The Past is Before Us

THE NINTH NATIONAL LABOUR HISTORY CONFERENCE
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
30 JUNE - 2 JULY, 2005

GREG PATMORE, JOHN SHIELDS AND NIKOLA BALNAVE
EDITORS

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR THE
STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY
WITH THE
BUSINESS & LABOUR HISTORY GROUP
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
### Table of Contents

#### Part A: Refereed Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referees</td>
<td></td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikola Balnave &amp; Greg Patmore</td>
<td>Rochdale consumer co-operatives and Australian labour history</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Barton</td>
<td>‘Communal life, common interests and healthy conditions’: industrial welfarism at Electrolytic Zinc, Hobart 1918-27</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Bennett</td>
<td>A long time working: Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate, 1822-1901</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Booth, Verity Burgmann, Stuart Macintyre, Andrew Milner &amp; Matthew Ryan</td>
<td>Vanguards and avant-gardes: the ‘Reason in Revolt’ online project on political and cultural radicalism</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley Bowden</td>
<td>A world dominated by youth: child and youth labour in Queensland, 1885-1900</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy Brigden</td>
<td>Missing women: an historical examination of female activism in the Melbourne Trades Hall, 1880-1920</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien Cahill &amp; Rowan Cahill</td>
<td>Civilian responses to peace-time military occupation: the 1978 Bowral call-out and its implications for the ‘war on terrorism’</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Cain</td>
<td>NSW Labor governments at the hands of their hostile British governors</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Cockfield</td>
<td>Arbitration, business strategy and labour management at Mort’s Dock</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew Cottle, Angela Keys &amp; Kristie Martin</td>
<td>The end of the line: an examination of the 1990 Victorian tram dispute</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana Covell</td>
<td>Why women took on BHP: gender bias and the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign, 1980-94</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine Darnell</td>
<td>‘Freehold property for mechanics’: a brief insight into Starr-Bowkett societies</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine de Matos</td>
<td>From the ‘people’s war’ to the ‘people’s occupation’: Australian and Japanese Communists, 1945-52</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Deery &amp; Doug Jordan</td>
<td>Fellow-travelling in the Cold War: the Australian peace movement</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Dyrenfurth</td>
<td>Class, language and labor tradition: towards the synthesis of discourse and experience</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith Gildart</td>
<td>An Australian socialist in England: Kim Mackay, the British left, and European federalism, 1934-60</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Hagan &amp; Andrew Wells</td>
<td>The British and rubber in Malaya, c 1890-1940</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Harris</td>
<td>‘A sort of Brigadoon’? ALP politics and the Residents’ Advisory Committee of the Glebe Estate during the time of federal government administration, 1974-85</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Marjorie Jerrard  
Exporting animals, exporting jobs: 30 years of campaigning against live export  
159

Michael Lyons  
Shopping around: extended retail trading hours and the Retail Trade Industrial Tribunal in New South Wales in the 1980s  
167

Julia Martínez  
When wages were clothes: dressing down Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory  
175

Bobbie Oliver  
Shades of the Cold War: the role of communist workers at the Midland Railway Workshops  
183

Wendy Paterson  
Ultimate ambition: Eileen Powell’s contribution to equal pay activism in Australia, 1929-69  
191

Geoff Robinson  
Labourism in action: Jack Baddeley, the Trade Union Secretaries Association and the New South Wales Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Bill 1931  
199

Joanne Scott  
Intersections of gender and class: female employers and self-employed workers in interwar Queensland  
207

Glenda Strachan & Lindy Henderson  
Assumed but rarely documented: women’s entrepreneurial activities in late nineteenth century Australia  
215

Rosemary Webb  
‘You could go to the Trades Hall and meet organisers’: labour precincts and labour women in interwar Sydney  
223

James Wolfinger  
‘Liberty … that’s a lot of bunk!’: the meaning of the 1944 Philadelphia transit strike to black Philadelphia  
231

Part B: Non-refereed Papers

K. Kevyne Baar  
Actors’ Equity Association, the McCarthy era blacklist, and managing the common good  
239

Robert Bollard  
‘The solidarity was misapplied’: the historiography of the Great Strike of 1917  
245

Lenore Coltheart  
Jessie Street and the pursuit of equal pay  
253

Robert Corcoran  
The Labor Split revisited: old memories and new evidence  
261

Diana Covell  
Women campaigning for jobs in steel in Canada and Australia: a comparative study  
269

Leanne Cutcher  
How sustainable is mutuality? the case of two australian credit unions  
275

Kate Deverall  
Sisterhood and solidarity: Annie Golding, Kate Dwyer and the NSW ALP  
283

John Elder  
The 1979 Commission of Inquiry into self-employed contractors in the NSW housing industry – was it the last hurrah??  
289

Rosemary Francis  
Muriel’s engagement: Muriel Heagney and the struggle for equal pay in Australia  
297

D. Frank, G. Kealey, L. Kealey, N. Lang, R. Leger, N. Ouellet & W. Parenteau  
Re-connecting with the history of labour in New Brunswick: historical perspectives on contemporary issues  
305
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob Gould</td>
<td>History repeats itself: Bruce and Howard compared</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Gould</td>
<td>The longest ‘Third Period’ in history</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Gregson</td>
<td>Titanic memorials in Australia: the myth and the message</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn Hanstock</td>
<td>Emerging from the silence: a history of women as adult educators in Australia</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Hearn</td>
<td>Justice Higgins and his witnesses</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob James</td>
<td>Mateship – its secret world: re-visiting the Australian identity</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Jones</td>
<td>‘A consequent gain in the tempo of effort’: Chinese labour and Chinese industrial activism in Australia, 1941-45</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Jordan</td>
<td>Léontine Cooper to Rosa Scott</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kellett</td>
<td>Annie Lane, ‘Lucinda Sharpe’: first wave feminism and Utopian socialism</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Kelly</td>
<td>Industrial relations in a deregulated era: reappraising nineteenth century building unions</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa Kerr</td>
<td>The importance of consent: labour management practices at Australian Abrasives 1945-62</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Knowles</td>
<td>Leadership in trade unions: how history and biography can help</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Laffan</td>
<td>Co-operatives and the Newcastle labour movement 1860-1940</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances Laneyrie &amp; Ray Markey</td>
<td>Exploring the role of ‘region’ in working class organisation through film: the South Coast Labour Council (Australia)</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Love</td>
<td>An invitation to a discussion of Trade Union and workplace culture</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Markey</td>
<td>White collar radicals: the NSW Public Service Association, 1899-1939</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rod Noble</td>
<td>Class and tradition in singing together: from Europe to New South Wales</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genevieve Picot</td>
<td>Equity Foundation, Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannie Rea</td>
<td>The ACTU and the struggles of Indigenous Australians</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Ritchie</td>
<td>‘It was a partnership, really: A partnership in the true sense of the word’: working relationships and gender balance in Scottish fishing families.</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Ross</td>
<td>Dare to struggle, dare to win! The 1986 deregistration of the BLF</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy Sarina</td>
<td>The call for reform: explanations for the introduction of non-union collective agreement making</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Shields &amp; Bradon Ellem</td>
<td>Electoral politics and the Broken Hill labour movement, 1921-50</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie Smith</td>
<td>Larrikins, labour and the law in Sydney from 1870-1900</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelton Stromquist</td>
<td>Making space: municipal socialists’ challenge to elite rule in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, 1890-1920</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Taffe</td>
<td><em>The Waterside Workers Federation and the Aboriginal rights movement of the 1960s: a north Queensland case study</em></td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Taksa</td>
<td>‘A beacon of unity’?: <em>J.S.T. McGowen, Premier of NSW, 1910-13</em></td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry Taylor</td>
<td><em>The making of a New Zealand communism? The rise and fall of the Workers’ Communist League</em></td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle Thornton</td>
<td>‘We were sick of being treated like animals’: class, gender and activism in the Melbourne tailoresses strike, 1882-83</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Walshe</td>
<td><em>The many gains that have flowed from Eureka</em></td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan Wise</td>
<td>Different worlds, different lives: labour history approaches to histories of the military</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris F. Wright</td>
<td><em>Industry policy and industrial relations in the Australian automotive sector: explaining the present through the past</em></td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Wright</td>
<td>‘Angry disputings’—violence, strikes and demarcation: relations between paid and unpaid firefighters in Sydney prior to 1884</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of Authors</td>
<td></td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Welcome

Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History was founded in 1961 to encourage study, teaching and research in labour history, with its main activity being the publication of the journal, *Labour History*. The interdisciplinary nature of labour history, with its acceptance of less traditional sources including folklore and oral testimony, make it a fascinating field, alive to past and present social justice issues.

The Society draws its membership from labour movement activists and academia, and maintains close links with the international community of labour historians.

Branches of the Society are active in the ACT, Adelaide, Brisbane, Illawarra, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. The branches hold talks and conferences, publish regular newsletters and journals, and they take turns in organising the biennial national Labour History conference. The journal receives support from the School of Business in the Faculty of Economics and Business at The University of Sydney. Two issues of *Labour History* are published per annum (May and November). *Labour History* participates in the online journal website of the History Co-operative managed by the University of Illinois Press.

A website serving the Society and its seven regional Branches is maintained at www.asslh.com. On this site, we have made available the digitised contents pages of the journal (no.1 to the present issue), and the abstracts since no. 74 (May 1998). They can be browsed or searched, thus providing a virtual index of labour history writing since 1962. A more ambitious project now under way is the digitising of back issues of the Sydney branch journal, *Hummer*, the first issue of which appeared in 1988. Using the site’s secure server, visitors to the site can subscribe to *Labour History* or purchase back issues of the journal as well as other society publications.

The Society administers two biennial awards: the *Labour History* Prize of $400 funded jointly by the Society and Unions NSW for the best article appearing in the journal in the preceding two years; and the Gollan Prize for Labour History (valued up to $600) which fosters the work of new scholars in the field by enabling them to attend the National Labour History conferences.

Business and Labour History Group

The main objective of the Business and Labour History Group is to promote historical research and teaching within the School of Business and the Faculty of Economics and Business. The group organises seminars and conferences on historical themes in the areas of accounting history, business history, economic history and labour history. It also runs research projects on a variety of themes. Since 1986 it has been the home of the journal Labour History. The group is a multi-disciplinary group drawing participants from both schools in the Faculty of Economics and Business. The group receives funding from the School of Business and the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.

Activities during 2005 include the 9th National Labour History Conference (30 June to 2 July) and a one day seminar on the state systems of industrial relations (26 August). Research projects include the Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement and a history of Citigroup in Australia.

For further details of the Group’s activities please contact either:
Greg Patmore: g.patmore@econ.usyd.edu.au or John Shields: j.shields@econ.usyd.edu.au.
Introduction

The ninth national conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History is held in the same venue as the inaugural national conference of the Society in 1988 – The University of Sydney. Since 1988, the various branches of the Society have organised biennial conferences of great interest to both academics and non-academics, focusing on a variety of themes and issues of concern to the labour movement and wider society. This year, the conference focuses on the theme ‘The Past is Before Us’ and highlights the breadth and depth of labour history research. The papers in this volume address a wide range of issues of relevance both in Australia and internationally. These include trade unions, management labour practices, compulsory arbitration, indigenous labour, gender, racism, culture, labour politics, and co-operatives. In keeping with the broad tradition of labour history, the collection includes papers by both academics and activists. The academic papers draw on a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives, from feminist and cultural studies to business and management.

This conference is the first National Labour History Conference to have a dedicated forum for postgraduate students where new researchers present papers of an innovative and exploratory nature. The forum also has workshops focusing on imparting skills for publishing in academic journals and obtaining work in the university sector. Designed to encourage and develop a new generation of labour history scholars, participation in the forum has been assisted by the largest number of postgraduate scholarships ever offered at a National Labour History Conference. We thank the School of Business, University of Sydney and the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History for their generosity in funding these scholarships.

In these proceedings, the conference papers are printed in two streams: part A includes the refereed papers while non-refereed papers appear in part B. The refereed papers were reviewed by two referees in a double-blind process. Some of the papers that were not refereed appear as extended abstracts. The postgraduate forum presentations are included in the non-refereed section of this volume.

Our thanks to the referees who gave so willingly of their time and expertise, and to Helen Conomos who helped administer the refereeing process.

The School of Business, The University of Sydney, provided both significant financial and personnel assistance to the organisers. In addition, many individuals contributed to staging the conference: Professor Sid Gray, the Head of the School of Business, provided support and encouragement throughout this process; Cathie Paul provided vital assistance with the financial arrangements for the conference; Jacqui Hunt helped in the crucial areas of general organisation, publications and web administration; Ellina Yukhina also assisted on publications, while Jonathan Cifuentes and Benjamin Tinker were involved with web administration; Margaret Walters and Carl Power, from the office of the Business and Labour History Group, School of Business, were enormously helpful in a range of areas connected with the conference.

Outside the School of Business we received significant help from a large number of individuals and groups. In particular we would like to thank our fellow members of the conference organising committee: Rowan Cahill, Rae Cooper, Rae Frances, Sarah Gregson, Julie Kimber, Melissa Kerr, Mark Hearn, Harry Knowles and Neale Towart. The Australian Society for the Study of the Labour History and its branches in Sydney and Brisbane provided financial support. Unions NSW assisted through donations and publicity. We are also grateful to the NSW Nurses Federation and the Search Foundation for their generous contributions. Finally, we would like to thank the Hon. Meredith Burgmann, President of the Legislative Council of NSW, for her patronage.

Greg Patmore, John Shields and Nikola Balnave
Editors
In accordance with the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Science and Training’s Higher Education Research Data Collection Criteria, the papers published in these Proceedings meet the definition of research in that:

1. The 9th National Labour History Conference is a conference of national and international significance.

2. Each paper in the Part A refereed stream, in its entirety, was double blind, peer reviewed before being accepted for publication.

3. The proceedings will be made available to libraries and on the web site.

4. Author affiliation is noted on each paper.

The conference organising committee would like to acknowledge the following for refereeing the papers in Part A of the 9th National Labour History Conference Proceedings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janis Bailey</td>
<td>Griffith University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikola Balnave</td>
<td>University of Western Sydney</td>
</tr>
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<td>Bradley Bowden</td>
<td>Griffith University</td>
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<td>Verity Burgmann</td>
<td>University of Melbourne</td>
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<td>Bowral, NSW</td>
</tr>
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<td>Rae Cooper</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leanne Cutscher</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy Damousi</td>
<td>University of Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Deery</td>
<td>Victoria University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Deverall</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Dyster</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Eklund</td>
<td>University of Newcastle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradon Ellem</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rae Frances</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
</tr>
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<td>Andrew Frazer</td>
<td>University of Western Sydney</td>
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<td>Sarah Gregson</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
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<td>Mark Hearn</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
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<td>Michael Hogan</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
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<td>Melissa Kerr</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
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<td>Julie Kimber</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neville Kirk</td>
<td>Manchester Metropolitan University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim Kitay</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Knowles</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenore Layman</td>
<td>Murdoch University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Love</td>
<td>Swinburne University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart Macintyre</td>
<td>University of Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigrid McCausland</td>
<td>Australian National University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Nicholas</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbie Oliver</td>
<td>Curtin University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Last Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Patmore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Quinlan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>Rees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff</td>
<td>Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Shields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda</td>
<td>Strachan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelton</td>
<td>Stromquist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>Todd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Westcott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Wright</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part A: Refereed Papers
The idea of Rochdale Consumer Co-operatives was imported from the United Kingdom (UK) to Australia. The motivation for establishing and joining the co-operatives varied. There was the economic motivation of additional income through interest on capital and the regular dividend based on purchases. At the other extreme there were those who saw the co-operatives as the basis for a Co-operative Commonwealth and the overthrow of capitalism. The consumer co-operatives would generate sufficient capital for the establishment of co-operative banks, co-operative insurance and producer co-operatives, which would supplant capitalist enterprises.

This paper will examine the meaning of ‘co-operation’ and focus on particular attributes of the Rochdale consumer co-operatives. It will then look at the treatment of the Rochdale co-operative movement in Australian labour historiography, suggesting several reasons for its marginal treatment by labour historians. Finally, the paper will explore several issues in relation to the Rochdale co-operatives as a political movement, employer and business.

Co-operation and the Rochdale principles

Co-operation is a ‘vague concept’ and has a wide range of meanings. In the 1890s it could mean more harmonious relations between capital and labour through more ‘amicable’ industrial relations procedures and profit sharing. It also stood for the replacement of capitalism through worker-owned and managed production enterprises or the organisation of consumers in co-operative stores. It covered a variety of land settlement schemes that arose in Australia during the 1890s against a background of high unemployment and ‘social experimentation’. These schemes encompassed both individual ownership and joint ownership. To add to the confusion employers sponsored ‘co-operative’ company stores in towns such as Port Pirie in 1917 and Port Kembla in 1918 to prevent workers from obtaining credit during industrial disputes and minimise wage demands by controlling prices. Some Australian ordinary joint stock companies, especially when a number of concerns have amalgamated, also adopted the term as a trade name.¹ By the early 1950s one definition of the Australian co-operative movement included Rochdale consumer co-operatives, producer co-operatives, building societies, credit unions, community advancement societies, agricultural co-operatives and friendly societies. Co-operation was viewed as a way of ‘helping each other’, which emphasised not only ‘self help but mutual help’.² In 1988 a NSW Government agency proclaimed that the ‘essential difference between co-operatives and other forms of economic enterprise is the subordination of business techniques to ethical ideas. The focus is on service and reach rather than maximising profits’.³

The Rochdale consumer co-operatives were founded on the basis of a clear set of principles. Following an unsuccessful strike in 1844, 28 flannel weavers in Rochdale, England started the movement to combat low wages, high prices and poor quality food. Their interest in co-operation was built upon the foundations laid by Welsh manufacturer and social reformer Robert Owen, who believed that ideal communities based on co-operation rather than competition would eliminate unemployment and pauperism and create a prosperous and harmonious community. The principles for the Rochdale co-operatives included: the provision of capital by members at a fixed rate of interest; unadulterated or pure food to be supplied, with the full weight and measure given; market prices; cash purchases only and no credit; a dividend on purchases or ‘divvy’ based on profits were to be divided among members in proportion to the amount of purchases; management to be based on democratic principles with ‘one member one vote’ rather than ‘one vote one share’; and that a share of profits should be allotted to education.⁴
The Rochdale movement in England, despite a number of legal and economic obstacles, grew. Private retailers attempted to limit competition from the co-operatives by persuading wholesalers to stop or restrict supplies to the co-operatives. There were also concerns about relying upon private manufacturers more concerned with profits than product quality. So the retail co-operatives established a Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in England in 1863 and Scotland in 1868. The wholesalers also operated on Rochdale principles such as a fixed rate of interest on capital and a ‘divvy’. The wholesale societies ultimately became global enterprises with purchases of primary products from countries such as Australia and Canada and tea plantations in Sri Lanka and India. The English CWS also moved into banking and insurance. The retail co-operatives formed a Co-operative Union in 1872 for education, legal, propaganda and political purposes. A notable outcome of the Co-operative Union activities was the formation in 1883 of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, which aimed to promote an interest by women in the co-operative movement and also protect female employees. Retail co-operatives even formed a Co-operative Party in 1917, which formally affiliated with the British Labour Party in 1927. By 1948 there were 1,030 retail co-operatives in the United Kingdom with 10,162,000 members.

British immigrants played an important role in bringing the Rochdale principles to Australia. Retail co-operatives became a feature of coalmining districts such as the Hunter Valley, the Illawarra, the Lithgow Valley, Wonthaggi in Victoria and Collie in Western Australia. There were Rochdale co-operatives outside these areas. Particularly notable was the Adelaide society, which opened in 1868 and had 9,412 members by 1923. In 1923 there were 152 consumers’ societies in Australia, with a membership of 110,000 and a capital of £1,800,000. NSW and South Australia were the strongholds of these consumer societies. Even during the virtual collapse of the Rochdale co-operatives during the 1970s and 1980s the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative achieved a peak membership of 95,000 in mid-1978. The Hunter Valley retail co-ops also founded the NSW CWS in 1912. The NSW CWS set up a broom factory in Newcastle in 1914 and packed bulk goods such as soap and tea under its own name. It imported tea from the English CWS. It published the Co-operative News, which was the main journal for the co-operative movement, from 1923 to 1959. By 1949 the NSW CSW had 110 affiliates, with some in Victoria. The NSW CWS eventually ceased operations in 1979. There were also Women’s Co-operative Guilds in NSW and South Australia. The movement developed its own leaders such as George Booth, Margaret Jones, and Tom Shonk. While there was some discussion of the Rochdale co-operatives forming a Co-operative Party and a Co-operative Bank, this never eventuated in Australia. Although the Australian movement did not achieve the success of its British counterparts, it was significant for workers and their families in a number of localities.

Australian labour historiography and the Rochdale movement

Australian labour historians have largely ignored the Rochdale consumer co-operative movement. David Walker and Ray Markey, who focus on NSW in the 1890s, wrote the only articles that specifically deal with co-operation in Labour History. Both recognise the vagueness of the term ‘co-operation’ at that time. Walker is primarily concerned with the unsuccessful experiments with agricultural co-operatives, while Markey focuses on trade unions and workers’ production co-operatives. There are only brief references to the Rochdale movement. Markey dismisses it by noting that ‘consumer co-operation never gained the working class support that it had in Britain and seems to have taken strong hold in the coalfields …’ Walker also dismisses the Rochdale movement in Australia but recognises its presence outside the NSW coalfields in the Adelaide Co-operative, which was larger than any consumer co-operative in the ‘mother colony’.

In several Labour History articles there is recognition of the significance of the Rochdale co-operatives at the local level. Annette Salt in her study of the women on the Northern Coalfields during the Great Depression notes that refusal of the Kurri Kurri Co-operative to merge with the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative during the 1980s was a measure of the strength of community identity or localism in the town. However, with the exception of a reference to the participation of a Women’s Committee of the Kurri Kurri Co-operative in a 1933 march, the role of the Co-operative in the 1930’s Depression is ignored. Peter Cochrane in his study of the 1934 Wonthaggi coal strike notes the key role of the Wonthaggi Co-operative Store in supporting striking miners. The ‘divvy’ on purchases, bulk sales and donations to the strikers’ relief committee helped the miners win the strike. In Broken Hill,
Bradon Ellem and John Shields noted that the Rochdale co-operative movement played an important role in the efforts of unions to fight stores set up by employers. There was an indexation provision in the 1925 Broken Hill Mines Agreement that provided a powerful incentive for employers to control prices. A company-financed ‘co-operative’ store was established for this purpose, although the unions supported the establishment of a Rochdale retail co-operative store and speakers from the movement visited Broken Hill to promote the idea. Ultimately, the company store was transformed into a union-orientated co-operative store based on the Rochdale system. Women, however, preferred to continue shopping with private retailers. This was despite the formation of a local branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, which aimed to win over working class women to the co-operative cause. Ellem and Shields suggest that women did not embrace the co-operative store as male unionists wanted because they wished to preserve one area of autonomy in a male-dominated town.

The general neglect of the Rochdale co-operative movement is also found in other publications by Australian labour historians. Major works highlight their insignificance or ambiguous role in class relations. John Child notes that they made ‘little headway’, while Ken Buckley and Ted Wheelwright claim there was no Australian development of consumer co-operatives except in coalmining areas. While Bob Connell and Terry Irving do see the co-operative store as a common feature of the Australian ‘union town’, the working class impulse for co-operation through co-operative stores, building societies and friendly societies was contained within a bourgeois social form – the joint stock company. Like Markey and Walker, a number of labour historians recognise the significance of the debates concerning co-operation during the 1890s, but have little to say about the Rochdale co-operative movement. Edgar Ross in his history of the Miners’ Federation recognises the important role that coal miners played in the Rochdale movement and the ‘valuable’ support that the retail co-operatives gave to miners during industrial disputes. Despite this, he concludes that the co-operative movement never influenced ‘the direction of working class endeavour to the extent of any other various brands of socialism’…

Erik Eklund in his study of relationship between storekeepers and the working class also highlighted that Australian private retailers shared ‘the virulent anti-cooperative mentality’ of their British counterparts and opposed the Rochdale co-operatives as a threat to their economic viability. He notes that despite this, the Rochdale movement achieved ‘some success’ before 1940.

As in the journal Labour History, the main interest in the Rochdale movement can be found in local histories, particularly in the Illawarra and Hunter regions of NSW. Neville Arrowsmith and Ray Markey looked at the history of consumer co-operatives in the Illawarra, which was dominated by the Woonona Industrial Co-operative Society. This co-operative was established in 1896 and by 1952 it had a membership of 6,186. Its head office was in Woonona and it had branches at seven locations including Wollongong and Port Kembla. The Woonona co-operative was wound up in 1970 in the face of supermarket competition, ‘dispensable consumerism’, the decline of working class communities and the reduction in the need for home deliveries as automobile ownership became more widespread. John McQuilton claims that the decline of the co-operatives in the Illawarra was partly due to ‘bad management’ arising from poor employee training and inadequate recruitment of new members. Arrowsmith, Markey and others highlight the positive role of the Woonona co-operative through providing financial credit to sick, unemployed and striking members, and by treating their employees ‘decently’. They also highlight the significant opportunities for women provided by the Co-operative Guilds, which enabled working class women to get out into the community as equal partners in community affairs.

The general positive image of the retail co-operatives contrasts to the work of Daphne Hampton, who examined the history of retail co-operatives in the lower Hunter Valley. While Hampton notes for example that the Kurri Kurri Co-operative Society provided financial credit for miners and their families during strikes and periods of unemployment, it was forced to take legal action against members to recover debts. Kurri Kurri also retrenched workers and rationed work for remaining employees during periods of economic crisis. Bitter divisions could also rise within retail co-operatives particularly during times of crisis such as the collapse of the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative Society in 1979-1980. Hampton further questions the classification of the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative, which was for many years Australia’s largest retail co-operative, as a miners’ society. It drew upon the large and diversified industrial working class of the Newcastle district, which meant it was more robust than the mining community co-operatives that relied on the economics of coal.
The past is before us

Part A: Refereed Papers

The retail history literature has little to add to our understanding of Rochdale co-operatives in Australia apart from demonstrating the confusion over the extent and influence of the movement. Webber and Hoskins emphasise the significance of consumer co-operatives to the history of retail in Australia. In contrast, the majority of writers of retail history either neglect or downgrade the role of co-operative stores. Kim Humphery notes that a limited consumer co-operative movement existed in early twentieth century Australia, but dismisses it as providing little threat to the independent grocer or to the development of larger retail firms. Gail Reekie briefly notes the active participation of women in consumer co-operatives, and hence in consumer politics. Beverley Kingston argues that the co-operative movement ‘was one of several working-class ideas adopted and developed out of recognition by the middle classes’ identifying the Melbourne Mutual Store and the Civil Service Store in Sydney as the most memorable examples of the co-operative movement in Australia, both of which ‘were modelled on London’s middle-class co-operatives’. Reekie and Kingston both emphasise the Civil Service Store, although this was not considered to be a true Rochdale co-operative by the movement, again demonstrating the confusion over the character and role of consumer co-operatives in Australian history.

Labour historians have generally overlooked two key sources of historical debate concerning the Rochdale movement – the literature following World War I concerning the Rochdale movement and the co-operative movement itself. The Rochdale co-operative movement during the 1920s attracted the attention of a number of academics including Herbert Heaton, W.E. McConnell and F.R.E. Mauldon. Heaton, who was later described as a ‘staunch member of the Adelaide co-op’, highlighted the significance of the Rochdale co-operative movement in South Australia. He noted that generally co-operatives were less important in Australia than the UK because of the focus of the labour movement on unionism and politics. He also claimed that some unionists opposed it because the ‘divvi’ could be viewed as a reduction in the cost of living and therefore an argument to prevent wage rises in the arbitration courts. Heaton also saw the greater individualism in new countries such as Australia leading to a preoccupation with personal advancement rather than ‘concerted action’. He also tried to explain ‘waves of interest’ in Australian retail co-operatives over time emphasising the rising cost of living during and after World War I. McConnell also tried to explain the growth of the consumer co-operatives NSW in terms of ‘economic pressure’, particularly profiteering, and ‘idealism’. Like Heaton, McConnell emphasised that the Rochdale movement had a broader geographical appeal than just the coalfields. In contrast to Adelaide, there were difficulties in establishing co-operatives in the Sydney metropolitan area. Indeed the Balmain Co-operative Society, which McConnell hails as a success, eventually went into voluntary liquidation in 1936. He notes the existence of consumer rather than producer co-operatives in rural areas of NSW. McConnell argues that Rochdale co-operatives had particular appeal to orchardists and poultry farmers due to closer settlement and a ‘community of interest’. Rural towns, which had some industry and were important railway junctions, were also sites of retail co-operatives. During the 1920s Rochdale co-operatives were located in rural towns such as Griffith and Junee. Mauldon was very critical of the Australian Rochdale movement noting that there was little of the ‘buoyant idealism’ that characterised the UK movement and claimed that the majority of the co-operative shareholders were little more than ‘dividend hunters’.

There have also been histories produced by members and employees of Rochdale movement in Australia. The Kurri Kurri Co-operative Society, for example, published two souvenir histories celebrating its 25th year in 1929 and its 50th year in 1954. Former employees of the Lithgow Co-operative Society recently published a history of the organisation, which went into liquidation in 1980, following a reunion of staff in 1996. Using documentary records and oral history they provide a number of insights into how a Rochdale co-operative functioned in Australia. They highlight that despite the Rochdale movement’s claims about harmonious relations between non-capitalist co-operatives and their employees, there were strikes and walkouts. They even raise doubts about claims that the removal of the profit motive ensured quality goods. One manager ordered his employees to pick weevils out of bags of dried fruit and then sell the dried fruit.

The most significant history produced by the co-operative movement is Gary Lewis’ history of Rochdale co-operation in NSW. It was published by the Australian Association of Co-operatives and was based on a PhD thesis. Unfortunately, labour historians interested in consumer co-operatives have ignored it. The book highlights that the Rochdale movement was riddled with divisions and unable to unite
around common goals. A major schism occurred between federalists and individualists. The federalists subordinated production to consumption and stressed the loyalty of tied stores to the CWS. They were concerned that autonomous producer co-operatives would not share their profits with consumers and would through a Co-operative Union dominate the consumer. Individualists believed that the CWS was necessary but not sufficient to achieve a Co-operative Commonwealth. They saw production as the primary act of humanity and feared that the CWS if dominant would fritter away surpluses through endless ‘divvis’ and be governed by commercial rather than social imperatives. There were also tensions between some women in the Guilds and the male-dominated CWS over the direction of the movement. The Rochdale movement in Australia was unable to form alliances with the labour movement and agricultural co-operatives. However, despite its contribution, there are limits to Lewis’s study. While it recognises the presence of the Rochdale movement in other states, it reinforces the general pre-occupation with NSW. Although Lewis is critical of the federalist approach, the book provides a ‘top down’ history of the co-operative by relying on federalist sources such as *The Co-operative News*. There is no detailed examination of the individual co-operatives and their local communities. 25

Overall, labour historians have largely overlooked the Rochdale movement for several reasons. The Australian labour movement preferred to take the path of trade unionism and the Labor Party rather than pursue co-operativism. While there is evidence to contrary, they are seen as only being of significance to workers in coalmining districts. There have also been doubts about the significance of ‘islands’ of socialism such as co-operatives as an effective challenge to capitalism. Indeed, Edgar Ross argued that if the various types of co-operatives did succeed they would ‘blur the real issues of the working class struggle against exploitation and for economic security’. 26 There are some challenges to this marginalisation of Rochdale co-operatives. Local labour historians have emphasised their significance in class relations at particular localities. Heaton and his colleagues in the 1920s highlighted the need for a greater understanding of the fluctuating fortunes of the Rochdale co-operatives and recognition of their geographical spread beyond traditional coalmining areas. Lewis notes that the Rochdale movement in Australia, despite its failures, was an important focus for debates not only over the form of the movement, but the future of capitalism. The literature suggests a number of issues that the labour historians can explore in regard to the Rochdale movement and these will be outlined in the next section of the paper.

**Issues**

The literature on the Rochdale movement in Australia and preliminary research indicates that there are six key issues in examining the retail co-operatives. These are ideology, general management, employee relations, the relationship with the labour movement, gender relations and opposition from the private sector. The ideology of the co-operative movement ranged from what may be termed ‘business co-operativism’, which focussed on the ‘divvi’ and the return of capital, to a fundamental belief in the need to replace capitalism with a Co-operative Commonwealth. These divisions had major implications for the Rochdale movement in Australia, which was unsuccessful in establishing a permanent national organisation. The Rochdale movement also claimed it was non-political and ‘classless’ to avoid divisions over allegiances to the Labor Party, Communist Party and even Non-Labor Parties. This non-political stance created suspicions on both the Right and Left particularly during crises such as the Labor Party split of the 1950s. 27

The management of the Rochdale co-operatives also created the potential for tension between shareholders, management committees and appointed managers. Shareholders pre-occupied with economic returns expected high ‘divvis’ and a satisfactory return on capital. There were expectations of high quality goods and fair prices. Managers wanted to retain surpluses to allow for investment and expansion. Some managers saw themselves as businessmen first and co-operators second. There were also continuing concerns about the competence of managers and calls for training programmes. The democratic structure of the Rochdale co-operatives provided shareholders with opportunities to express their displeasure with the management. There are examples of shareholders removing management committees and managers that did not deliver a reasonable return, raised the price on staples such as bread, or provided poor quality merchandise. 28
The Rochdale co-operatives claimed that they treated their employers better than the private sector because they were not preoccupied with profits. There are numerous examples of this through the provision of better wages and conditions. However, dissent did exist over numerous employee relations issues, particularly in relation to non-standard pay. For example, in the 1920s, sick pay was not encouraged, regardless of court decisions, and the movement’s policy on penalty rates during the 1940s was that ‘payment should be for work done or time worked; and that where inconvenient hours are involved the workers should be rostered so that all should share them equally’. Furthermore, there were variations in the quality of employee relations. There appears to have been less industrial conflict at the Woonona co-operative compared to its counterparts at Kurri Kurri and Lithgow. Management at the larger co-operatives also adopted similar personnel practices to the private sector. For example, the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative had a staff welfare club, while the Lithgow Co-operative adopted worker participation on the board of management in the 1970s. The relationship between employees and management was further complicated by the ability of workers to become shareholders through the purchase of shares. There was also the issue of nepotism in recruitment particularly as many co-operatives operated in small towns with limited local labour markets.

The Rochdale co-operative movement ultimately did not establish a close official relationship with the labour movement. The co-operative movement regularly appealed for a greater link with the labour movement, urging unions to invest funds in co-operatives in preparation for industrial action. In turn, the Rochdale co-operatives provided credit to striking workers and allowed union closed shops. However, calls within the Rochdale movement for unions of co-operative employees and the Co-operative Party did not please trade unions and the Labor Party. There were also concerns about the political effectiveness of the Rochdale movement in challenging capitalism and fears that the co-operatives were reinforcing capitalism through ‘business co-operativism’. Despite the claims to the contrary, some unions believed that in the treatment of workers employees there was little difference between the co-operatives and the private sector. However, at the local level, trade unionists, whether members of the Communist Party or the Labor Party were active in their local co-operatives. Notable labour activists on the Rochdale movement included Jim Healey and George Booth. Healey, the Communist Secretary of the Waterside Workers’ Federation, was on the board of the North Sydney Co-operative, while Booth, the Labor member for the NSW state seats of Newcastle and later Kurri Kurri from 1925 to 1960, was president of the NSW CWS for many years. The Queensland Branch of the ALP also published ‘The Consumers’ Co-op’, a six page monthly featuring much co-operative news amongst its political matters, from 1946.

Gender relations are manifested in the treatment of women as consumers and employees. They are also highlighted by role of the Women’s Guilds in the Australian Rochdale movement. The Co-operatives recognised the significance of women as the main purchaser of goods in most working class households. This ranged from the fashion shows put on by the Lithgow Co-operative in the 1930s to features in The Co-operative News on the upbringing of children, romance, beauty tips, cooking and knitting. While there were calls in the movement for equal pay, co-operatives in towns such as Lithgow followed general practice of requiring women to resign from their jobs upon marriage. Women’s Guilds also went beyond the supportive role expected by the NSW CWS. Some guilds frequently challenged the male-dominated CWS by criticising their leadership and organising conferences to look at alternative paths for the Rochdale movement. There were also regional variations in the strength of the Women’s Guilds. While they were active in the Illawarra and the Hunter Valley, they were not significant in the Lithgow Valley and rural areas.

Finally, there is the issue of competition from the private sector. There was history of private sector opposition to the Rochdale movement as the co-operatives were a threat to the financial viability of private sector storekeepers. There was direct competition which involved price wars, bribery and collusion with wholesalers aimed at crippling and bankrupting the co-operative stores. There was indirect competition associated with the changing nature of retailing. The rise of chain stores, cash and carry, supermarkets and shopping centres are examples of this.

Conclusion

Overall, labour historians have largely overlooked the Rochdale movement. There are some challenges to this marginalisation of Rochdale co-operatives. Local labour historians have emphasised their
significance in class relations at particular localities, while others have highlighted their geographical spread beyond traditional coalmining areas and their own significant ideological battles over the future of capitalism. Several authors suggest that greater individualism and earlier development of Labor politics in Australia may explain why the Rochdale movement was less successful here than in the UK. This paper highlights six areas for further research: ideology, general management, employee relations, relationship between the Rochdale and the labour movements, gender relations and opposition from the private sector. An exploration of these issues will ensure that the Rochdale movement gains greater prominence in Australian labour historiography.

**Endnotes**

19. Hampton, Retail Co-operatives, pp. 8, 31, 33, 43.
22. *CN*, 1 April 1944, p. 17.
28. Hampton, *Retail Co-operatives*, p. 20; Lithgow Co-operative Society Committee Minutes, 14 April 1925. Lithgow City Library (hereafter LCL); Lithgow Co-operative Society Research Group, *The Life and Times*, p. 27.
32. Lewis, *A Middle Way*, pp. 108-109, 137,170-1; Lithgow Co-operative Society, Report of the Secretary to the President and the Board of Directors, 4 January 1932, 8 August 1932. LCL.
‘Communal life, common interests and healthy conditions’: industrial welfarism at Electrolytic Zinc, Hobart 1918-27

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At Electronic Zinc in Hobart the Collins House group of companies put in place an industrial welfare programme that aimed to reform the worker outside the factory gates and bring efficiency and loyalty. This centred on a model garden village and cooperative activities. However the contradictions within the schemes and workforce indifference forced management to modify their initial approach and points to the importance of the local and points of resistance.

In the years after World War I the provision of company welfare schemes was, according to Hay, limited to a small number of companies. There was a great amount of variation in the amount of coverage offered by companies and the schemes mostly centred around pensions, death benefits and disability allowances. The vast majority of companies, however, were anti-welfare and viewed labour simply as a factor and cost in production. Electrolytic Zinc’s (EZ) industrial welfarism was heavily influenced by the Collins House experience and the company wished to remake both the workplace and the surrounding community. Many of the Collins House directors and senior technocrats such as W.S. Robinson, Gerald Musson and Herbert Gepp were influenced by the ‘New Liberalism’ with its concerns about efficiency, labour productivity and cooperation. The Collins House approach, Eklund argues, brought together the dominant class’ industrial and cultural agenda to produce a unique expression at the local level. The labour management approaches of such dominant companies reveal a community influenced by the employer and illuminates industrial and cultural points of resistance.

EZ put in place a broad industrial welfare programme that centred on housing and cooperative activities. The EZ housing scheme at Lutana represented a bold attempt at a Garden City and drew its design inspiration from Ebenezer Howard’s concept of small community based garden cities with public ownership of land. This had its antecedents in the ideas of the English utopian socialists such as Edward Bellamy and William Morris. It represents a particular attempt at localism where an employer, through architects, seeks to manipulate the conceived space and fragment working class community and offers the employer the ability to extend their strategies beyond the workplace and into the surrounding community and create a sense of dependency. The cooperative activities drew more explicitly from the broader Collins House experience and represented an attempt to reform the worker outside the factory gates to deliver greater efficiency and workforce loyalty. The contradictions in this approach and local worker indifference saw EZ modify the design and scale of its housing and many of its cooperative activities and reveals points of worker resistance.

EZ’s background

EZ was part of the Collins House group, an alliance of Anglo-Australian lead-zinc interests that had largely been based in Broken Hill that were linked through materials, capital and interlocking directorships. Along with the Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) this group dominated heavy manufacturing development in the inter war period and introduced many new management practices into Australia. A number of these were first put in place at the Port Pirie lead smelters. The establishment of EZ at Risdon, Hobart, was brought about by a number of factors namely the decline of Britain as an economic force, government encouragement of manufacturing industries and the favourable orientation of most federal governments towards tariffs that favoured manufacturing interests. With a suitable political and economic climate, the availability of a vast amount of tailings from Broken Hill, and the development of the new electrolytic smelting process meant that the material and technology was available to enable the Collins House group to produce zinc economically. Tasmania’s cheap hydro electricity provided the incentive to establish the factory at Risdon in Hobart.
EZ’s first General Manager, Herbert Gepp, initially worked as an engineer with the Zinc Corporation in Broken Hill and, as proponent of the New Liberalism, argued that for Australia to become a self-contained independent nation it required national efficiency, the maintenance of an ethical as opposed to a materialistic attitude of mind and the development of the spirit of industrial citizenship. He attributed the poor relations between labour, management and capital to the parties’ ignorance of the others’ needs. He argued that employees wanted:

Firstly, health; secondly security of employment … thirdly insurance against being dragged down to the depths financially if, unfortunately, he should be sick and unable to work; fourthly decent housing conditions; fifthly a fair margin between the cost of living and his income; sixthly, good education and a chance in life for his children; and, seventhly reasonable social and civic rights – all of which, summed up, imply a minimum amount of happiness.

This minimum amount of happiness could be achieved by co-operation with the employer’s role being to take a keen interest in the lives of all their employees, develop a spirit of industrial and civic citizenship, inaugurate cooperative councils which would reduce the cost of living and educate the workers in economics.

Technocrats, such as Gepp, held a view of nationalism that moulded class interests with industrial independence. This fraction of the new industrial ruling class took a view that argued for Australia’s independence from imperial interests and saw the development of mining and manufacturing capacity was central to this. National efficiency was central to this independence and would be achieved on the working class outside the workplace. Gepp anticipated that EZ’s industrial welfare, in particular its housing and health initiatives, would create efficiency in the workplace by cooperation outside the factory gates and this new spirit would see the end of class conflict and industrial action. Although at Port Pirie the trade unions were able to offer a critique of the company’s industrial welfare programmes, at EZ the company had assiduously used the state Wages Board system to marginalise trade unions from the plant and use its own Works Committee to influence wage setting and act as a union substitute.

EZ was therefore spared the necessity of using welfarism to directly suppress unionism although this does not preclude the possibility of welfarism acting as a union substitute.

Communal life

The EZ Company was part of the Collins House Group and was incorporated in Victoria in 1916 and, under Gepp’s watchful eye, construction began at Risdon, five miles from Hobart. The Zinc Works were isolated by open paddocks from the neighbouring mainly working class suburbs of Moonah, Glenorchy and the New Town, the main source of its workforce. Economics and technology made the Zinc Works a continuously operating plant producing zinc 24 hours a day and enabled Gepp to obtain permission from Collins House to commence an adjacent housing scheme. The initial construction and operation of the factory would require in excess of 1,000 workers and there were concerns that the poor condition, scarcity and costliness of rental and owner/buyer housing in Hobart would make it difficult for EZ to attract a workforce. As well the housing scheme would place the workforce close at hand to deal with emergencies or any other unexpected needs. If the Works could not be intimately close to the workforce, then Gepp would build a village that would bring the workforce intimately close to the Works.

In 1918 the company bought eleven and a half acres at Risdon, known as Large’s estate, as the site of the Lutana village. Further land, which became known as the Orpwood estate, was purchased in 1919 on the high side of Bowen Road, just above Large’s estate. EZ initially proposed to build about 60 houses on Large’s estate for the accommodation of its employees and leave Orpwood’s estate undeveloped in the short term. In 1919 the eminent Melbourne architect Walter Butler was hired to facilitate the planning of the village. Butler trained in England and was associated with the Arts and Crafts and domestic revival circles centred on William Morris and Norman Shaw.

Butler was instructed to prepare a scheme for an economical garden settlement. He advised that the land, although hilly, was picturesque and healthy and capable of carrying 200 houses and that the cheapest way of creating the village was to plan the entire scheme and construct as large a number of houses at the same time as possible. The houses should be sound, substantial and comfortable and, whilst the
employees should be able to express their views upon the type of houses to be built, he thought the modern
type should be adopted. Butler proposed that the settlement should have a varied design and appearance
and a mixture of single and double storey, detached and semi-detached houses. He argued that workers
would not purchase the houses unless payments were over comparatively short terms and exceeded rents
by only a small amount. EZ agreed that the houses should be rented but with inducements to purchase.
Butler calculated that the houses would only be attractive if rents or purchase costs were 3/9 per week less
than cost. It was, Butler believed, fair to assume that the scheme would help to make the men content and
calculated that if the Company benefited from better labour to the extent of 3d a day it would wipe out the
loss of endowing the scheme with £1,950 per annum. Thus specific economic calculations were made
where the housing expenditure was calculated against the imputed cost of labour unrest.

On the basis of Butler’s report, Gepp recommended to Collins House that 200 houses be constructed. As
was the case at Port Pirie this was seen as a necessity to secure an adequate supply of skilled and reliable
workers with Gepp declaring that the ‘scarcity, poor quality and inaccessibility from the Works of
suitable homes render the creation of a settlement an urgent matter in the interests of security, efficiency
and the contentment of the Company’s labour supply’. The houses could be either rented or purchased,
with care being taken to ensure that the lower paid men were allotted a large share of the houses.

In October 1919, with the scheme’s infrastructure in place, Butler suggested this aspect of the design
could be left to EZ’s Hobart staff, leaving him free to concentrate on the houses, gardens, enclosures
and the planting and decorating of the reserves. However the Collins House directors were of the view
that Butler’s designs were not always economical and in September 1919 decided it was unnecessary to
retain his services. At Gepp’s suggestion another Melbourne architect, A.G. Stephenson, who was later
involved in planning the Yallourn Garden City in Victoria, was contracted to complete the Lutana scheme
and instructed to reduce design costs. The led to a move away from the concept of a garden suburb and
towards cheaper housing. Stephenson believed it was questionable whether the type of tradesman EZ
wished to employ would live in such houses and argued that to have two different standards of housing
in the village would ‘certainly bring severe criticism and discontent between the occupants’. He was of
the opinion that EZ needed to decide either to erect more expensive, sound houses on Orpwood’s estate
or cheaper, smaller and more accessible houses at Moonah only 15 minutes walk from the Works. These
could be occupied by labourers working on the factory construction and then sold with the profits put
into developing Orpwood’s estate. The workmen the Company wished to retain could then move into the
village. Stephenson explicitly linked the quality of the housing scheme with the attraction and retention
of skilled and desirable labour. The housing for the unskilled and less desirable could be erected on the
assumption it would ultimately be used to subsidise the skilled labour’s housing.

Stephenson recommended that the Company should proceed with the Orpwood’s scheme on the basis
that ‘the happy housing conditions there will bring more quickly than anything else the benefits which
the industry needs’. On the contrary in the Moonah scheme:

This Esprit de Corps would be lacking-the spirit of community life centred on one object would not
be there. No encouragement would be given to that communal interest focussed in one spot which
is so potent a factor in obtaining maximum efficiency. This, after all, is the ultimate aim. Communal
life, common interests and healthy conditions, have been proved to be the greatest factors in bringing
about industrial rest and spirit of co-operation between the workman and master and vice versa.

It was anticipated industrial welfare housing would bring a convergence of interest between employer
and employee interests and reduce industrial unrest.

The construction of the more austere houses proceeded with 31 houses occupied, one vacant, five nearing
completion and seven under construction by early 1921. In spite of all the planning and construction work
the housing shortage remained acute and was proving to be more expensive than initially anticipated. In
1921 a downturn in metal prices caused the dismissal of approximately 350 workers and housing construction
to be shelved. But, as those houses that had been commenced were almost completed, the time was deemed
ripe for the development of a stronger civic sense among the tenants. As with other company towns,
community spirit was associated with the control of public space and remaking local society through notions
of belonging and commitment. Much of the day to day running of the housing scheme had been vested in
the Housing Trustees which consisted of two Company representatives and six employee representatives.
The Housing Trustees proposed that the tenants should establish a General Purpose Committee that would be responsible for over seeing discipline, care of property, communal improvements and the formation of a club for social and recreational purposes. Within its scope were schemes such as care and cultivation of the orchard, a common chicken run and milk supply, the development of a playing area for the children, rubbish disposal, a small rifle club, and improvement of communications on a cooperative basis. Such a Local Improvement Committee was formed by the residents of Lutana and in May 1921 was about to embark on a tree planting scheme. It would seem that Lutana was developing much as EZ desired. After a tour of inspection by a member of the Housing Trustees and Company officer it was reported that ‘It was a pleasure to find that the great majority of houses were well kept and clean inside and that progress in front gardens and kitchen gardens is as well advanced as it is’. There were two miscreants whose houses did not measure up to the Company’s desired standard of cleanliness who were to be warned and evicted if improvement did not occur.

In March 1922 Gepp reported to Collins House that once again the housing shortage was becoming acute. Hobart house rentals were rising and a number of staff members were looking for accommodation. At this stage 41 houses had been completed and the foundations of a further 14 houses laid. EZ’s Industrial Officer, A.W. Hutchin believed that if more houses were built ‘we shall add to the number of employees living in the village who are, by that much, more closely identified with the Company and its interests’. He pointed out that both C.R. Baker, Secretary of the Cooperative Council, and himself lived in the village and had established a very intimate touch with the employees and it was to the advantage of the Company that this nucleus should gradually grow. Within the village a feeling of solid commitment to the Company might be developed which, in times of stress, might have a most profound influence and senior Company officers could be available in emergencies.

In spite of these perceived benefits, the Board of Directors believed the current depressed financial situation militated against the construction of further houses. Gepp insisted and suggested that, instead of five houses being built at Lutana, a community hall and recreation area should be constructed. Gepp was aware of the potentially placating effects of Company housing on the workforce arguing:

The need for provision of facilities for the development of the social life of the village, removed as it is from the city, is eminently desirable … and we feel sure that it would afford an opportunity for our industrial officers who live at Lutana to develop the community spirit as we should like to see it developed.

Community would not be allowed to develop in an organic manner but would be engineered by management.

In 1923 the company established a Cooperative Building Fund that would allow the Housing Trustees to assess the suitability of the employees, with serious consideration given to their character, to borrow up to £750 to build or purchase houses. In 1923 the apparent poor demand for the expensive rental housing at Lutana caused EZ to modify its plans to build another 180 houses and instead proposed to sell the land at Orpwood’s estate to employees under the Cooperative Building Fund. The Hobart architects Hutchinson and Walker produced a more utilitarian design layout for Orpwood’s block and eliminated a playground, village green and nine conjoined houses from the design. The proposed facilities and houses were of a cheaper design and, although there were plans to extend the recreation reserve, it was a far cry from the originally planned model garden suburb. Although the blocks were offered at cost price, only 17 of the 103 blocks sold, with the vacant subdivision a testimony to the degradation of the original model garden village concept. The vision of a large harmonious village at Lutana did not eventuate on the scale initially outlined in 1918. In 1925 some 15 per cent of the rental houses were vacant. This was attributed to a prejudice against the concrete houses, the employee’s ability to obtain finance through the Cooperative Housing scheme had deprived the company of some good tenants whilst EZ’s wages allowed people to choose to live closer to the city and the company’s rail concessions allowed them to live some distance from the works. As Eklund found at Cockle Creek, the ready availability of transport to and from the Works enabled the workforce to scatter through the Hobart suburbs and weakened the influence of welfarist policies aimed at engineering the social and community life of workers. By 1926 the Company believed the housing scheme had fulfilled its duty, which was to meet the housing shortage and stabilise employees in their own homes, and as the value of houses had dropped there was little purpose in building new homes.
The Company’s involvement with Lutana shifted to day-to-day maintenance of the village and vigilance over peoples’ behaviour at Lutana. Inspections of the houses continued with the occasional report of houses being kept ‘in a very dirty condition and the children apparently not controlled’. During the 1931 depression EZ cut workers’ wages by 10 per cent and reduced rentals by 10 per cent on all EZ houses. Some tenants were unable to keep up with their rental payments and either left or were evicted from their houses. EZ hired a collection agency to obtain the outstanding rentals. Some, such as Mrs Glidden whose husband had been killed at the Works and children had been retrenched, offered to pay some rental and requested that her son and daughters be employed at the Works. Others, such as Mrs Brockman, revealed the depth of anger and frustration. She told EZ that if they had given her husband work she would have been able to pay.

I did not think that you would put your foot on me like that when you knew the way we was when we left you … you big men don’t care a scrap whether us poor wretches live or die you have your regular income you don’t know what it is to be without food there is all my family with hardly a boot to their feet there are better boots in the rubbish tip …. a big company like the zinc ought not miss a few pounds like that you could help poor people like us if you tried but you would not do that you would rather crush and keep us down.

Mrs Brockman received a letter from EZ stating that the collection agency had been withdrawn and she should pay when she could.

Although decent housing conditions were one aspect of Gepp’s minimum amount of happiness, in practice EZ’s planned garden village fulfilled a more mundane role. Management saw the benefits of the village as attracting skilled labour to the isolated Works, reducing industrial action and minimising the effects of breakdowns. Once the village was established the company worked assiduously to create a spirit of community. The Housing Trustees played a central role in maintaining physical and moral order in the village with those unwilling or unable to comply removed. In spite of the company’s considerable investment in housing there were contradictions. The Collins House directors’ concerns with costs saw a significant reduction in the number of houses and a degradation of the concept of a garden village. The workforce largely preferred to live away from the works. EZ’s subsidised rail fares and the cost of the housing played a significant part in this decision and it may be that the company’s overbearing influence in the village dissuaded others. Mrs Brockman certainly felt little gratitude towards the company. These tensions played out in such a way that the village ultimately bore little resemblance to Herbert Gepp’s original concept of a model garden village.

**Common interests and healthy conditions**

Although housing formed a part of EZ’s welfare strategy, other aspects were aimed at a much broader part of the workforce and encompassed recreational and health facilities. As at Port Pirie, the Cooperative Council was instrumental in running and organising many of the welfare activities. The EZ Cooperative Council was formed in 1918 ‘for the purpose of participating in and controlling a scheme for the supply and sale of the necessities of life on a cooperative basis to the employees of EZ’. The Council consisted of three members appointed by the General Manager, and another nine elected annually by all the employees. The Cooperative Council undertook to organise the worker’s lives outside the factory gates. At various times the Cooperative Council, as was the case at Port Pirie, undertook commercial activities with varying levels of success such as selling firewood, meat, and a cooperative store. The Council organised a number of social and sporting clubs and activities such as an orchestra, lacrosse, cricket and football teams, a brass band and tennis club and an annual picnic. As with the other cooperative activities many of these had chequered histories.

Although EZ claimed its working conditions were no less healthy than any other industry, and were supported by governmental sources, as in other sections of the metalliferous industry, some workers endured difficult circumstances. M.L. Daly, who worked in the Cell Room, recounted the conditions endured by the cell inspectors:

These men are continually subject to a constant spray of sulphate. …. The cell inspector is given a respirator, but it does not protect him the way it should. When a man breaks out into a perspiration it runs and carries the sulphate into his eyes and a man will come out with eyes like raw beef.
The conditions endured by the cell strippers were worse with:

more accidents in this particular line than in any other part of the Works. Only last week a man had his arm caught and some of his fingers severed… The Merit Board shows 22 accidents – one a fortnight – in 10 months … They call it ‘Port Arthur’ and themselves the ‘chain gang’.70

While in some circumstances the labour process acts as an impetus for mobilisation,71 at EZ it drew the workforce towards the company’s welfare activities.

After the Cooperative Council had established many of the welfare activities EZ management were concerned that the Cooperative Council had insufficient to do. They had recently received Federal Court decision exempting the company from the operation of Federal awards and concluded that this ‘tends to make us more than ever a self governing industrial community in the matter of wages and conditions, and the natural corollary of this is a well thought out programme of social service also conducted on self governing lines’.72 Conscious of the poor state of many employees dental health, management suggested to the Cooperative Council that ‘Cooperation between all employees of this Company, and the Company itself must undoubtedly concern itself most seriously in assisting and improving the general health of the community’73 and that the company would assist with establishing a dental clinic. The Directors supported this approach and, although they believed there was not a health problem at Risdon, there was a relationship between good health and efficiency, and that the establishment of a dental clinic deserved consideration if only from the point of making the employees more efficient.74

An Insurance Society was established in 1919 with the impetus apparently coming from Gepp and Gerald Mussen who had been involved in setting up a similar scheme at Port Pirie.75 The aim of the Society was to pay sickness benefits to the workers. Membership was voluntary and cost 6d a week and would pay £50 to the family of a member killed at work.76 In 1922 a separate Life Assurance Association was established where for membership of 3d a week an employee’s kin would receive £100 in the event of death.77 The association appears to have been well patronised with 92 per cent of the workers members in 1927.78 The Collins House Directors were enthusiastic about the scheme. Other employers’ experience of life assurance had been that it paid dividends in terms of the loyalty, goodwill and greater efficiency of the workers and was increasingly being used to get closer to their workers and show interest in their welfare.79 In 1920 a Medical Union was established to enable employees to receive free medical treatment and prescriptions from the Union Medical Officer at the Works80 at a cost of 9d a week.81 The company’s dramatic reduction of its workforce in 1921 to around 45 daily paid workers caused the fund to experience some financial difficulties. However after 1927 the workforce increased and over 98 per cent of workers chose to become members which enabled the fund to trade out of its difficulties.82

The Cooperative Council sought to organise the workers’ lives outside the factory gates. It supplied commercial services and organised sporting and social clubs with varying measures of success. It was in the area of medical related schemes that the Council achieved its greatest success. The Collins House directors saw this as a way to demonstrate cooperation between employers and employees and assist efficiency. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of some of the working conditions at EZ, the workers participated in these schemes. Whether this enabled the company to get closer to the workers is a moot point for the leaders of some of these welfare schemes were instrumental in forming the Zinc Workers Union some 15 years later.83 This reinforces Balnave’s observation that the lessons of cooperation learnt in welfare activities could be transferred to the formation of a union.84

Conclusion

At a time when company welfare schemes were limited to a small number of companies, the Collins House group of companies were at the forefront of such schemes. At EZ these were driven by the General Manager Herbert Gepp who, influenced by the New Liberalism, believed that efficiency and cooperation could be achieved by employers taking an active interest in their workers lives outside the factory gates. This saw plans for an extensive model garden city drawn up and a number of cooperative activities put in place.

Whilst Gepp took an approach that stressed the benefits of housing for the whole Works, the Collins House directors took a more narrow view. Their concerns over the cost of the scheme saw a degradation of the
original model garden village scheme both in terms of scale and design. Within the village the Housing Trustees oversaw the development of community spirit and discipline where those who were unwilling or unable to comply, such as Mrs Glidden and Brockman, could be evicted. As Patmore suggests, within a particular space localism may not be shared by all groups. This appears to have been the case with EZ’s garden village at Lutana where the workforce largely rejected the company housing. The village was seen as remote from Hobart, the housing expensive, the concrete houses viewed with suspicion and EZ’s subsidised railway tickets enabled people to live some distance from the Works. The second aspect of EZ’s industrial welfare programme was the activities run by the Cooperative Council. Although the Council’s commercial activities and social and sporting clubs had a chequered history, the medical related activities were embraced by the workforce. The Collins House directors were enthusiastic about the medical schemes and anticipated they would deliver greater efficiency and workforce loyalty. Doubtless many workers saw these benefits as necessary given the difficult working conditions in sections of the Works.

Overall EZ’s industrial welfare schemes had uneven outcomes. The tensions between Gepp’s idealism and the Collins House directors’ concern with profitability saw the scale and intention of the model garden village change. Some of this was attributable to the workforce’s indifference to many of the welfare schemes. The majority of workers only participated in the medical related schemes with this most likely a necessity due to the often harsh working conditions inside the Works rather than any desire to engage with the company. Although EZ had been able to banish unionism and implement its welfarism strategy free from any trade union criticism or the necessity to use welfarism to blunt unionism, this did not mean that the workforce would engage with welfarism nor signal any reconciliation between capital and labour. Reforming and engaging with the workforce outside the factory gates proved to be more difficult than Gepp and the Collins House directors anticipated and offers the prospect that, while companies may wish to dominate the community, the local provides tensions and points of resistance.

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A long time working: Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate, 1822-1901

Michael Bennett, Sydney

The contribution by Aboriginal workers to the development of Alexander Berry's Coolangatta Estate on the Shoalhaven River has received little recognition. They had an important role in the establishment of the estate in 1822, using their bush skills to supplement the meagre diets of Berry and his convicts. In the 1830s, Aboriginal workers developed agricultural and husbandry skills, although their bush expertise was still put to good use at times. Aboriginal labour reached its peak in the 1850s when they filled the labouring slack caused by the departure of many white workers to the gold fields. Employment continued until 1901 when the Aboriginal residents were moved to a nearby reserve. Despite the extensive work undertaken by Aboriginal people on the Coolangatta Estate, it remained only a minor economic strategy: the majority of their subsistence came from other sources such as fishing, hunting and gathering.

The contribution of Aboriginal labour to the pastoral industry in northern and western New South Wales following the discovery of payable gold at Sofala in 1852 is well known. Goodall’s analyses of the annual reports of the Commissioners for Crown land and various property records demonstrate that numerous Aboriginal men and women took up the labouring slack after the departure of many white workers to the gold fields. Whereas before they were driven from their lands to make way for sheep and cattle, some Aboriginal people now had the chance to continue the occupation of their lands and receive reasonable wages in return for their labour. Goodall refers to this phenomenon as ‘dual occupation’. The situation in the more settled regions of New South Wales in the vicinity of Sydney is less well understood. An exception is the important contribution made recently by Mark Hannah who examined the pattern of Aboriginal employment on the Australian Agricultural Company’s land between Port Stephens and Manning River. Hannah demonstrated that Aboriginal workers were among the most productive of all employees and resisted the imposition of the factory system of regimented and supervised work. Furthermore, he found there was an increased reliance on Aboriginal labour in the 1850s after gold prospecting intensified, but this was not caused by a desire on the part of European employers to offset higher wage claims by the remaining white workers. Rather, Aboriginal employees were in demand because of their reputation as ‘skilled and trustworthy’ workers.

Little has been written about Aboriginal labour in the Shoalhaven region to the south of Sydney, despite a wealth of historical and anthropological research. The reason for this dearth of analysis is not a shortage of primary historical material. The vast agricultural records of Alexander Berry’s Coolangatta Estate, found near the mouth of the Shoalhaven River, offer a detailed portrait of Aboriginal employment, particularly in the 1850s when Berry’s white workforce was drastically reduced by departures to the gold fields. They show Aboriginal people worked on the property from the time it was established in 1822 until 1901 when the Aboriginal residents were removed to the Roseby Park Aboriginal reserve. This article arises from research undertaken for my doctoral dissertation and presents a narrative of the changing nature of Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate from 1822 until 1901 in terms of the type of work undertaken and, to a lesser extent, the gender division of labour. It concludes by briefly contrasting the nature of dual occupation at Coolangatta and other areas of New South Wales.

Early settlement

The first land grant of 10,000 acres on the Shoalhaven River was given to Alexander Berry and Edward Wollstonecraft soon after their arrival in the colony in 1821. Berry was a Scotsman born in Fifeshire on 30 November 1781. After attending Cupar Grammar School and St Andrews University, Berry gained a medical degree from the University of Edinburgh and went to work as a ship’s surgeon for the East India Company. He grew up during the Scottish Enlightenment and followed Adam Smith’s dictum that ‘we must be men of the world’. Berry realised that there was a lack of understanding about indigenous peoples and when travelling with the East India Company to India and New Zealand, he took the opportunity to record his observations and make up for the dearth of knowledge.
Soon after abandoning his medical career, Berry formed a partnership with Edward Wollstonecraft, an English merchant, and together they moved to Sydney intent on becoming landowners and adhering to the Tory maxim that advocated the social, political and economic dominance of the landowning class. Wollstonecraft died in 1832 and had a minor role in managing Coolangatta.

Berry’s desire to become a landowner indicates another side to his character. As Elizabeth Brenchley demonstrates, he was also strongly influenced by the economic principles of laissez-faire capitalism, which eroded his humanitarian principles and tempered his benevolence towards Aboriginal people.

Not only did he want to have indigenous people on his property to observe, he was hopeful that they would become a labour force, and eventually, settled yeomen farmers. It was Berry’s belief that Aboriginal people were inferior to other groups and only capable of occupying jobs at the lower end of the economy.

Official settlement on the lower Shoalhaven River began in June 1822 when Alexander Berry set out from Sydney aboard the Blanch, a 15 ton cutter, with a crew including Hamilton Hume and two Aboriginal guides. Soon after arriving, the arduous task of clearing ground commenced, and the endeavours of Berry’s crew were assisted by local Aboriginal men, who also gave fish to the white workers. Berry recognised the efforts and generosity of the locals, and supplied them with tomahawks.

Two men of political importance came forward to meet with Berry, identifying themselves as ‘chiefs’ of Jervis Bay and Numba (the land on the southern side of the lower Shoalhaven River). They travelled back with Berry to Sydney when he returned to gather further supplies. They were given brass gorgets to signify their position. Berry was being drawn into a reciprocal relationship with local groups where he was expected to share, from an Aboriginal perspective, his abundant material wealth. This he did not always do and after some corn was stolen in March 1824, a reprisal raid led to the death of least one Aborigine. Episodes of plunder continued throughout the 1820s, but there is no further evidence for the application of lethal force in response. Amicable relations were re-established by 1830 and persisted for the remainder of the century.

One of the guides who assisted Berry to established Coolangatta was Broughton. While preparing in Sydney to claim his grant, Berry received a letter from Charles Throsby introducing Broughton, who had guided him on his southern expeditions. Throsby wrote that Broughton is ‘… well acquainted with every inch of that part of the country, speaks good English, and I think may be useful to you. I have therefore told him if he will accompany you and explain to the natives there, that they are not to touch anything you have and… that you will give him some tobacco, a pair of trousers, and he adds, he must have an old shirt’. This was the beginning of a working relationship that lasted over two decades and Broughton proved invaluable to Berry on the farm and in dealing with local Aborigines. Broughton was not transferred from Throsby to Berry as a slave. As the letter shows, Broughton would only go if he was given something in return. Farm records show that Broughton was paid in food and goods. The move was probably attractive to Broughton as it meant moving back to land with which he was familiar.

Broughton worked in a variety of jobs on the Coolangatta Estate. Between October 1824 and August 1827, he tended tobacco crops, recaptured escaped convicts, couriéd letters to Sydney, cut reeds in a swamp and procured parrots for collectors. His work is not representative of other Aboriginal labourers as they did not undertake agricultural tasks. Broughton also worked more frequently than others. A labouring life on the farm did not suit most Aboriginal people who preferred their traditional subsistence pattern of hunting and gathering. Berry wrote that he once said to Billy, an Aboriginal man occasionally employed on the estate, ‘Well Billy, I expected you were to have become like a white man but am sorry to find that you have again become a wild bush native’. Billy replied: ‘Oh no sir, I am no more wild than formerly, but I have become a free man again’. Berry had great difficulty in convincing Aboriginal people to become yeoman farmers.

**New skills**

Developing new skills, the indigenous inhabitants of Coolangatta worked on the corn harvest in May 1829 and the wheat harvest the following summer. The reapers were brought in at a time when convicts were protesting against inadequate rations and poor treatment by going slow and absconding. They may have been replacements for the missing convicts. Berry informed Wollstonecraft on 7 January 1830 that
‘[w]e have been employing as many natives as possible to assist in the reaping – and four of them have stuck steadily to the work for eight or ten days and although not first rate reapers still they are better then some of the worst reapers among the white people’.  

Aboriginal people formed a workforce to be drawn upon in times of shortage.

Wollstonecraft was less praiseworthy about the reaping abilities of Aboriginal people:

I know not what Mr Toosey’s (overseer) system for his May harvest may be – but nothing could be worse or more injurious than that which was pursued last year… He handed it over to the black people to be gathered as they thought proper – and merely had it carted into the field when picked. The results were – as might be expected – that the blacks picked some – but left a much larger quantity upon the stalks…. At least one third (was) lost to us… This system – or anything similar to it – will I trust be avoided on the present occasion.

Wollstonecraft’s assessment of their harvesting abilities is hasty and unfair. There are no previous records of Aboriginal people having participated in the harvest. Wollstonecraft’s account indicates that the Aboriginal people were given little training in harvesting technique and had to learn on the job. It is not surprising that some of the corn was left on the stalks at their first try. As is to be expected, their skills improved and Aboriginal people continued to assist with corn and wheat harvesting over many decades. Further, the Aboriginal reapers were working when money was tight on the farm. Wollstonecraft advocated that no more money be spent on farm development and that any excess workers be dismissed. It seems that he did not fully appreciate the presence of a workforce who largely supported itself and worked for very little.

**Aboriginal labour in the 1830s**

Indigenous participation in agricultural work continued into the late 1830s. Provision store books, covering the periods of 23 January 1837 to 19 January 1838 and 21 July 1838 to 22 December 1838, contain weekly lists of rations and supplies given to the free workers, convicts and Aboriginal workers at the three main centres of the estate: Coolangatta, Numba and Broughton Creek. The overseer of the provision store at Coolangatta recorded the information. Aboriginal people are listed as undertaking a variety of tasks including collecting bark, fishing, boating, tracking horses, capturing convicts, delivering messages, sewing and reaping crops, threshing seed, washing sheep, making yeast, washing bags and cleaning the storehouse. Overall, most indigenous workers were employed for their agricultural skills, but bush skills were put to good use, particularly where a comparative advantage existed, such as in collecting bark.

Aboriginal people rarely worked alone in 1837 and 1838. The usual listing is for ‘natives’ rather than the singular. The largest group consisted of 11 Aboriginal people assisting the butcher to slaughtered an ox in September 1837. Another group procured 56 sheets of bark in the week beginning 9 September 1837. There are several other groups of between five and seven individuals undertaking tasks such as wheat harvesting and cleaning the tobacco store. Aboriginal people were used to working in groups, so doing the unfamiliar work with familiar faces probably made the job easier and improved labour efficiency. It would also have made the task a social occasion.

Broughton is the name most frequently mentioned in the provision store books. For 1837, he is recorded as receiving a weekly ration on 38 occasions. His wife, who is named as Mrs Broughton, is listed on a further three separate weeks. Both Broughton and his wife received 10 pounds of flour, seven pounds of beef, some sugar, tobacco and occasionally tea in their ration pack. It approximately matched the rations given to assigned servants but was well below that usually given to hired hands. The tasks that Broughton undertook are not listed. Berry wrote in his 1838 reminiscences that slops and rations were always available for Broughton if he wished to claim them, implying that he need not work in return. On one instance, his wife is listed as helping with tobacco processing. She may have worked there to get supplies of tobacco. Alexander Berry was known to freely distribute tobacco among the convict labourers as an enticement to work.
Mrs Broughton is the only identifiable Aboriginal woman in the provision store books. This is not to say that all the other Aboriginal workers were men. Only five Aboriginal men are named: Broughton, Charcoal, Tammal, Lewis and Black Joe; but overall, there is a general absence of information about the work accomplished by Aboriginal women making it difficult to draw conclusions about the sexual division of labour at this time. The provisions that the Aboriginal workers received varied, but always at the small end of the scale. Other than for Broughton, there does not seem to have been a structure underlying their payments. The workers usually received flour, tea and tobacco. Sometimes beef was distributed. There are no records of money being paid, although if it was, it is unlikely to have been recorded in the provision store book that dealt solely with rations. The small amounts given as payment reflects the knowledge of Alexander Berry that Aboriginal people were still largely self-sufficient and could find their own subsistence after working for very little. As was the case on the Australian Agricultural Companies estates, the majority of Aboriginal people at Coolangatta were not employed, but Berry was happy to maintain an indigenous presence if it meant he could have access to a skilful workforce that knew its way around the landscape and could be called upon to work quickly and skilfully.

**Into the 1840s**

Economic conditions increased the opportunity for Aboriginal employment in the 1840s. Convicts, the main source of labour for the estate until this time, were withdrawn by the government in 1841, forcing Alexander Berry to look for an alternative supply of cheap labour, such as the employment of immigrants. The scarcity of labour and a drought in 1840 pushed up wages. Alexander Berry responded by refusing to employ British immigrants who were demanding excessive remuneration. Also, many immigrant labourers were unwilling to travel away from the cities.

Records of Aboriginal work from this period come from ledger and day books kept on the estate. They contain information about all the free and convict workers. The information includes details about wage rates and goods provided to the workers such as clothes and cooking utensils. Workers were rarely paid in cash. Most of the remuneration came in the form of rations and goods. There are no records of Aboriginal workers in 1840 and 1841. Information about Aboriginal labour begins in 1842, but is scarce until 1844. The most detailed picture of Aboriginal labour from this period comes from 1845. It appears that most of the ledger books from this year survived. There is little information from 1846 and none from 1847. Overall, the records indicate that Aboriginal employment did not increase markedly in the 1840s, despite improved opportunities.

Unfortunately, the ledger books contain limited information about the type of work undertaken by Aboriginal people. In the latter half of 1842, an Aboriginal man named Monkie burned off stubble from the land. On 23 August 1843, four unnamed labourers cut maize cobs from their stalks and two days later, seven others each received a shirt and a pair of duck trousers, most probably for the same task. Sheep washing, stock keeping and bark cutting were other jobs that Aboriginal people worked at over the next two years. A point to note about the work done by the Aboriginal people is that with the exception of cutting bark, all the other tasks were directly connected with agriculture and animal husbandry. It continues the trend from the late 1830s when the development of the estate meant that traditional Aboriginal skills such as bark cutting, hunting game and guiding people were not required to the same extent as they were previously. The exception is the burning off done by Monkie in 1842, which was a traditional practice directed to an agricultural purpose.

The overall work pattern for Aboriginal men in 1845 is shown on Figure 1. It records the number of times each month that Aboriginal workers were provided with goods and wages. The graph shows that the busiest month was July when goods were given to Aboriginal workers on 26 occasions. Various tasks were undertaken in that month including sheep washing, stock keeping, bark cutting and plough driving. The maize harvest in 1845 was done in June, the third busiest month for Aboriginal workers. The pattern for the year shows an increasing amount of work being done in the first six months, peaking in July and then falling away as the year moved to a close. There were no records for December. The graph demonstrates that Aboriginal men worked in all the months that records were kept. The pattern is seasonal insofar as the peak came in July when much work on the Coolangatta Estate was required to be done.
A notable absence from the work records is the name of Broughton. By the early 1840s he had retired from the Coolangatta Estate and his replacements were a new generation of Aboriginal workers. Broughton, however, was still living on the farm. In April 1842, he carried a letter from Alexander Berry to Governor Gipps requesting blankets for the Aboriginal population. It read that Broughton was the ‘oldest surviving Black prince and the virtual Head of the Shoalhaven Aboriginal Aristocracy’. Berry went on to say ‘Mr Broughton has always conducted himself a Good and Loyal subject and has been the means of capturing many Bushrangers’.  

**Figure 1: Number of goods and wage transactions per month, 1845**

![Graph showing number of goods and wage transactions per month, 1845](image)

### The gold rush and Aboriginal labour

The external factor with the largest potential impact on Aboriginal labour in the 1850s was the gold rush. Free workers left the Coolangatta Estate in droves in search of a private fortune on the goldfields of Bathurst and elsewhere. There were 236 private workers on the property in 1851. The number dropped to less than half that over the following 12 months. The introduction of tenants partially relieved the shortfall, but there remained a growing opportunity for Aboriginal people to increase the amount of work they did on the farm.

In the 1850s, Aboriginal labour conformed to the pattern established over the previous 20 years: workers continued to develop their skills in agriculture and animals husbandry. They harvested corn and wheat, reaped potatoes, tended to sheep, sheared and trained horses, amongst other duties. For the first time in over a decade, records show that Aboriginal women worked on the property, although only very rarely and there is no discernable division of labour. They mainly pulled corn and picked potatoes, usually with the men but once in an all female group. Men also occasionally stripped bark, but as was the case from the 1830s and 1840s, bush skills were now rarely in demand.

From November 1848 to June 1858, there was only one month when indigenous workers were not recorded in the day books and ledgers. There was, however, no consistent pattern to their working year. In about half the years, Aboriginal labour peaked in summer during the wheat harvesting season. For the remaining years, work was at a maximum during the winter when corn was harvested. The contingent reasons for these fluctuations are not apparent from the historical record.

The overall picture of Aboriginal work on the estate is of continual employment at fluctuating low levels. The picture for some individuals is different. The records indicate that no Aboriginal person was continuously employed from the late 1840s to the late 1850s. Some Aboriginal people only appear once or twice in the day books. Others worked more frequently, but with gaps of at least several years between jobs. Fewer Aboriginal men developed long working histories on the estate. The man with the most extensive record of labour was Unie, who first received goods and wages in 1845. He began working on the property when he was young, probably about 12 years old.
He grew up on the estate watching and learning from the Aboriginal workers. From 1848 to 1853, there were only five months in which he did not receive at least one payment of goods or wages. He had the longest period of work, exceeding the next best by two years. The type of work undertaken by Unie between 1848 and 1857 was not recorded in the ledgers. In July 1845, Unie was given a pair of braces for stock keeping. It is likely that he continued in this role for at least part of his working life.

An experienced horse rider, in January 1864 he was picked up by the constabulary and charged with stealing a horse from Sydney and riding it to Kiama.

An Aboriginal man named Buthring recalled to Archibald Campbell in May 1902 that a ‘black named ‘Oney’’ was a renowned stockman on the Coolangatta who was ‘proud of his expertise with the stockwhip’. According to Buthring, ‘Oney’ could split the head of a snake with the crack of his whip. Clearly, Unie was a talented stockman and horse-rider whose skills were valued on the Coolangatta Estate for many years.

It is difficult to gauge the response of Aboriginal labour to the demand created by the gold rush. There is no noticeable increase in the number of payments made to Aboriginal workers after the rush began in 1851. Berry made 222 payments to Aboriginal workers in 1850 worth approximately £52, 224 in 1851 worth about £47 and 255 in 1852 worth about £61. The biggest jump occurred in 1853 when the number of payments reached 266 with a value of almost £97. Increases in the value of goods given for work does not necessarily mean that more days were spent working – the average wage may have risen instead. The number of days worked by Aboriginal people on the Coolangatta Estate is tricky to determine. The impression created by the records is that there was no noticeable increase either in employment or remuneration immediately after the gold rush and that the biggest change occurred two years later, suggesting a different cause for the increment.

Hannah noted an increased reliance by the Australian Agricultural Company on Aboriginal labour in the mid-1850s, but he found no evidence that ‘Aboriginal workers were substitutes for Europeans seeking better pay and conditions elsewhere’. Rather, they were in demand because of their skills in shepherding and stockwork. It seems that a similar situation existed on the Coolangatta Estate. By the early 1850s, Aboriginal workers such as Unie had almost 15 years of experience working on the property. Furthermore, they had grown up on the estate watching the previous generation do much of the same work. They were valuable for their skills and not as replacements for departed gold rush workers. Hence employment, or at least the value of remuneration, did not increase when the gold rush began.

Aboriginal labour in the late nineteenth century

There are few detailed farm records from the last four decades of the nineteenth century from which to draw a picture of Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate. Day-to-day control of the property largely rested with Alexander’s brother, David Berry, who was well known for his relaxed approach to record keeping. Property records show an Aboriginal presence in the 1860s and 1870s, but contain little detail on the type of work undertaken.

There is more information about indigenous employment on the Coolangatta estate in the 1880s and 1890s when the property had passed into the hands of Alexander and Sir John Hay, cousins of David Berry. It is provided by the oral history recorded by Janet Mathews in the mid-1960s. In April 1965, she spoke with Mrs Emma Longbottom (nee Lloyd), then 73 years-of-age. Mrs Longbottom, who was married to John Longbottom, recalled that her parents, William Thomas Lloyd and Mary-Anne Dixon, had lived all their lives on the estate, as had her grandparents. Mrs Longbottom said that when she was a child, her father collected corkwood (Duboisia myoporoides) and took it to the milk factory on a bullock dray. His two brothers did not work on the estate. She lived with her family near a black swamp lined with tea-trees about six miles from the homestead. Mrs Longbottom recalled that George Nipple also worked for the Hay brothers at the homestead, where he was the ‘main man … (who) used to help with the rations’. In summing up her experiences on the estate, she said that Sir John Hay was a ‘wonderful man’ who looked after the Aboriginal people by providing them with boxes of new clothes and rations, including meat. Life under Alexander Hay was less enjoyable as they were not treated as well. She did not go into details, but it may have been because of the part he played in the removal of the Aboriginal people to Roseby Park.

Mathews also spoke to Agnes Johnson of Wreck Bay, who described herself as the ‘oldest pioneer from the Coolangatta estate’. Mrs Johnson recollected that her husband worked at cutting down trees
on the property. She also recalled that Geoff Amatto was the chief stockman on the property when David Berry was in charge.

The annual reports of the Aborigines Protection Board confirm indigenous employment on Coolangatta. In 1888 David Berry employed about 25 Aboriginal people at the rate of £0.10.0 to £0.13.0 per week plus rations and quarters. The report for 1890 declared that 20 to 30 individuals were employed on the property at a weekly rate of £0.12.0 to £0.16.0. It also announced that other Shoalhaven Aboriginal people were earning a living as farm labourers on different properties, while others obtained subsistence from fishing. A similar story was recounted in the annual report for 1891, the only difference being the reduced weekly wage rate of £0.10.0 down from £0.12.0, which was probably the consequence of the emerging depression which gripped Australia in the 1890s.

By the 1880s, Aboriginal people of the estate did not necessarily have to work or hunt and gather in order to obtain subsistence. Following the creation of the Aborigines Protection Board in 1883, rations were available to children and the elderly, reducing the pressure on younger adults to provide for family members incapable of supporting themselves. The rations, which consisted of flour, sugar, tea and sometimes meat, were not always sufficient to feed a family and at times they did not meet basic standards of nutrition, but they would have made life easier, particularly during the depression of the 1890s.

 Removal to Roseby Park

Aboriginal employment on the Coolangatta Estate was curtailed in the early 1900s when the community was moved to the Roseby Park reserve. The Hay brothers were intent on breaking up the estate and selling it in smaller lots to maximise their financial returns. The Aboriginal population, who were mainly living in huts at the northern foot of Coolangatta Mountain, were moved on to ease the process, although supposed health problems in the camp was given as an official reason.

The removal of the Aboriginal people happened incrementally. The Roseby Park Reserve, which had been gazetted in 1900, remained unoccupied in February 1901, although over 10 huts, including some transported from the Coolangatta Estate, were ready for tenants. (Sir John Hay had donated £50 towards construction and reassembly.) At least some of the residents of Coolangatta moved to the reserve soon after as the 1901 census shows that 23 members of the Carpenter and Bundle families were living there when the return was taken in early April. It records that 10 huts were unoccupied. The census also shows that at least 60 Aboriginal people were still living on the estate, including the families of William Lloyd and George Nipple. The precise time at which they were moved to the reserve is unknown. It was likely to have been soon after that as Sir John Hay was keen to sell more land. No Aboriginal people would have lived on the estate by 1916 when the last of the land was sold. The relocation disrupted many thousands of years of direct association between the Aboriginal people and the land around Coolangatta Mountain and the Shoalhaven River. Some people continued to live on the estate workers may have continued to work on the property, but there is no obvious mention of it in the estate’s work records.

 Discussion and conclusion

Goodall, in her doctoral research of pastoral properties in north-western, western, and north coast NSW, demonstrates that pastoral owners employed Aboriginal workers when properties were large and stock densities were low. This permitted economies of scale, particularly during the busy mustering season. Evidence from the Coolangatta Estate suggests a different pattern of Aboriginal employment and thereby a different form of dual occupation. There is no distinct seasonal pattern to Aboriginal employment on the Coolangatta Estate as there was on the larger pastoral stations. They tended to work throughout the year, with concentrations in December for wheat harvesting and July for corn picking, but this pattern did not always manifest itself. Dual occupation of the Coolangatta Estate began soon after Berry took possession of the land in 1822. Initially Aboriginal people contributed to the running of the estate by using their bush skills to catch fish and track cattle, for example. By 1830 when the period of frontier violence had ended, Aboriginal people were living and working on the property in relative safety and this situation continued for the remainder of the nineteenth century. As the 1800s progressed they continued to learn new skills in agricultural and animal husbandry.
It is clear that dual occupation began earlier and had a much longer duration at Coolangatta than it did not many other parts of New South Wales. Other differences include that unlike other parts of the colony, it is difficult to identify a dramatic increase in the amount of work done by Aboriginal people in the aftermath of the gold rush. Remuneration increased two years later, suggesting that indigenous workers were valuable for their skills rather than as a reserve workforce to be called upon in a time of shortage. Another notable difference is the absence of information about the work done by Aboriginal women. It seems that they took little part in agricultural activities aside from occasionally picking potatoes and harvesting corn. They probably worked at domestic chores but the documentary evidence for that too is slim.

Greater similarities exist between Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate and the Australian Agricultural Company’s land at Port Stephens. In both areas Aboriginal people worked and remained on their land over many decades beginning at a similar time in the 1820s. Over the years many Aboriginal people were employed but the majority remained independent of the European landowners. The gold rush saw marginal increases in indigenous employment at best, but there was not wholesale recruitment. Further research may show similar patterns in Aboriginal employment on properties in the wider area about Sydney.

Endnotes


9. The idea of inferiority is implicit in Berry’s support of the ‘science’ of phrenology, which claimed to differentiate between nationalities on the basis of supposed measurable brain criteria. As Reece established, Berry believed that the ‘Aborigines’ nomadic habits were attributed... to the over-development [in the brain] of ‘locomotive propensities’, see R.H.W. Reece, *Aborigines and colonists: Aborigines and colonial society in New South Wales in the 1830’s and the 1840’s*, The University of Sydney Press, 1974, pp. 85-90. To advance phrenological investigations, Berry collected skulls from his estate into the 1840s, sending some of them to St Andrews University in Scotland. Berry was not an extreme supporter of phrenology, but it gave him the justification for prioritising self-interest over his concern for Aboriginal people.


13. Letter from Berry to Wollstonecraft October 16 1824, Berry Papers ML MSS 315/86-7; Berry Papers ML MSS 315/86-7; Letter from Berry to Wollstonecraft October 8 1826 ML MSS 315/86-7; Berry Papers ML MSS 315/86-7.


17. Letter to Berry May 22 1830, Berry papers ML MSS 315/50.


29. Aboriginal workers were mainly identified by comparing names from the estate’s day books and ledgers with names in the blanket returns from the 1830s and 1840s.
34. AIATSIS Library, Janet Mathews Tapes, J10-11.
35. A sample of flour from a supplier to the La Perouse reserve was sent to the government analyst in 1895. The flour was found to be substandard and the analyst recommended that the supplier be told to provide ‘a better article’, Minutes of the Aborigines Protection Board, October 17 1895, NSW State Records, 4/7108-4/7112.
37. 1901 Commonwealth Census, County of St Vincent, NSW State Records, 2/8462.
38. Some of the residents may have established a camp at Woregy, to the west of Nowra, rather than moving to Roseby Park. The Woregy camp still existed in the 1930s when some of the residents worked as bean pickers on nearby farms, see Goodall, Invasion to Embassy, p. 221.
Vanguards and avant-gardes: the ‘Reason in Revolt’ online project on political and cultural radicalism

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The ‘Reason in Revolt’ project aims to bring together primary source documents of Australian radicalism as a readily accessible digitised resource. By ‘radical’ we refer to those who aimed to make society more equal and to emancipate the exploited or oppressed. As it grows and develops, the project website will become an expanding record of the movements, institutions, venues and publications through which radicals sought to influence Australian society. Burgmann, Macintyre and Milner intend to utilise the technological benefits of this website in the production of a monograph on the role of intellectuals in the development of radical thought and practice.

To the predictable annoyance of Andrew Bolt, the Australian Research Council is providing $222,000 over the 2004-06 period to fund a project entitled ‘Reason in Revolt: The Role of Intellectuals in Australian Radicalism’. Writing in the Melbourne Herald Sun in November 2003, Bolt airily dismissed the project’s three Chief Investigators, Verity Burgmann, Stuart Macintyre and Andrew Milner, as ‘old-time Marxists’. Doubtless, he will be relieved to learn that we have drawn on a younger generation of radicals to provide our research assistants: Simon Booth, completing his History PhD with Macintyre on ‘Picturing Politics: Cartoons and Melbourne’s Left, 1890-1920’ and located in the project office near Burgmann in the Department of Political Science at the University of Melbourne; and Matthew Ryan, one of the editors of Arena Magazine, who is based with Milner in the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University.

Over the next few years this team will build an online database of the more significant primary source documents of Australian radicalism during the past 130 years. Booth coordinates the uploading, indexing and cross-referencing of the more broadly ‘political’ documents, Ryan the more specifically ‘cultural’ documents. The launch of the website <www.reasoninrevolt.net.au> at the Biennial Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History at the University of Sydney 30 June – 2 July 2005 now marks the successful completion of the first stage of this online project.

The point of the project

The ‘Reason in Revolt’ project aims to bring together primary source documents of Australian radicalism as a readily accessible and easy-to-use digitised resource. Improved scanning techniques make possible the high-quality website reproduction of hardcopy texts. Most importantly, the benefits of online technology will facilitate new ways of understanding and interpreting Australian political and cultural radicalism. The Chief Investigators encourage others to exploit the possibilities; and intend themselves to utilise online technology in the production of a monograph on the role of intellectuals in the development of radical thought and practice.

By ‘intellectual’, we refer not to a certain type of person, but rather to a particular type of social role: to writers and journalists, actors and painters, priests and teachers, no matter what their own individual levels of ‘intelligence’, no matter what their own particular individual abilities and disabilities. This social role is reflection, analysis, commentary on and critical engagement with the institutions and practices that constitute the social order.¹ Some of these will be ‘traditional’ intellectuals, to borrow Gramsci’s term, that is, professional intellectuals who experience their social position as ‘autonomous and independent’; some will be ‘organic’ to other social groups, such as the ‘bourgeoisie’ or the ‘working class’.² The prime focus of this project is on those who disseminated radical argument in the public domain, usually in printed form, whether they operated as ‘traditional’ or ‘organic’ intellectuals and whether they produced their statements as individuals or as groups.

By ‘radical’ we do not mean those who simply made statements that unsettled or destabilised prevailing ideas; we refer rather to those who aimed to make society more equal and to emancipate the exploited or oppressed. To this extent our definition of radical is approximate to ‘left’ in the sense used by Norberto Bobbio, who maintains that ‘the left tends towards equality and the right tends towards inequality’.³
Whatever their immediate success, the radical intellectual currents, movements and organisations with which we are concerned, significantly affected the history of Australia in ways that enlarged rather than restricted opportunities and improved rather than deteriorated people’s circumstances. In many instances the radical heresies of one generation became the commonplace or at least more mainstream attitudes of later generations, for example: the late nineteenth-century demands for the enfranchisement of women; or the early to mid-twentieth century arguments for equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender or race.

A recurring motif in ‘modernist’ political and cultural practice, from the late nineteenth-century until well into the second half of the twentieth, has been that of the ‘progressive intellectual’, understood either as political ‘vanguard’ or cultural ‘avant-garde’. More expressly ‘postmodernist’ accounts often argue that such practices became obsolete during the late twentieth century. We propose to examine the modernist self-perceptions of the progressive intellectual and to analyse the extent to which these persist into the postmodern period. Postmodernist readings tend to subject vanguardist or avant-gardist intellectuals to what E.P. Thompson once termed ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’. More explicitly hostile readings, on the other hand, follow the movement of such intellectuals into the universities and cultural professions, to characterise them as a deracinated intellectual ‘elite’ removed from and unsympathetic to popular values and aspirations. By contrast, we aim to interrogate progressive intellectuals’ own accounts of themselves, their declared motivations and aspirations, through a direct analysis of a wide range of primary source texts. We aim, too, to discover the extent to which such radical cultures constitute what Raymond Williams termed ‘a whole way of life’.

The title ‘Reason in Revolt’ is not simply an allusion to the words of the well-known revolutionary anthem, but also an indication that we intend to investigate how radical intellectuals tended to subscribe to an alternative rationality to the dominant or hegemonic; and how this commitment to ‘reason’, however understood, tended to underpin their urge to revolt. For example, socialist intellectuals frequently argued that collectivity and co-operation were more reasonable organisational principles for society than individualism and competition; and feminist intellectuals countered the rationality of equality between the sexes to the irrationality of women’s subordination to men. In positing this notion of an alternative rationality, the research team will nonetheless seek to problematise the Enlightenment assumption, common to such intellectual radicalism, that the application of reason to human social arrangements results in ‘progress’. We will therefore consider whether postmodernist critiques of the grand narratives of emancipation spawned by the Enlightenment – such as socialism, feminism and nationalism – offer insight into the particular role and manner of operation of radical intellectuals.

There is growing interest in the study of the role of intellectuals in Australian radicalism. The 1988 collection edited by Head and Walters contained several essays considering such subjects within a framework that explored the historical relationship between intellectuals and Australian society. There is a growing body of biographical studies of particular labour movement intellectuals, including Vere Gordon Childe, Brian Fitzpatrick and Lloyd Ross; and Irving and Scalmer have recently attempted to conceptualise the role of ‘Australian labour intellectuals’. Feminism, peace activism, environmentalism and Aboriginal activism have also generated biographical and other historical studies of intellectual practice, for example those in Eric Fry’s edited collection Rebels and Radicals. More recently, Janette M. Bomford’s That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein, Peter Hempenstall’s The Meddlesome Priest: A Life of Ernest Burgmann, Tim Rowse’s Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life and Paul Strangio’s Keeper of the Faith: A Biography of Jim Cairns, have all explored the problematic relationships between radical intellectuals and their social milieux.

The ‘Reason in Revolt’ project will chart the constellation of Australian radicalism over more than a century, so as to make possible a more systematic and comparative study of patterns of intellectual practice. Political science and political history have contributed many worthwhile studies of particular streams of progressive thought and practice. However, the bulk of the existing secondary literature is polarised between political accounts of the left, which are inattentive to its intellectual context, and intellectual histories inattentive to politics. Much left-wing history is preoccupied with expressly political purposes and uninterested in reading the relevant political primary sources as cultural texts; whilst the more recent focus on literary and cultural history tends to be concerned with particular groups and genres, to the expense of broader left history. We aim, therefore, to integrate the approaches of...
political science and political history, on the one hand, literary and cultural studies, on the other, into a synthetic treatment of Australian intellectual radicalism.

There has been no previous analysis of Australian radicalism as a whole and over a long time period. Our aim is to reveal the extent to which different radical ideas and practices both intersected and took issue with each other. These conjunctures and disjunctures will need to be examined if radicalism is to be adequately comprehended and this can only be done through a totalising approach.

The website will enable researchers to test hypotheses about transmission, influences, shifts, and breaks; about languages, imagery and audiences. Examples of the questions that could be asked include: to what extent has left-wing thought and practice employed masculinist rhetoric? or feminist thought and practice been impervious to issues of class? to what degree has the productivism of socialist thought precluded its engagement with environmental issues? is there a connection between realist aesthetics and leftist politics, modernist aesthetics and political quietism? Hitherto, scholars seeking answers to these and related questions have been denied the advantages of a computerised database with cross-referencing and keyword search functions. The provision of keyword search functions will enable researchers to explore, for example, continuities and discontinuities in language use between different kinds of radicalism or between different radical generations. Downloadable text and graphics will facilitate comparative analysis of analogous continuities and discontinuities in patterns of iconography. At the very least, the accessibility of the documents and the ease with which they can be manipulated will encourage multiple forms of investigation and critical scrutiny.

**Background to the project: from filing cabinets to computer technology**

The project inherited a large archive. With the help of a large ARC grant of $33,000 in 1990-1991, which employed Joy Damousi as a half-time research assistant, Burgmann and Milner established a primary source collection comprising approximately 2,000 documents. Significant pamphlets and manifestos, influential poems and songs, important editorials and articles from journals and magazines, were photocopied from a wide range of collections located at: the National Library of Australia and the Noel Butlin Archives of Business and Labour in Canberra; the State Library of Victoria and the University of Melbourne Archives; the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales; the Barr Smith Library and the South Australian Archives in Adelaide; the Battye Library in Perth; the Oxley Library in Brisbane; and from private collections. Attention was also paid to pictorial material, such as illustrations, photographs, posters and cartoons. Various autobiographical writings were also collected.

The existing hardcopy database currently fills a four-drawer filing cabinet. It includes obscure, even hitherto unknown material, but also obviously important radical utterances that are nonetheless difficult to locate or are scattered in secondary literature and rarely reproduced **in toto**. Examples of ‘obvious’ inclusions are: the Manifesto of the Democratic Association of Victoria in 1872 (the Australian affiliate to Karl Marx’s ‘First International’ or International Working Men’s Association); William Lane’s exhortation to fellow radicals to leave Australia and join his utopian socialist community in Paraguay in 1893; Vida Goldstein’s feminist manifestos during her early twentieth-century Senate election campaigns; the Victorian Socialist Party Socialist Sunday School’s ‘Ten Commandments’; the Industrial Workers of the World’s song, ‘Bump Me Into Parliament’; the founding manifestos of the Communist Party of Australia in 1920; the statements of the Unemployed Workers Movement in the Great Depression of the early 1930s; Nettie Palmer’s response to the Spanish Civil War; statements of Aboriginal activists at the time of the 1938 sesquicentenary of European settlement; extracts from P.R. Stephensen’s *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* and Rex Ingamells’s *Conditional Culture*; manifestos of the New Theatre, the Realist Writers’ Groups and the Studio of Realist Art; A.A. Phillips on the cultural cringe; founding or other significant editorials of periodicals such as *The Bulletin, Ross’s Monthly of Protest, Personality and Progress, Communist Review, Meanjin, Overland, Outlook, Arena, Intervention, Refractory Girl, Scarlet Woman* and *Hecate*, and of newspapers such as *The Radical, The Boomerang, Dawn, Woman Voter, The Guardian, Tribune, Mejane, Abo Call* and *Koorakookoo*; documents relating to the major splits in the Communist Party; the principal statements of the New South Wales Builders Labourers’ Federation during the ‘Green Bans’ of 1971-75; the election manifesto of the Nuclear Disarmament Party in 1984; the aims and objectives of the Aboriginal Treaty 88 Campaign; the Charter of the Rainbow Alliance in 1989; and the Preamble and Objectives of the Constitution of the New Left Party in 1990.
This inherited collection is a sizeable and representative database of primary source materials, produced individually or collectively by radical intellectuals and relating to self-consciously ‘progressive’ currents in Australian political life. Despite overtures to various publishers and some near bites in the early 1990s, the earlier project fell victim to the technological advances it has now embraced. The time was out of joint for hardcopy publication of documentary collections such as those that informed the research of previous generations of labour historians.

Fortunately, the new wave of funding will enable the research team to consolidate and expand the collection, especially for the 1990s period not included in the initial project, and to incorporate the most worthwhile components of the enlarged collection into a website. This will itself constitute a significant research project into the forms and provenance of Australian political and cultural radicalism. More importantly, however, the new technology will allow the texts to be investigated in innovative and fruitful ways.

What is being done: the technical aspects of the project.

Selecting Documents

Documents are being selected initially from the inherited database. The criterion for a document to be included is simply that it is an expression of the work of radical intellectuals, broadly conceived. A radical is here understood as someone who wants to transform society in a more egalitarian and emancipatory direction, an expression as anything from a speech or lecture through to the rules and purposes of an organisation. If anyone wishes to offer documents for inclusion, or at least to establish whether or not the project already has a particular item, please contact Simon Booth on <booth@unimelb.edu.au> in the case of ‘political’ documents or Matthew Ryan at <Matthew.Ryan@arts.monash.edu.au> in the case of ‘cultural’ documents.

The original hardcopy collection was biased towards documents of an expressly political kind, so current attention is being directed toward the addition of material concerning cultural radicalism. Documents included thus far have ranged from journal articles on national culture and debates about aesthetics to novel extracts and theatre programs. Organisational material, such as the constitutions of writers’ groups, has also been included. Along with printed text, images of cartoons and photographs are also included in the collection. The use of MP3 sound files has also enabled the inclusion of radical songs and music. This broad scope approach to culture will enable the user to view radical critical work as well as cultural artefacts themselves.

Scanning documents

The project as originally envisaged proposed to digitise all our documents using text recognition software. This form of scanning digitises the document character by character, producing a word document with all the text in it. The great strength of this approach is that it allows complete flexibility in searching. Once the scanning process is complete, it is possible to search the document for any text it contains. The difficulty, however, is the imperfection of the text recognition software. As anyone who deals with archival material knows, the quality of the original document is often poor or has deteriorated over time. While text recognition software is perfectly adequate to deal with a document printed off a modern laser printer to today’s standards, it has serious problems with the printout off a microfilm of a newspaper typeset 100 years ago. Initial trials with this approach found that, while the search options provided by a document with full text-recognition were to be preferred, the time taken to correct errors made the approach unviable in most instances. In some cases, it was quicker to type a transcript than to scan the document and make all the required corrections.

As an alternative, we decided to scan all the documents as images, but to also provide a text transcription only when we have determined that a document is of special importance. The standard adopted is to scan the originals as PDF documents, that is, the common standard on the web: most computers have a PDF reader and most users have some experience with PDFs.

Importantly, Booth and Ryan are writing brief abstracts for each document, thus ensuring keyword search functions for each abstract if not every document in its entirety. These abstracts will be
particularly valuable in the case of visual and audio sources, as well as for those documents uploaded only in PDF format.

As we noted, a number of the documents are either in a poor physical state or badly reproduced. This raises the question of whether to include a document in the database at all if it is in such poor condition. Here, we opted for the principle of inclusivity: if the bulk of the material in a document is readable, even if with difficulty, then it has been included, since it will still be of some value to users of the website. Where a document is of poor quality, this will be noted in its entry in the database.

**Coding and the Online Heritage Resource Manager**

We aim to provide ‘context’ for each ‘text’ in the form of a brief commentary, and any necessary annotation, though this aspiration has been jeopardised by the fact that the ARC did not grant teaching relief for the project. In these circumstances, we would very much welcome assistance in writing commentaries, and annotation where necessary, from anyone especially familiar with selected documents; and by-lines would be provided.

At the very least, an elaborate coding system is being deployed as each document is placed on the website. The Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre (AUSTEHC) has developed a platform called an Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM), which they describe as a ‘context based resource discovery and access system that links creators, archival and heritage resources and published materials within the one system’. For the purposes of this project, it provides a database in which the source material can be organised and which generates the bulk of the website automatically. The OHRM was selected as the appropriate platform because of its demonstrated success in a range of other projects, including the Australian Trade Union Archives project and the Australian Women’s Archives Project as well as the Australian Dictionary of Biography Online.

The OHRM is a database which employs the ‘entity – relationship’ model for documenting and managing resources. In this approach, the creation of descriptive entities and the establishment of their interrelationships place records in their context. For example, William Guthrie Spence’s book, *The Ethics of New Unionism*, is described by its primary relationship to the subject entity ‘New unionism’, the biographical entity ‘William Guthrie Spence’ and the institutional entity ‘Australian Socialist League’. Since Spence has an ongoing relationship with the ALP, there is also a ‘see also’ relation to the institutional entity ‘Australian Labor Party’. Each of these entities has a description, which provides the user with some context, and also links to the entries for each individual PDF document.

The original archive was catalogued into sections such as feminism, radical nationalism, republicanism, indigenous rights, homosexual liberation, pacifism, anti-militarism, environmentalism, socialism, anarchism, communism, realism, modernism, postmodernism, right-to-work campaigns, student movements, libertarianism, free thought; where appropriate, these sections are further subdivided into manageable chronological or other subdivisions, such as ‘1920s’ or ‘New Left’.

In the OHRM each of these subject headings become entities. They are then related to other entities, which are organised under the categories: Events, Institutions, Persons, Places, Subjects and Cultural Forms. Entities are also listed under the additional browsing category of ‘functions’, which includes headings such as Activist, Social Phenomenon, Political Movement and Aesthetic Philosophy. For example, the Subject entity ‘Divorce’ is related to another entity, ‘Feminism’, as well as listed under the function of Social Phenomenon. The documents are then entered into the database as ‘publications for download’. These are then also related to the appropriate entities – a process which builds a complex map of the relationship between the people, the organisations and the events of Australian radicalism.

There are some challenges in the relating process. For example, the subject entity ‘anti-Semitism’ is used when a document’s subject is anti-Semitism. What, then, when one comes across an example of anti-Semitism in a document whose subject is something quite different, for example, socialism in Sydney? The OHRM provides the option of establishing a relationship as either ‘primary’ or ‘see-also’, which is one useful way to indicate the relative importance of the relationship established. The approach adopted when dealing with this type of problem is to concentrate on what is most useful for the user.
The Past is Before Us

As suggested in the examples of included documents, our understanding of ‘culture’ incorporates both the artistic sense of creative production and the sociological sense of a ‘whole way of life’. So a journal article that presents an argument for aesthetic realism, for example, would be primarily related to the subject entity ‘Realism’ and would also be related to the cultural form entity of ‘Criticism’. An essay on the need to forge a distinctive Australian identity would be primarily related to ‘Nationalism’. Where there is an explicit discussion of culture, using the term in the either the sociological or artistic sense, a primary relation to the ‘Culture’ entity would be made. In the case of artistic cultural artefacts, such as poetry, a relation to the cultural form entity ‘Poetry’ would be used. Other examples of sub-categories listed under cultural forms include Paintings, Songs and Cartoons. Arranging these sets of related categories around culture means that the user will be able to gain access to a large network of documents concerning culture, whether they are researching radical approaches to culture or radical cultural artefacts.

Copyright

The copyright held over documents is an important issue for this project, presenting a number of challenges. Where copyright exists in an item to be included in the website, permission must be sought. Until recently, copyright for the vast majority of the material lasted for the life of the author plus 50 years from the end of the year of the author’s death. On 1 January 2005, the free-trade agreement between Australia and the United States of America came into effect, changing the duration of copyright from 50 to 70 years from the death of the author. However, there is no revival of copyright that expired before 1 January 2005. For example, David Stewart, a key figure in the founding of Workers’ Education Associations in Australia, died in 1954 and copyright in his published work ended at the end of 2004. His published works came into the public domain on 1 January 2005 and, since they were already out of copyright at the beginning of the year, they will remain so regardless of the free-trade agreement.16

Thus far, the bulk of material processed for the project has been from the nineteenth century and in the public domain, but in moving forward to the twentieth century the process of seeking copyright permission will become more demanding. It can be very difficult to track down copyright holders who were members of small radical organisations or marginalised social groups. Also, in some cases it is
unclear who would hold the copyright, as for example in flyers or pamphlets issued around particular campaigns or issues, or material published under pseudonyms. As the project expands its cultural content there will also be additional copyright hurdles. Unpublished literary, dramatic and musical works, as well as unpublished anonymous material never come out of copyright into the public domain, and it is often impossible to find copyright holders for this material.

The process undertaken in relation to copyright is set out in the diagram below. The OHRM has been designed to include a statement on the copyright status with the entry for each document. This is used to track the status of a document and to record what steps have been made to identify the copyright holder and seek permission to include a document. The keeping of proper records is essential should an audit occur or a complaint be lodged in order to demonstrate that best endeavours have been made to gain permission for the use of any material under copyright.

Where a document is in copyright and the author agrees to its inclusion, a deed has been prepared by lawyers, which gives permission for the document to be used on the site. As the diagram demonstrates, where the copyright holder cannot be identified, we have decided to include the material. Subsequently, should someone approach us and demonstrate they hold the copyright and do not wish the material included, then it will be removed immediately. Additionally, if we cannot through our best endeavours locate a copyright holder we have identified and the material has already been in the public domain, then we will include it, and similarly remove it if requested. Where material is unpublished, private material, never before made public, then we will not include it. Are there other issues of intellectual property?

Our understanding is that copyright and associated moral rights are the major issue and not intellectual property (ideas formally registered for commercial exploitation). However, we will seek advice on the matter of intellectual property.

**Figure 2: Process for determining whether to publish a document in relation to copyright**

For our purposes, the website will constitute the primary resource for writing a monograph on the role of intellectuals in Australian radicalism over the past 130 years. This monograph will provide taxonomical analysis of the components of radical thought and practice, thereby mapping the changing boundaries of radicalism. It will explore how radicals conceptualised their objectives to include and exclude particular components such as race, gender and nature, and will suggest some of the principal shifts within radical ideology. The monograph will pay attention to the textual dimension, looking at discursive and iconographic forms, breaks and continuities. It will provide a contextual interpretation of the organisational forms and practices of radical political movements, their reach and impact. Finally, it will provide a historical and analytical account of the figure of the radical intellectual: who s/he was and how s/he worked.
However, the success of the project will also be judged by the extent to which it proves interesting and useful for others. As it grows and develops, the website should increasingly capture the variety of radical passions and persuasions that have motivated large numbers of Australians over the past 130 years; and become an expanding record of the movements, institutions, venues and publications through which these people sought to influence the wider society. The use of digital scanning technology, a relational database and the internet will allow much greater access to this body of radical intellectual expression. We hope that the website will provide both scholars and radicals with a valuable and accessible resource.

Endnotes


A world dominated by youth:  
child and youth labour in Queensland, 1885-1900  

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One of the key characteristics of late nineteenth century labour was its youth. During the period 1885 to 1900 this attribute was particularly pronounced in Queensland where nearly half the population was under 20 years-of-age. While labour historians have long recognised that child and youth labour was associated with sub-standard employment, little attention has been paid to the ways in which this disproportionately large demographic shaped both the operation of the overall labour market and patterns of trade union organisation. This paper argues that both can only be understood in the context of the labour supply pressures exerted by an exceptionally large youth cohort. The wide-scale use of youth labour was, however, a product of specific temporal and geographic experiences. By 1900 the nation’s demographic profile was rapidly maturing as the birth rate slowed dramatically.

In recent years, studies of late nineteenth century employment have increasingly drawn our attention to workforce divisions based upon gender and race. In a recent article on the role of union organising activities in rebuilding labour’s strength between 1900 and 1910, for example, Cooper pays considerable attention to union agitation among female workers. But, despite observing that ‘unorganised labour posed a threat to … the survival of unionism’, there is no discussion of the youthful composition of this ‘unorganised’ sector or of union attitudes towards it.1 Such oversights are unfortunate as nothing so differentiates the labour force of this period from our own time as its age. In reflecting upon the key features of the American industrial working class during the late nineteenth century, David Montgomery has observed: ‘The world of the operative was dominated by youth’.2 However, in comparison with their Australian counterparts, American workers were positively geriatric. While the median age of American male non-agricultural workers in 1890 was 33.3 years, Queensland’s Registrar-General noted in 1886 that ‘nearly half the population … included children and youths under 20’. He went on to state that ‘it will be perceived that in almost every class and order of occupations many males and females of the youthful division … even from 10 years upwards, are employed’.3 Not only did those aged between 12 and 20 years represent almost 25 per cent of the colony’s total population aged over 12 years, 34,516 of the 56,025 youths in this cohort were already actively engaged in the labour force. Of the remainder many would have been active in the home or on the family farm. In Brisbane, the colony’s expanding capital, the population’s median age was, by 1891, just 21.6 years.4 The situation was broadly similar in the southern colonies. In New South Wales, 45 per cent of the population in the early 1890s was under 20.5 By the end of the century, in all eastern mainland colonies, the largest cohort was that aged between 10 and 14 years, followed by those aged between 15 and 19 years.6

Labour historians have long appreciated that child labour was a significant factor in late nineteenth century Australia. In 1971, G.P. Walsh remarked: ‘Child labour under bad conditions was a feature of factory employment in the second half of the nineteenth century’.7 Nevertheless the focus of inquiry has been narrow. Studies have largely revolved around how, in the absence of effective factories and shops acts, child labour posed an often insurmountable problem for union organisation. With regard to the Victorian printing trade during the 1880s, Hagan concluded that what the union ‘could not control was the unlimited employment of boys’.8 Similarly, Frances has observed that in the clothing trade ‘the employment of cheaper juvenile labour in place of adults was probably the most popular [employer] strategy in the 1890s depression’.9 To the extent that broader labour market factors have been considered it has largely involved analysis of changing labour demand resulting from new technologies. Markey, for example, has noted that the increase ‘in cheap female and juvenile labour’ was an ‘indication’ of the deteriorating position of craft workers resulting from increased mechanisation.10 Although studies by both W.A. Sinclair and Frances have stressed the role of demographic factors in shaping female workforce participation rates, their analysis operates within what Sinclair refers to as ‘a modification of the conventional supply and demand schedules’.11 Seen from this perspective, the participation of youthful females primarily reflected utilitarian labour market decisions by households as to how to best utilise this internal resource. As Sinclair observes, changes ‘resulted from the degree to which women’s wages were regarded by the households to which they belonged as a desirable addition to their incomes’.12
If, for labour historians, child labour has largely been considered with an eye to its impact on adult workers and households, those few works that have made child labour their central focus have paid scant attention to the functioning of the labour market. Instead, authors such as Barbalet, Horsburgh, Davey and Larson have examined how the state dealt with child labour through either its welfare or educational provisions. In consequence, as Murray has observed, ‘there is little Australian historiography concerning the place of children in the general workforce’. Despite Murray’s own work, which has been restricted to New South Wales, this summation still holds true. We know precious little of the pathways by which young people entered the workforce. Nor is there a proper understanding of the factors that saw industries that had been dominated by youth in the late nineteenth century, as evidenced by the testimony at numerous official inquiries, once again dominated by adult labour in the early years of the twentieth century.

Although an in-depth investigation is not possible in a paper of this length, this study will explore the issue of child and youth labour by examining the Queensland experience between 1885 and 1900. For the purpose of this paper child and youth labour will be defined as non-adult labour, ie, those under 21 years. While most factories and shops acts tended to define a ‘child’ as someone under 14, it was also recognised that youths over this age were exposed to different working experiences than adults entitled to a full-wage. A 16-year-old seeking employment experienced broadly similar problems to a 13-year-old entering the workforce. In exploring these experiences, particular attention will be given to shop assistants, the clothing trade and the boot trade – all industries where the employment of youth labour was particularly significant. It will be argued that, in these trades, the working conditions and patterns of union organisation that prevailed can only be understood in the context of the labour supply pressures exerted by an exceptionally large youth cohort. It will also be argued that while only legislative enactment could provide for effective regulation of the employment conditions that resulted from these supply pressures, in the final analysis the problem of child and youth labour in the late nineteenth century is best seen as a demographic anomaly. After 1900, the workforce’s age profile rapidly matured as economic depression brought about a permanent decline in the Australian birth rate.

‘Industrial parasitism’: the ideology and practice of child and youth labour

After reflecting upon the patterns of economic organisation applying at the turn of the nineteenth century, Beatrice and Sidney Webb penned a stinging denunciation of what they termed ‘industrial parasitism’, by which they meant those trades that failed to fully recompense society for their costs of production. The ‘most obvious’ form of ‘industrial parasitism’, the Webbs argued, was ‘the employment of child-labour’. They noted:

When an employer, without imparting any adequate instruction in a skilled craft, gets his work done by boys or girls who live with parents and work practically by pocket-money, he is clearly receiving a subsidy or bounty which gives his process an economic advantage worked by fully-paid labour.

While child and youth labour had always been an essential part of all pre-industrial societies, the Webbs rightly recognised that the traditional pathways by which children had acquired skills and entered the labour force had collapsed with industrialisation. In part this simply reflected the demise of family-based domestic production But it also reflected the erosion of ‘the old system of individual apprenticeship’ to the point where it became in ‘nearly all trades, dead and past reviving’. The latter’s demise reflected not only the introduction of new technologies that reduced the need for skilled handicraft but also a sustained assault on any ‘restrictions’ that inhibited the free movement of labour. In his 1776 classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith provided the ideological justification for the dismantlement of the laws protecting the apprenticeship system, declaring: ‘Long apprenticeships are altogether unnecessary’. Rather than providing socially necessary skills, Smith argued that the real effect of the apprenticeship system was ‘to prevent the market from being overstocked … which in reality is to always keep it understocked’. The result was that craftsmen were able to ‘reduce the whole manufacture into a sort of slavery to themselves, and raise the price of their labour much above what is due to the nature of their work’.

In Britain, the repeal of the Elizabethan Statute of Apprentices in 1813 left the apprenticeship system reliant for its survival upon a combination of custom and practice and the residual industrial strength of craftsmen in each trade. In Australia, the enforcement of effective apprenticeship provisions proved particularly problematic. As Patmore has observed of nineteenth century Australia: ‘There
was minimal use of fixed-term indentured apprenticeships… Many apprenticeships were nominal, providing employers with cheap child labour. For those opposed to child labour, whether due to its detrimental effects on the wages of adult workers or upon the children themselves, the most typical response was restriction. This normally took one of two forms. First, the passage of Factories and Shops Acts prohibited the employment of children in factories below a certain age whilst also limiting the hours of work of older youths. In Australia the first such act was passed in Victoria in 1873 with other colonies gradually following Victoria’s lead. Secondly, craft unions attempted to directly control the engagement of youth labour by demanding that employers restrict their hiring of apprenticeships or ‘learners’ to an agreed ratio.

In what remains the most detailed assessment of the policy of restricting child labour the Webbs declared this strategy to be not only ineffective but also misguided. Legal prohibition of the employment of children below a certain age merely postponed their entry into the workforce and, in the absence of major educational changes, did little to provide for a more prosperous and socially useful working career. The Webbs were particularly scathing of union attempts to restrict the entry of youths into a given trade through a ‘limitation of numbers’, enforced either through apprenticeship provisions or by setting ratios that restricted youth numbers. Such an approach, they noted, even where it was effective, could only assist a select minority at the expense of those who were arbitrarily excluded. This, and the apprenticeship system upon which it was based, they denounced as: ‘Undemocratic in its scope, unscientific in its educational methods, and fundamentally unsound in its financial aspects’. Instead of pursuing a policy of restriction, the Webbs argued that unions would be better placed if they supported ‘the enactment of a definite sum of earnings per week below which no employer should be allowed to hire any worker’. Such a move, they believed, would force employers to pay greater attention to the nurturing of this non-adult labour force. In Queensland, as elsewhere in Australia, the size of the child and youth labour force during the 1880s and 1890s ensured that a consideration of such strategies would be matters of pressing concern.

They are turning out the men: growth and variance in use of child and youth labour in Queensland, 1885-1900

In testifying before a Royal Commission into Factories and Shops in 1891, a compositor complained that in the Queensland printing trade ‘they are turning out the men’ in order to replace them with boys. One of his colleagues added that things were particularly bad in rural areas, noting: ‘The inland papers are worked almost solely with boys’. A baker pointed to a similar pattern in his trade, stating: ‘They get a boy at low wages in Brisbane, work him long hours; in a few months, when he wants a rise, get a cheaper one’. That this was not a transitory problem restricted to a few trades is indicated by the fact that five years later one Member of Parliament (MP) observed: ‘At present it was the custom to employ children in shops and factories for 12 or 18 months without paying them any wages’. No one contradicted the accuracy of this observation. In 1900, despite the passage of Queensland’s first Factories and Shops Act in 1896, not much appeared to have changed. Speaking of the thousands employed as apprentices or ‘learners’, another MP remarked: ‘He did not think there were more than six factories in the city where anything was paid to those boys and girls’. Again, no one contradicted this comment.

While the problem of child and youth labour in Queensland was, at this time, deep-seated and persistent, it was nevertheless one that was relatively new for the colony. Significantly, in 1871 Queensland was characterised by a relatively mature demographic profile. Considered in five-year age cohorts, the largest group was that aged 30 to 34 years, followed in order by those aged 25 to 29 years, 35 to 39 years and 20 to 24 years. The variance in the demographic patterns applying in Queensland from the early 1870s to a decade or so later highlights the fact that child and youth labour was, in colonial Australia, a product of specific temporal and geographic experiences. These varied from one decade to the next and from one colony to another. In Queensland, four factors were principally responsible for the expansion in the youth workforce after 1880. Importantly, Queensland’s birth rate spiked upwards. In 1879 the colony’s Registrar-General commented: ‘We have had a high birth-rate in Queensland as compared with other Australian colonies’. Then, the age of the population was, as Lawson has noted, ‘skewed by the heavy immigration’ of young adults and children during the 1880s.
The growth in Queensland manufacturing, particularly after the protective tariff of 1888, produced a demand for unskilled labour that could be met by juveniles. Finally, the provisions of Queensland’s Education Act, 1875 did not require students to attend school after their twelfth birthday. The Act’s impact was further diminished by the failure of successive governments to proclaim its compulsory clauses. Even among those who chose to be on the school rolls attendance was poor. Of the 4665 boys enrolled in inner Brisbane in 1885, 1,000 were away on any given day. Those not in gainful employment tended, it was recorded, to roam the streets together, or spend their days ‘lounging at the door of a Chinese gambling den’.33

If child and youth labour was commonplace in Queensland’s shops and factories by the late 1880s there were significant variations from industry to industry in terms of the degree of youth penetration and the gender of those engaged. The use of child and youth labour was most pronounced in the clothing trades. Among milliners and dressmakers, who were the largest sector of the industry, those aged 20 or under comprised 1,572 of the 3202 employed in 1886. All of these were females. Even among those listed as tailors almost a third were aged between 15 and 20. Again, females predominated, there being 242 females to 81 males of this age. By contrast, boys predominated in the youthful boot industry (workers between 15 and 20 were the largest cohort in this industry in Queensland). Of the 1,232 employed in this industry in 1886, there were only 30 females aged 15 to 20 years compared to 184 males. Regarding the largest category of retail workers – drapers and their assistants – there were also more boys than girls. In this sector there were 155 males aged 15 to 20 compared to 61 females in a total workforce of 982.34

In terms of union organisation the impact of the growth in child and youth labour also varied from industry to industry. The direst effects were felt in the clothing trade. Here the Tailors’ Society, which represented Brisbane’s journeymen tailors, had attempted to regulate employment conditions through a ‘log’ negotiated with the city’s master tailors since 1872. From 1883, however, this body’s influence went into what one member described as a ‘very great decline’, as needlework was displaced by sewing machines operated by young females.35 By 1891, only two Brisbane workshops were still recognising the Society’s log. Although a Tailoresses’ Society was established on 5 August 1890, becoming part of the newly formed Women’s Section of the Australian Labour Federation, its industrial influence was minimal.36

While the use of child and youth labour undermined previous patterns of union organisation in the clothing trade, in the boot trade the Operative Boot Trade Union (OBTU) initially limited the inroads of this demographic. Indeed, in May–June 1890 the union cleverly played on public disquiet about the use of juvenile labour to win a raft of concessions from Brisbane’s employers, most of which had little to do with child labour. During a mass rally to pressure employers, citizens were called upon ‘to assist the bootmakers in their attempt to stamp out child labour and obtain a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’.39 Among the concessions in the settlement of the dispute was an agreement by employers to strictly limit the engagement of ‘boy labour’. This victory, however, proved short-lived. As the economy slipped into depression the temptation to lower production costs through the use of juvenile labour proved too strong. By September 1891 one of Brisbane’s largest manufacturers, Astill, had cast aside the earlier agreement so that 28 of his 47 workers were now recorded as ‘boys’.40 After the failure of a strike aimed at bringing Astill into line, other employers followed his lead. By the decade’s end it was reported that in ‘factories where machinery is largely in operation boys and youths are mostly employed’. As a result: ‘The conditions of the boot operatives in Queensland is positively appalling. Any thing worse could not be imagined’.

Although in many trades the engagement of youth labour was associated with the deterioration in both working conditions and patterns of union organisation, with regard to shop assistants there were considerable differences between the circumstances applying in the large department stores vis-à-vis the smaller retail shops. Department stores such as Finney Isles and Edwards & Lamb in Brisbane, and Cribb & Foote in Ipswich, were significant employers of juvenile labour. But those engaged by these firms at least benefited from early closing, a half-day holiday on Saturday, water coolers, dining rooms and even prepared meals.42 These firms also tended to be active supporters of the Shop Assistants’ Early
Closing Association. In addressing his employees on the anniversary of the firm’s introduction of early closing, Thomas Finney, Brisbane’s leading retailer, declared: ‘He was sorry to hear that the employees did not assist the early closing movement with all their power. It was their duty to do so’. Similarily, the leadership role of Frank McDonnell in the Association from the late 1880s reflected the active support of his employer, Edwards & Lamb. As the Worker noted in 1896: ‘Much of his success in Brisbane is due to the action of his employers, Edwards and Lamb, who have always shown generous and kindly sympathy in all democratic movements’. Such attitudes, however, reflected only the benvolence of the most prosperous section of the retail trade. In small and medium-sized shops the hours worked by young shop assistants were not only long but also totally at their employer’s discretion. When in mid-1890 the first large-scale agitation for a Factories and Shops Act threatened to limit juvenile working hours, shop owners reacted in horror. The Brisbane Traders Association (BTA), which represented more than 270 owners, declared that any such action ‘would paralyse trade’.

‘Work six months for nothing’: common employment characteristics

If there were variations within the various trades in the hours and working conditions of juvenile workers, when we consider the overall terms under which younger workers were employed a number of common features nevertheless stand out. Formal indentured apprentices were relatively rare. Instead, children and juveniles typically entered the workforce through an extended, and unpaid, probationary period. During this period, or at its completion, they were designated as either a ‘learner’ or an ‘improver’, being employed on this basis for up to 12 months. Only rarely did this work attract any remuneration. Significantly, such practices applied even in the ‘better’ establishments such as Finney Isles and Cribb & Foote. Often young workers continued as unpaid or low-paid ‘learners’ for years. When one employer was asked when this unindentured learning period ended, he bluntly remarked: ‘Until they leave us, or until we sack them’. In defending the practice of employing youths without pay, leading employers argued that the benefit they were providing to their employees was educational, rather than monetary. As Finney noted in 1896:

> children came long distances to businesses by train and ‘bus, and it might seem hard to make them work six months for nothing, but it must be remembered that in learning their business they engaged the time and attention of skilled hands, and were thus a source of expense.

Despite Finney’s claims that employers diligently provided youths with new skills, real opportunities for anything other than cursory training appear to have been few. It was widely accepted that employers took on young workers ‘for 12 months, give them a small wage, discharge them and take on others’. Although some managers claimed that the absence of formal apprenticeships reflected the fact that, among young workers, ‘a great many do not care about being bound down’, the floods of unskilled youths desperate for any ‘situation’ belies this. At more prestigious establishments, employers were able to demand the payment of a ‘premium’, ranging from £50 to £100, for taking on an apprentice. Such payments, however, did not necessarily guarantee proper training. As one cynic remarked: ‘It is a rule of the firms to take a premium, but not to teach the boys the trade ... the boys sweep out the place, and never get taught the trade’.

If the entry of young people into the workforce was often associated with unpaid labour, wages typically remained low even for those retained after the completion of their period as a ‘learner’. Whether in retailing, the clothing or boot trades, or some other industry, young females normally received between 2s/6d and five shillings after their first year – barely enough to pay the bus or tram fares to and from work. This made them particularly attractive to employers, one of whom candidly informed commissioners to the 1891 Royal Commission into Factories and Shops: ‘We expect to get cheaper work from the girls because it is the ordinary thing’. Few females, in any industry, could expect more than 15 shillings unless they obtained a supervisory position. For such wages employers demanded high performance levels. One manufacturer declared: ‘If they are not worth 15 shillings I tell them they must improve or go’. For boys, wages were somewhat higher, although still well below the £2-3 received by an adult male. The 18 shillings received by James McCarthy, an 18 year old who had completed four years as a ‘learner’ at Neighbour’s Boot Factory, one of Brisbane’s largest, appears typical for a youth with this level of experience. For employers, child and youth labour was also more easily managed than adult workers. ‘I prefer the girls because I can manage them better’, one employer stated. When times were slack, young workers could also be easily dispensed with, either temporarily or permanently.
For employers the benefits of employing children and youths in lieu of adult workers were obvious. They were cheaper and more easily replaced during periods of economic fluctuation. What is less immediately obvious is the benefit to non-adult workers of entering into employment relationships that offered little in the way of either immediate economic reward or long-term job prospects. Three factors suggest themselves in explanation. No doubt the income from child and youth wages, however minimal, was an important component in the household budget, and one young female shop assistant remarked in 1891, ‘we all do our duty in supporting the family’. Next, with even the nominal requirement to attend school ending on the twelfth birthday, most families appear to have concurred with Montgomery’s assessment that the route to a successful working career ‘passed through apprenticeship and experience, not schoolrooms’. Defenders of youthful entry into the workforce pointed to the ‘very dangerous period in the lives of those children’ who were allowed ‘a hiatus’ between their twelfth birthday and their first job. No factor, however, seems as significant as the demand for jobs produced by this disproportionately large demographic. Child and youth labour was so cheap primarily because it was so plentiful. Nowhere is there any evidence that employers had any difficulty in replacing a child or youth worker no matter how little he or she paid. Indeed, there was always ‘more applying’ for work than there were jobs available.

‘To protect the weak against the strong’: regulation and its opponents

In their treatise on the economic effects of child labour, the Webbs concluded that ‘there is no chance of the parasitic trades raising themselves from their quagmire by any sectional action of their own’. Instead, they argued, only the enactment of a minimum wage for all workers could rescue these trades and the workers found within them. By June 1890, Queensland’s labour leaders had come to similar conclusions. A committee was established under the secretariaship of Albert Hinchcliffe, who was also Secretary of the Australian Labour Federation, to agitate for a Factories and Shops Bill. While an initial bill was rejected in 1890, the government nevertheless agreed to the holding of a Royal Commission in 1891. This body’s majority report recommended the immediate introduction of a bill aimed not just at protecting children under 14 years, but also ‘young persons’ aged between 14 and 18 years. The election of a bloc of 16 Labor MPs at the 1893 General Election ensured that the government remained under pressure to act on these recommendations. In arguing for reform, Labor MPs were supported by middle-class reformers who found child and youth labour morally repugnant. Reflecting this middle-class opinion, one Government Minister argued that a Factories and Shops Bill was simply ‘a means to protect the weak against the strong … This Bill will protect those who are not able to defend themselves by means of combination’.

Despite the constant pressure for reform, no Factories and Shops Act was passed until 1896. Even when action was taken the resulting legislation was condemned as ‘a mere apology for a Factories Act’. Not only did it impose no restrictions on the use of child labour in shops, its provisions also did not apply to outwork or factories with less than four employees. The result, as one critic later remarked, was that children or young people could end up ‘going across the road and getting employment at an exactly similar trade, perhaps under more severe conditions’.

The absence of any effective constraints on the use of child and youth labour in Queensland prior to 1900 reflected the view among business leaders and their representatives that all such matters should, in the words of Adam Smith, be ‘trusted to the discretion of the employers’. In opposing a raft of Labor amendments aimed at strengthening the 1896 Act, the Colonial Secretary, Horace Tozer, observed: ‘Why should they stop a child from learning a trade?’ Four years later a Ministerial colleague warned that ‘such drastic legislation as is proposed will drive business away from our factories’. There is little doubt that such opponents of reform shared a genuine belief that any regulation of child and youth labour was wrong in principle. As the Minority Report to the Royal Commission into Factories and Shops stated in 1891: ‘State interference tends to hamper trade and to discourage enterprise and self-reliance’. Such views were even shared by traders recognised for their benevolence. Thomas Finney, while granting shorter hours to his workers, was nevertheless opposed to such conditions being compulsorily imposed on his competitors, declaring:

\[\text{I think legislation of that kind is utterly inconsistent with personal liberty … It would be better for the people to be left to their own resources … instead of looking to the Government to wet-nurse them.}\]
Despite the sustained opposition to an effective Factories and Shops Act in Queensland the opponents of reform were forced to steadily give ground during the 1890s. In 1900 a series of conferences between the Shop Assistants’ Early Closing Association and the Brisbane Traders Association heralded a fundamental realignment of forces, as the latter indicated its willingness to accept an array of legislative changes in pursuit of its goal of a half-day shop holiday. The election of Frank McDonnell – the long-term leader of the Shop Assistants’ Early Closing Association – as the Labor MP for Fortitude Valley also added a highly articulate champion for change to Parliament’s ranks. When an amendment bill was introduced in 1900, McDonnell’s influence was most clearly seen in his ability to shepherd through Parliament a clause that stated: ‘After one month’s probation, no person under the age of twenty-one years’ could be employed in factory or shop ‘unless in receipt of a weekly wage of at least two shillings and six pence’. This clause, which provided for the first legislative regulation of wage levels in Queensland, highlighted a recognition that the problem of ‘child labour’ could not simply be dealt with by prohibiting employment below a certain age. Instead, Parliament needed to also look to the ways in which all non-adult workers were treated. Among the other changes to the 1900 Act – applauded by Pember Reeves as ‘one of the best Factories Acts in Australia’ – were an extension of its provisions to shop assistants and outworkers, a ban on the payment of premiums for apprenticeships, and shorter hours for ‘young persons’ (defined as persons between 14 and 16 years).

The passage of the *Queensland Factories and Shops Act, 1900* effectively brought to an end the unregulated use of child and youth labour in Queensland. Even prior to this, however, the proclamation of the compulsory clauses of the Education Act had already restricted employers’ access to this pool of labour. But, as politicians grappled with the problem of child and youth labour that had blighted the labour market during the 1880s and 1890s, fundamental changes were occurring within Australia’s households that were to have an even greater impact. As a result of depressed economic circumstances there occurred during the 1890s, as Hicks has recorded, ‘a spectacular decline in the Australian birth-rate’. Whereas a woman who completed her childbearing years in 1891 would have had, on average, at least seven children, women whose peak childbearing years were in the early 1900s had only 3.6 children. The impact of this unprecedented fall in the birth rate was exacerbated by the virtual total curtailment of overseas immigration. In consequence there began, from 1900, a maturing of Australia’s demographic profile as those born in the 1870s and 1880s entered adulthood. As the pool of cheap, plentiful youth labour dried up, employers were of necessity forced to turn again to adult workers. If the late nineteenth century had produced a world dominated by youth, the maturing of this population helped ensure a position of primacy for the adult male in the new regulated labour market.

**Conclusion**

The role of demographic factors in shaping the labour market within which both trade unions and employers operated at the turn of the last century has received scant attention from labour historians. By contrast this paper argues that, in late nineteenth century, the issue of child and youth labour posed a particularly pronounced problem for trade union organisation due to the fact that those aged 20 years or less comprised such a large component of the potential labour force. While contemporaries condemned child labour as an example of ‘sweating’, and the Webbs denounced it as ‘industrial parasitism’, only the most principled or foolhardy employers could forsake using this labour pool because of the relative shortage of adult workers. Given that the demand for jobs among the youthful labour force typically exceeded the supply the result, in the absence of effective state regulation, was the entrenchment of a set of employment relationships that placed considerable downward pressure on adult wages.

In exploring the use of child and youth labour in late nineteenth century Queensland this paper argues that the problem was a product of specific temporal and geographic experiences. These varied from colony to colony and from decade to decade. Queensland, for example, had one of Australia’s more mature demographic profiles in the early 1870s. Yet by the 1880s it had one of the youngest. This change reflected the combined impact of a high natural birth rate and the arrival of a wave of youthful immigrants and their families. The use of younger workers also varied from industry to industry and, indeed, within the same industry. In the clothing trades the replacement of handwork by machine sewing resulted in the rapid collapse of union organisation as adult males were displaced by young females.
By contrast, in the boot trade, adult unionists were initially able to resist the inroads of ‘boy’ labour into their industry. Even here, however, union organisation alone eventually proved powerless as youthful entrants flooded the labour market.

As the 1890s progressed, condemnation of the labour practices associated with child and youth labour – by both labour activists and middle-class reformers – produced progressively more effective regulation through successive Factories and Shops Acts. But, in the final analysis, the issue of child and youth labour was the product of a demographic anomaly. Paradoxically, effective regulation occurred at the very time when the nation’s demographic profile was being reshaped by a dramatic decline in the birth rate as a result of the 1890s Depression. As Hicks has remarked, ‘the speed and wide extent of the decline in the birth rate produced a loss of confidence in national vitality’. 26 Within a few years, concerns about child labour were replaced by a new industrial focus – the protection of a ‘family’ wage based upon the earnings of the adult male breadwinner.

Endnotes

1. Rae Cooper, ‘“To organise wherever the necessity exists”: the Activities of the Organising Committee of the Labor Council of NSW, 1900-10’, Labour History, no. 83, November 2002, pp. 46-47.
19. Ibid., p. xiii.
21. Ibid., pp. 228-29.
24. Ibid., p. 481.
25. Ibid., p. 774.
32. Lawson, Brisbane in the 1890s, p. 28.
33. Brisbane Courier, 7 October 1885, p. 5.
34. Queensland Census of 1886, p. 234.
36. Worker, 1 September 1890, p. 15.
37. ‘Testimony of Adolf Neuman, RCSF&W, Q.10229.
39. Worker, 4 June 1890, p. 7.
43. Brisbane Courier, 1 January 1890, p. 5.
44. Worker, 28 March 1896, p. 9.
45. Brisbane Courier, 19 July 1890, p. 5; 4 April 1890, p. 5; 3 July 1890, p. 5.
46. ‘Testimony of Thomas Finney and James Cribb’, RCSF&W, Q.12181.
49. ‘Testimony of Miss Brown’, RCSF&W, Q. 12080.
58. Montgomery, The fall of the house of labor, p. 131.
60. ‘Testimony of J. Williams, Queen St draper’, RCSF&W, Q. 1766.
64. ‘Editorial’, Worker, 23 September 1899, p. 2.
68. Hon. A. Gibson, QPD, vol. 86, 1900, p 2565.
70. ‘Testimony of Thomas Finney, RCSF&W, Q.1062, 1192.
72. Queensland Factories and Shops Act, 1900, S. 45 (1); QPD, vol. 86, 1900, p. 1730.
76. Hicks, This Sin and Scandal, p. 157.
Missing women: an historical examination of female activism in the Melbourne Trades Hall, 1880-1920

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With little attention having been traditionally given to gender dynamics and women’s representation in peak bodies, this paper explores historical patterns of women’s participation. In building this picture of women’s activism, the focus is on Victoria from the 1880s up to the 1920s. The first section looks at the activities of the pioneer women in the 1880-90s, the second at the consolidation of their place in the 1900-10s and the impact of the formation of women’s unions through the strategy of separate organising, while the final section raises issues about their experiences in the post-World War I period.

While women these days frequently occupy key leadership positions in a number of peak union bodies – for example, at a national scale, Sharan Burrow (Australian Council of Trade Unions), Barbara Byers (Canadian Labour Congress) and Linda Chavez-Thompson (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)) all hold senior positions, while three Australian state peak bodies have women secretaries (Grace Grace in Queensland, Lynne Fitzgerald in Tasmania and Janet Giles in South Australia) – surprisingly little is known about the historical role of women in these collective union bodies (whether at a national, state/provincial or regional scale). In Australia, two recent peak body histories had a common pattern: while there was discussion of early women activists in the 1890s-1910s, women then disappeared from the narrative only to reappear from the 1970s.1 Where women activists were in the intervening decades was either left to our imagination, on gleaning tantalising snippets from fragmented, incomplete secondary sources or entailed a return to primary sources to redress this ‘chronological gap’. ‘Re-claiming’ and ‘re-placing’ women activists, examining their patterns of activism in peak bodies, exploring the strategies they used and the alliances they forged thus remains critical work (and not isolated to Australian labour history).2

In recent years in Australian industrial relations and labour history, there has been an increasing interest in the under-researched area of peak union bodies. While some of these studies have incorporated spatial insights drawn from geography into the analysis of peak bodies, as yet, however, there has been only minimal attention given to gender. This paper is part of a larger project of ‘gendering’ our analysis of peak bodies, and argues that, by focusing on explorations of gender, greater insight is gained into the power and spatial dynamics found within peak bodies. The paper begins with a brief discussion of some of the debates about gender and space relevant to ‘gendering’ our analysis of peak bodies. Remedying the ‘chronological gap’ encountered by women activists is then begun with reclaiming and replacing women in the history of one peak body, the Melbourne Trades Hall Council, with patterns of female activism identified from the late 1800s to the 1920s.

Gender and space

While recent years have seen an increase in Australian research on peak bodies, they remain comparatively under-researched. Only three full-length histories have been published with many stories, particularly at the state and regional scale, yet to be told. Recent research has included development of a number of theoretical frameworks which have strengthened the existing and new empirical studies. Analysis of these studies highlights a number of key themes, such as the origins of peak bodies; peak body purpose and the relative emphasis given to political and industrial roles. Little attention has traditionally been given to gender; indeed only one woman is mentioned in Hagan’s history of the ACTU, with equal pay discussed without reference to any women activists. While this inattention is an evident omission in the peak body literature, it parallels the treatment of gender in the broader industrial relations literature.3

Peak bodies, like their trade union affiliates, are gendered organisations, shaped by gendered patterns of power and space. These patterns were imprinted from the outset as the historical masculinity of nineteenth century trade unionism was transposed to peak bodies upon their formation. Just as the gendered nature of trade unions needs interrogating, so too do those collective bodies formed by trade unions.
While the agency of male trade unionists is just assumed as peak body founders, activists and leaders, recognition of women’s agency is equally central to understanding peak bodies and their role in the wider labour movement. Analysing the activities of the Organising Committee of the Labor Council of New South Wales (NSW) between 1900 and 1910, Cooper, for instance, argues the impact of women activists ‘well exceeded their representation’. Contemporary developments have also shown how women unionists, through affirmative action positions and women’s committees, have influenced the policy agendas of peak bodies. What we lack, however, is an understanding of the ebb and flow of women’s peak body activism, of a sense of both their presence and their agency (heeding Cooper’s reminder that ‘it is the agency rather than the mere presence of feminist women in unions that has the capacity to challenge the masculinist status quo within labour organisations’), and how historical patterns have (or have not) shaped how contemporary women unionists approach this scale of activity.

As well as being gender-blind, much industrial relations research is also ‘space-blind’. The process of gendering our analysis of peak bodies can be further enriched by examining the spatial dimensions of industrial relations. A growing dialogue between geographers and industrial relations researchers has identified how an appreciation of the central geographical concepts of scale, space and place can broaden our understanding of trade unionism. Peak bodies reflect how trade unionists engage at a variety of scales, whether they be organised at a regional, state or national scale. With a number of peak bodies formed by male trade unionists in the nineteenth century, such as the Melbourne Trades Hall Committee (in 1856) and the Labor Council of NSW (in 1871), this early scalar organisation of labour was a masculinised one, which was then compounded by the creation of peak body spaces and places by men. How did women fit (or awkwardly fit or not fit) into these spaces? How did their presence and agency influence (or fail to influence) the scalar organisation of labour? In considering the historical role and agency of women unionists and the impact on their contemporary scales of activism, these issues need examination.

Analysis of the gendered dimension of space found in the work of feminist geographers and others provides useful insights into the intersections of gender, space and place. The issue of ‘appropriate’ spaces for women is considered, with assessment of the consequences for women of moving out from accepted ‘feminine’ private space into ‘masculine’ public space. Damousi, for example, has argued that when women were perceived to challenge notions of masculinity in the public domain, thus moving beyond their accepted roles in the private sphere, their activities became more intolerable, and resisted by men, as seen in the World War I debates over conscription. Even when women were accepted into the public domain, men-only spaces were often maintained through the creation of women-only spaces. Spain argues women are disadvantaged by such ‘gendered spaces’ whereby gendered spatial segregation ‘separates[es] women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege’. This raises issues of gendered power and the degree to which such segregation adversely affected women. There clearly have been negative effects of such segregation, yet women activists have also strategically used spatial segregation in a deliberate attempt to create gendered space to increase their voice, as Cobble argues in her study of waitress unionism. For example, separate organising has been used as an explicit strategy by women activists over time. As we will see, in Australia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women formed their own unions, providing space for women’s voices and enabling women’s agency, while women’s committees are a more common contemporary form. We now turn to the story of women unionists in Victoria and their experiences, in the period from the 1880s to the 1920s.

Patterns of women’s activism

In building this picture of Victorian women unionists and their involvement with the Trades Hall, the lack of recognition of women is compounded by the absence of a comprehensive history of the THC or the broader Victorian union movement. A number of secondary sources have assisted in identifying key women activists, but little is known about their peak body activities. What follows is a preliminary chronological locating of Victorian women unionists from the 1880s to the 1920s, establishing their presence as a precursor to analysing the nature of their agency: a necessary stage as Melanie Raymond found when researching this period in the late 1980s:

It is normal … to find mentioned the strike by the Victorian Tailoresses’ Union in 1882 as the one and only example of early female involvement in the labour movement. A great leap forward is then
made to the equal pay campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s led by equal pay activist Muriel Heagney. But in between these two events there is an enormous gap where working women seem to have disappeared from the political and union stage.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{1880s and 1890s}

The first time that Victorian women unionists are usually discussed in the context of the THC is in relation to the 1882 Tailoresses’ strike and the formation of the Victorian Tailoresses’ Union. Notable for the militancy of the women, the strike is regarded as critical in contributing to the increased industrial role of the THC, as it assumed tactical and financial responsibility for the strike. Here, then, we have a clear case of women affecting the strategic direction of the THC, their agency and activism having a direct effect on the peak body. As Frances highlights, ‘the fact that the strikers were women is particularly important here, although to date historians have neglected the role that gender played’.\textsuperscript{12}

It is, however, the impact on the THC that dominates Brooks’ analysis (which remains the standard account of the strike). He focuses on the role of the THC and its male secretary to the exclusion of the role of the union. Indeed, the women unionists are curiously absent from his discussion and so little is learnt about the striking tailoresses or their leaders.\textsuperscript{13} Given this was a very overt incursion into public space by the striking women workers, organised into a women-dominated union with women strike leaders (with a membership estimated to number 2,300 after the strike), engaging in industrial action usually the province of male unionists, the impact and consequences of this dispute in challenging the traditional place of women should have elicited further investigation.

As well as helping shape the role of the THC, the impact of the strike had other spatial consequences for labour’s space. Following a deputation from the Tailoresses’ Union including Mrs Ellen Cresswell ‘to tender their thanks for the valuable assistance’, the TH Committee undertook to build a hall for the women.\textsuperscript{14} The Female Operatives Hall, opening later that year in 1883, provided dedicated space for women unionists, arguably giving them a place of their own (as well as reinforcing the gendered space of the THC).

The other critical legacy of the 1882 strike was it ushered in the first generation of women union activists who would leave their mark on the union movement. Tailoresses had been organising in their workplaces in the 1870s, with the first unionising of tailoresses in 1874 and a strike in 1879, and the union drew on these women’s experiences. Women activists and leaders included the Scottish-born Mrs Helen Robertson, Mrs Lucy Moodie, Mrs Ellen Cresswell, Miss Mary Wise and Mrs Sarah Muir.\textsuperscript{15} As Jean Daley would later acknowledge:

\begin{quote}
the foundation they laid is standing under the new edifice [of the union] and whatever there is of advantage gained for women by the Trade Unions it has been gained on the first instance by the pluck and self sacrifice of the Pioneer.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The scale of these women’s activity was not just contained to the workplace as the Tailoresses’ Union soon extended its activism to the broader union movement. In 1884, the union sent Ellen Cresswell and Mrs J. Graham, as delegates to the 2nd Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, with the Congress the following year attended by Cresswell and Miss J. Arinbin, and Sarah Muir going to the seventh Congress in Ballarat in 1891.\textsuperscript{17} While it is not yet clear when she was first credentialled, upon her death Lucy Moodie was described as the first woman delegate to the THC (but with no date given), while Sarah Muir and Miss Scott were credentialled in 1893.\textsuperscript{18} The difficulties of the 1890s depression beset the union, with reports of tailoresses reforming a union in 1897.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{1900s to 1910s}

Just as male-dominated unions began to recovery after the strikes and depression of the 1890s, the turn of the century saw women consolidate their place with the women of the Tailoresses’ Union continuing to play a key role, in particular Helen Robertson and Lucy Moodie. Their involvement began to extend and broaden beyond just being a delegate. As well as participating in the THC, the women also participated in the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee which had responsibility for organising the annual eight hours march and celebration: with Moodie elected to the Amusement Committee in both 1900 and 1901 (with Robertson standing unsuccessfully in 1901).\textsuperscript{20}
Structured in a similar way to the Council, the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee comprised affiliates entitled to send delegations determined on their membership. In size and membership, therefore, meetings of the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee were similar to that of the THC. Up until 1925, the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee was separate from the Council, operating under its own set of rules and electing its own office-bearers. Helen Robertson was elected to the Amusement Committee from 1908 until 1915, and then elected to the executive from 1916 (when it was expanded) until the winding up of the committee in 1925. By then she had been a delegate to the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee for 35 years; a feat recognised by the decision to present her with a 10 pound honorarium 'for services rendered'. Through their participation in the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee, she and a number of other women unionists became Life Governors of some key Victorian charitable institutions: Robertson in 1902; Miss M. Rees (Cardboard Box Employees) in 1906, Maude O’Connell (Tobacco Workers) and Minnie Felstead (Domestic Workers) both in 1909 and Mrs A. Jones (Rubber Workers) in 1910.

The contesting of THC elections was a critical development in the expansion of women’s participation and influence. In December 1900, Helen Robertson was elected to the THC executive, while Lucy Moodie was elected to the THC’s Organising Committee. Helen Robertson, moreover, retained her position on the THC executive, contesting seven elections as she served from January 1901 to January 1909, thus arguably becoming part of the leadership of the Victorian union movement in this first decade of the twentieth century. After Robertson’s lengthy term, only three years elapsed before another woman, Mrs A. Jones (Rubber Workers), was elected in the December 1912 executive elections. The following year, after the June half-yearly elections, the executive, likely for the first time, had two women on it when Sara Lewis (Female Hotel and Caterers’ Union) joined Mrs Jones until she resigned midterm in November. Mrs Wilson (Tobacco Workers) was defeated in 1914 while May Francis (Clothing Trades) unsuccessfully stood for election twice in 1918 and 1919, while a number of other women withdrew their nominations. It took until 1923 for a woman to again sit on the executive: Nelle Rickie (Theatricals) being elected in December 1923.

Women’s presence on affiliate delegations to both the THC and the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee soon began to broaden. Towards the end of the first decade, while unions formed in other sections of the clothing trades often sent women delegates (like the Dressmakers and Garment Workers, and the by then two separate unions for the Whiteworkers, and Shirt and Collar Workers), other THC affiliates such as the Tobacco Workers, Cardboard Box and Carton Employees and Rubber Workers began to include women delegates from 1909, as had the delegation of the re-formed Domestic Workers Union in 1908. During and after World War I, women delegates appeared on the THC delegations of the Photographic Employees, Ammunition and Cordite Workers and Felt Hat Trimmers, while the Jam, Sauce and Pickle Workers, Hospital Attendants, and Storemen and Packers all included women on the Eight Hours Anniversary Committee delegations.

The women’s unions

Developments in the early 1910s focused attention of the gendered nature of trade unionism and the issue of separate organising as a gendered strategy, used by women to extend women’s voice. In the wake of the achievement of female suffrage for Victorian women in 1908, and spurred on by the commitment of Miss Ellen Mulcahy and Mrs Minnie Felstead, two middle-class feminists active in labour politics, a vigorous organising campaign of women workers into separate women’s unions, as well as female sections of existing unions, began around 1910. By the end of 1912, it is estimated that, including women representatives of male unions, 31 ‘forums’ representing women workers existed. This upsurge in organising women’s unions had parallels both interstate and internationally: in the United States, the period up to World War I represented ‘the height of the movement for separate female organizations’. Not ‘merely a product of nor reaction to the discrimination of male workers’, Cobble argues that: ‘Moreover, although a consensus on separatism as a strategy never existed among working women, in certain periods and in certain trades, women themselves pushed for separate-sex organizations’.

Unions of women bookbinders and stationery workers, laundry workers, cigarette workers, office cleaners, matchworkers, female confectioners, women hotel and catering workers all affiliated with the THC. Just as were many of the other female-dominated unions, like the Domestic Workers, Garment Workers, Dressmakers, Shirt and Collar Makers, these unions were organised along occupational lines. While some
of the new unions drew on male assistance (such as the cigarette workers initially for their president and secretary and the women bookbinders for wages board representation), their THC delegations included women (as did their Eight Hours Anniversary Committee delegations). For instance, once restaurant waitresses were organised into the Female Hotel and Caterers Union by Mr Strahan, it was announced that the ‘spectacle of a union absolutely under the control of ladies may very shortly be witnessed’ as he prepared to hand over ‘the judicial management to the ladies themselves’. \(^{31}\) Workplace-based meetings attracted many women: 300 clothing workers attended a meeting in August 1911, leading to an increase in union membership. Rank-and-file members became active: ‘women who kindly consented to act as shop delegates are doing splendid work, and assisting the union materially’. \(^{32}\)

Critical roles were played by Ellen Mulcahy and Minnie Felstead in organising women into unions and then providing leadership support as office bearers. Felstead worked with the women bookbinders, laundry workers and office cleaners, together with Mrs Barry, as well as the cigarette workers. Mulcahy organised the female section of the Clerks Union, and worked on organising women in a variety of trades including clothing and furnishing trades. \(^{33}\) With their different industrial and political backgrounds, the impact of Mulcahy and Felstead on general union organising campaigns compared to those who organised within their own trade like the clothing trades women activists, needs further examination. How did their strategies compare with those of earlier working class activists like Helen Robertson and Lucy Moodie, and to what extent were their leadership strategies shaped by their differing backgrounds? A number of the women, including Felstead, Mulcahy and Lewis, were also politically active in the Labor Party and its women’s committee (as Cooper also observed in her analysis of women activists in the NSW Labor Council’s Organising Committee) with Felstead underlining the connection between political and industrial organisation for women workers, with ‘industrial unionism as a preliminary to the political’. \(^{34}\)

In 1910, a THC committee was appointed to ‘thoroughly investigate the conditions of women workers’ and to provide a scheme for ‘effectively organising’ them, while a women’s organising fund was then set up. \(^{35}\) When it was then agreed that a THC’s women’s organiser should be appointed, five women nominated: Felstead, Miss McGrath, Mrs Jones, Miss O’Connell and Mrs Robertson. Felstead’s organising abilities were recognised by Trades Hall delegates when they elected her ‘by an overwhelming majority’. \(^{36}\) The 1911 report on organising recommended that special attention be given to smaller organisations and to female unions. \(^{37}\) From 1910, there was an ongoing female presence on the THC’s Organising Committee, with delegates primarily from the women-only unions. Felstead served two terms in 1910-1911, while Sara Lewis (Female Hotel and Catering Union) in 1912 and Miss Webber (Dressmakers) in 1913 served single terms. Mary Rogers (Office Cleaners) was elected in December 1913 and remained on the committee through to 1920. Jean Daley (Female Hotel and Catering Union) and Miss Parker (Female Confectioners) joined her in 1917, with Lewis returning in 1918, and May Francis (Clothing Trades) in 1919. In 1920, another delegate from the Office Cleaners, Mrs Florence Anderson was elected to the committee together with Mrs Hennessy (Female Hotel and Catering Union). \(^{38}\)

This focus on organising has parallels with contemporary organising debates around the role of internal and external organising, the use of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ organisers, as well as the role of peak union bodies in encouraging and sustaining organising campaigns. The need to sustain unions beyond their initial organisation by supporting their rank-and-file leaders and activists is also seen as important. This was the case for the women bookbinders:

> even after the formative years when Barry and Mulcahy had moved on … [t]hey continued to receive support from older labour women, in particular … Felstead and Mrs Louisa Cross, both feminists with strong records of organising within the industrial and political labour movements. \(^{39}\)

Questions remain about how decisions were made about the type of union organising. Even when separate organising was pursued, it took different forms: whether it was into separate unions competing with male unions, such as the Cigarette Workers or female sections of male-dominated unions, like the Clerks Union. Different patterns of organising were found in female-dominated occupations. As well as the Clothing Workers, in which women were active, there sprung up a plethora of occupationally-specific unions in the clothing industry. Existing unions also responded differently (as seen in the Printers’ treatment of Louisa Cross): the attempts to block the Cigarette Workers’ affiliation to the THC, while the Tobacco Workers reserved a position for a woman on its THC delegation in 1915. \(^{40}\)
While the male bookbinders were willing to represent the women bookbinders on their Wages Board, this may well have just reflected a paternalistic ‘looking after’ of the women and a way of limiting any possible threat through maintaining a level of dependence.

**The post-World War I years**

The women’s unions undoubtedly contributed to an increased voice and arguably influence of women in the pre-war years. The upsurge in women’s representation reached prior to the war was sustained during it. Nolan argues that the decline in women’s representation in the THC by the early 1920s paralleled the rise and fall of equal pay campaign.\(^41\) With the nature of women’s activism in the 1920s and 1930s needing further research, the answer to the decline in women’s participation mostly likely lies with the fate of the women’s unions. Not many of them survived their first decade: with the fate of some like the Cigarette Workers unclear.\(^42\) At the same time as they were forming, the THC was debating the issue of ‘closer organisation’, and the reduction of small craft unions, later encouraged by the argument for the One Big Union.\(^43\) While these debates affected the ongoing existence of the small craft unions, irrespective of gender, the outcome of amalgamation would have had a greater impact on women’s representation, with fewer places available on merged union THC delegations. Although unions increased in size, the cap of four delegates for unions over 1,000 members remained. Amalgamations occurred between the numerous women’s clothing unions and the Clothing Trade Union in 1915 and 1916. For the clothing union activists, their presence in the THC falls by a third or more: from six to one or two delegates.

The Women Bookbinders merge with the Printers (together with the Cardboard Box and Carton Employees) in 1920, and the Office Cleaners and the Miscellaneous Workers Union follow suit in 1921\(^44\). The variable consequences for women activists following these two mergers can be seen by the differing experiences of the women secretaries, Florence Anderson (Office Cleaners) and Louisa Cross (Women Bookbinders). Anderson became a full-time assistant state secretary in the Miscellaneous Workers Union after her union’s amalgamation. Described as ‘the iron hand in the velvet glove, that type of lady’, she was elected State Secretary in 1930, reputedly ‘saving’ the branch by the ‘hard financial decisions’ she then made. Also elected as a federal vice president, she led the Victorian branch until 1946.\(^45\) In contrast, Louisa Cross was elected as an organiser with the Printers Union, but only after defeating a rival female candidate put up by the male leadership (who hoped the younger woman would soon marry, and replaced by a male organiser). Thwarting these plans by holding this position until 1951, she ‘carried out her duties in an atmosphere of more or less mutual suspicion and antagonism’, although upon her death, the THC president declared that ‘the Labor Movement can ill-afford to lose such of its members of the calibre of the late Mrs Cross’.\(^46\)

**Conclusion**

From the industrial action of tailoresses in the 1880s to the delegates of the women’s unions in the early 1910s, women carved out a place in the Victorian union movement. Helen Robertson, Lucy Moodie, Ellen Mulcahy, Minnie Felstead, Sara Lewis, Mary Rogers, to name just a few, all played a significant role in creating and maintaining a profile for women. While some were working-class rank-and-file activists and others were middle-class political activists, together they were instrumental in reshaping the overt masculinity of nineteenth century trade unionism at the state scale. While this survey of women in the THC adds to the picture of these women, it remains incomplete with questions arising that are not yet answered and contemporary parallels not yet explored. The influence of the different political and industrial experiences of the women union leaders needs further analysis, particularly as the political influences from the 1920s includes the Communist Party with its growing impact on union activists through the 1930s and into the post-war years.

Activism patterns of the ‘missing women’ of the inter-war and the World War II years still need to be recovered and integrated into the analysis. We have seen how broader political and industrial developments, including female suffrage and the One Big Union affected women’s organisation. The impact of the increase in women’s participation during the war has been chronicled in terms of the pursuit of equal pay and the experiences of some unions but little is known about the impact on women’s broader union involvement and their representation in the THC. Parallels need also to be drawn with...
the impact of the women’s movement on the influx of women into the THC in the late 1970s. A similar pattern emerged: new affiliates with large female memberships and women officials including teachers, nurses, airline hostesses, mothercraft nurses, together with an increasing number of women delegates from older affiliates. The strategy of separate organising was again used, but this time it was focused on internal measures such as women’s committees and affirmative action positions. As women activists grew in number and influence, many of them too had to cope with union amalgamations in the early 1990s, providing yet another avenue for historical comparison with their sisters of the past.

Endnotes

14. Trades Hall Committee Council minutes, 23 February 1883, 30 March 1883.
18. Labor Call, 1 February 1912, p. 1; THC Council minutes, 14 July 1893. A gap exists in the microfilm records of the THC from 1883 to 1893.
19. Tocsin, 25 November 1897, p. 5. Union organising amongst domestic servants, the other dominant women’s occupation, also suffered at this time. A. Best, The History of the Liquor Trades Union in Victoria, Federated Liquor and Allied Industries Employees Union of Australia, Victorian Branch, North Melbourne, 1990, pp. 53-55, 93; THC Council minutes, 11 July 1897.
20. Eight Hours Anniversary Committee minutes, 17 January 1900, 16 January 1901
21. Women delegates to the Anniversary Committee were elected to both the Amusement Committee and the Bazaar Committee, while it was strictly men-only on the Sports Committee.
22. Eight Hours Anniversary Committee Executive minutes, 15 September 1925.
23. Proceeds of the eight hour celebrations were donated to various hospitals and other institutions, which gave the Committee the right to nominate Life Governors to their boards. S. Brown, Notes on using Australian Trade Union Resources in Genealogical Research, Victorian Trades Hall Council, revised 2003; Eight Hours Anniversary Committee minutes, various.
24. Sarah Muir (previously active in the Tailoresses Union but then a delegate for the Shirt, Collar and Whiteworkers Union) unsuccessfully ran for the THC executive in both 1902 and 1903, and she and Robertson were defeated in the 1902 election of the Organising Committee.

25. THC Council minutes, 14 December 1900, 12 December 1901. From 1907 a delegate for the Clothing Trades Union, Robertson’s last executive meeting was 26 January 1909.

26. THC Council minutes and Committee Book.

27. Eight Hour Anniversary Committee minutes, various


29. Cobble, Dishing It Out, p. 62. For NSW, see Cooper, p. 56.


33. Labor Call, 3 August 1911, p. 1; 10 August 1911, p. 1; 4 April 1912, p. 1.


35. Labor Call, 8 September 1910, p. 5; 3 November 1910, p. 8; 17 November 1910, p. 3.

36. Labor Call, 8 December 1910, p. 2; 15 December 1910, pp. 2, 3.

37. Labor Call, 7 September 1911, p. 2.

38. THC Committee Book.

39. Frances, The Politics of Work, p. 120.

40. For the Cigarette Workers affiliation, see THC Council minutes, 10 July 1908, 25 September 1908, 2 October 1908, 8 January 1909. Initially the Female Branch of the Tobacco Workers ensured gender balance. In 1915 the union allocated one of its three THC positions to a woman member. A. Best, The tobacco worker: history of the Federated Tobacco Workers’ Union of Australia, Victorian Branch, 1884-1988, Federated Tobacco Workers Union of Australia, Victorian Branch, Cheltenham, 1989, p. 95.

41. Nolan estimated it peaked at ten per cent during World War I, before then declining to five per cent by the early 1920s. M. Nolan, ‘Sex or class? The Politics of the Earliest Equal Pay Campaign in Victoria’, Labour History, no. 61, 1991.

42. Best, The tobacco worker, p. 95.

43. See THC Council minutes, 7 September 1911, 28 August 1919.


46. Frances, The Politics of Work, pp. 122, 171; THC Council minutes, 1 August 1957.

Civilian responses to peace-time military occupation: the 1978 Bowral call-out and its implications for the ‘war on terrorism’

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During the dawn of Tuesday 14 February 1978, around 800 Australian soldiers, kitted out in the full paraphernalia of war, and their armed personnel carriers, moved into the small town of Bowral, population about 7000, some 128 kilometers south-west of Sydney. For three days the military patrolled the area. The occupation occurred in the wake of the Hilton Hotel bombing. It was justified as a legitimate response to the perceived threat posed to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM) – being held at Berida Manor, Bowral – by a possible terrorist attack. This paper analyses the response of civilians to the peace-time occupation of Bowral. In light of recent federal legislation in Australia which, under the justification of fighting the ‘war on terror’, potentially extends the basis upon which military force may legitimately be used against the civilian population, we examine the implications of the Bowral call-out episode for contemporary labour movement and progressive activists.

Early during the morning of Monday 13 February 1978, a city council garbage truck stopped in Sydney’s George Street, outside the Hilton Hotel, to collect the weekend contents of an overflowing litter bin. Two council workers began to empty the bin, and as they did, a bomb hidden in it exploded, killing them both; a nearby policeman later died in hospital from injuries received, and seven other people were seriously injured. Inside the Hilton Hotel were 11 visiting heads of government; the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM) was due to start in Sydney later that day. On Tuesday 14 February the Sydney Morning Herald announced that Australia was no longer ‘immune to the international disease of terrorism and violence’.¹

Soon after the explosion, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser was being briefed about the situation by his closest advisers and security personnel. It was the first of a hectic round of emergency briefings and meetings that day, including a meeting with New South Wales Premier Neville Wran, and a Federal Cabinet meeting. Amongst decisions reached during the day were to continue the CHOGRM program as planned, but with dramatically altered travel arrangements to a conference retreat in rural Bowral; and in relation to this, to call out the Army.²

Late that night (13 February) in Admiralty House, Sydney, Governor General Sir Zelman Cowan signed an Executive Council minute to call out the Defence Force to safeguard ‘the national and international interests of the Commonwealth of Australia’ from what were claimed to be ‘terrorist activities and related violence’. With a few strokes of his pen, Cowan effectively overcame a long standing Australian cautionary emphasis on the primacy of civilian authorities in maintaining peace-time domestic order.³

The Bowral call-out

During the afternoon of 13 February 1978, four army helicopters reconnoitered the Bowral township for two hours, landing on local sporting fields, and utilising a private airstrip on the property of industrialist Sir William Tyree on the outskirts of town. The following day the military occupied the town. Establishing a temporary command post just inside the Sydney end of town and opposite the small war-memorial park, troops spread along the main street and positioned themselves in twos at each street corner, secured the railway station, the nearby railway tunnel, and each end of the town. Camp was set up on a local football field. By 6.30 am everyone was in place and residents wakened to the sound of Kiawa helicopters from the 161 Reconnaissance Squadron circling over town, the sight of about 800 fully armed troops, magazines in place, while teams of soldiers scoured drains, garbage bins, hedges and shrubbery.

Closer to Sydney, armed troops, bayonets fixed, established a presence in neighbouring Mittagong on the Hume Highway, patrolling the streets and the railway line. About five kilometres north of town along the Highway, partially obscured by roadside bush, another military presence was established. Between Bowral and Sydney, troops were strategically deployed along the Sydney-Melbourne railway line, with particular attention given to tunnels, bridges, overpasses and stations.
All up nearly 2,000 military personnel were involved under the command of Vietnam veterans Brigadier David Butler and Lieutenant-Colonel Murray Blake; the troops, all based at the Holsworthy army base (NSW), were drawn from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, the 5-7th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (RAR), and the 12-15th Medium Regiments Royal Australian Artillery.¹

The troops were deployed in a manner that exposed them to civil prosecution; as a consequence they were uneasily conscious of this and aware that if required to fire, there was the possibility of a lack of ‘official backing’. Contributing to a sense of unease, which went to senior levels, was confusion about the ‘threat’ they were countering, about procedures to be followed in the event of trouble, and the exact nature of their power.² Externally, from a Bowral civilian viewpoint, the deployment gave the appearance of martial law; in the absence of local information to the contrary from either military or civil authorities, rumours circulated in the district to the effect that martial law was in operation and that a curfew was in force during the night of Tuesday 14 February.³

**Bowral 1978 as a precedent**

The government’s motivations in calling out the troops in 1978 are unclear. Also unclear are the identity and motivation of the person (or persons) who planted the bomb outside the Hilton Hotel which provided the pretext for the military call-out. As Jenny Hocking points out, there is a ‘continuing suggestion that the security services were in some way involved in the Hilton bombing’.⁴ Certainly, there is little, if any, evidence that ‘terrorist activities and related violence’ posed a threat to the CHOGRM conference. Such absence of threat belies the far reaching implications of the 1978 military occupation of Bowral.

The Governor General’s minute was open ended, to remain ‘in force until revoked’.⁵ According to A.R. Blackshield, in an early discussion of the militarised response, it ‘raised more questions than it answered’.⁶ No attempt was made to specify the units or sections of the armed forces to be used, the number of personnel to be involved, the geography of their deployment, nor the ‘degree of intervention in civilian life they might undertake’. And no attempt was made to establish a claim ‘to legal validity on any precise constitutional ground’.⁷

The Hilton bombing and the militarised response placed security firmly on Australia’s national agenda and helped to strengthen the power of the federal government in domestic affairs. The bombing was also a major factor leading to the formation of the Australian Federal Police, which came into operation in 1979. Importantly, as Hocking argues, ‘the ambivalent concept of “terrorism” as a specific legal entity’, capable of political definition and manipulation, was introduced to Australian law; and ‘a precedent for the use of the Army in the name of “counter terrorism”’ was established.⁸ Blackshield sees wider ramifications, arguing that the call-out ‘strikingly demonstrated the vulnerability of our democracy under existing law’, an implication being that should a future Australian government seriously embark on a military coup, it ‘would encounter no constitutional obstacles or restrictions at all – at least as far as the black letter constitutional text is concerned’.⁹

The Hilton bombing and the militarised response invigorated political, strategic bureaucratic, and legal reform processes, leading to the development over the next 25 years of what Jenny Hocking has described as:

> a comprehensive strategy and organisational network of domestic counter-terrorism according to an adaptation of a counter-insurgency approach which is not only inappropriate to our own political context but which also carries significant dangers for political and civil liberties in its application.¹⁰

Recent codifications by the federal government of the definition of terrorism as well as extensions of the range of activities for which the military can be used to suppress civilian unrest are the latest aspects of this strategy, which, in some circumstances, could be applied against militant labour movement protests.

While the future is in the making, the historical record shows that Labor and non-Labor governments have variously used the armed forces against the trade union and protest movements. The armed forces generally were mobilised as back-up during the 1923 Melbourne Police Strike and also provided strike breaking assistance; troops were used as strike breakers during the 1949 Coal Strike in New South Wales; army and naval personnel were used to variously break bans by the Seamen’s Union of Australia
(SUA) and the Waterside Workers Federation in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954; the navy was used to break an SUA boycott against the Vietnam War in 1967; the air force was used to break union bans on Qantas in 1981; and the navy and air force were used to break the 1989 industrial campaign by the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. Also that year, the dispatch of troops was authorised to back-up South Australian police against demonstrators at the Nurrungar joint Australia-United States military satellite base. A significant political/industrial role was envisaged for the army during the Cold War in the anti-union Operation Alien (1950-1953); the nature and extent and of involvement of defence force personnel in the 1998 War on the Waterfront is yet to be fully understood.14

Bearing in mind these past uses of the armed forces, along with the precedent established by the 1978 call-out, the changed legal environment of counter-terrorism, and the vulnerability of ‘our democracy’ suggested by Blackshield, it is fitting to look at the 1978 call-out and the brief occupation by military forces of the country town of Bowral south of Sydney, not as a piece of geography that was the objective of the call-out, but as a population of some 7000 people caught up in a historical precedent.

**Civilian responses to the occupation**

Newspaper reports and our own interviews provide the sources for identifying civilian responses to and experiences of the occupation. The usefulness of newspapers in this process is twofold. First, in their ‘on the ground’ reports of the occupation, they provide insights into the reactions of Bowral residents to what was, for most, an unprecedented experience of military occupation. Second, newspapers provide one of the major mediums through which the occupation itself was experienced and interpreted by civilians – whether in Bowral or elsewhere throughout the country.

**National/Sydney newspapers**

Newspaper coverage of the occupation expressed a mixture of concern at the implications of the government’s use of security powers and bemusement at the striking contradiction of armed troops patrolling the normally sedate streets and environs of Bowral. On Friday 17 February, after the occupation had ended, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that ‘There was a strong element of over-reaction in Mr Fraser’s invocation of emergency powers to direct the Army, using a battalion of troops to clear the way to Bowral’.15 The *Australian*’s Philip Cornford, covering the occupation, asked ‘Is this Australia?’,16 while the same newspaper’s Defence Correspondent was clearly troubled by the events:

> [T]he deployment of the military on this scale can only be described as an over-reaction … to deploy a force of the size that is reported in the role given it is to make a mockery of the whole concept of security in a free country unless there is evidence of a threat serious enough to merit calling out the military on this scale.17

Tim Dare in the *Sydney Morning Herald* explored the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the powers, in relation to civilians, of the occupying troops.18

From the time CHOGRM delegates were secreted to Bowral during the early evening of 14 February, aboard two Chinook helicopters (landing on an exclusive golf course adjacent to Berida Manor, the CHOGRM venue) and in three heavily escorted motorcades, rather than by train as originally planned, the print media demonstrated an interest in the logistics of the occupation. Photographs of the Commonwealth leaders leaving Sydney, arriving in Bowral, and of the troops stationed in Bowral, were carried during the week in the newspapers surveyed. The contrast between the military presence, on the one hand, and the peaceful scenes of rural life was captured by a number of reporters and photographs. Philip Cornford, for example, wrote:

> In Mittagong, a few kilometres from Bowral, a football team in early training jogged past young men patrolling the footpath with loaded rifles. In Bowral there were more soldiers than citizens on the street and, mixing with them, the blue uniforms of NSW police.19

Beneath a photo from Bowral The *Australian* ran the caption ‘Troops search Bowral as local teenagers wait for their school bus’.20 Adding to this contrasting image was that the conference itself was presented as a peaceful sojourn in the country. Prime Minister Fraser was pictured half-clad on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* at Berida Manor ‘after a workout in the gymnasium’.21 The Commonwealth
leaders’ wives were reported to have gone shopping and ‘sipped morning coffee’ in the nearby tourist
town of Berrima. Similar coverage framed CHOGRM’s departure from Bowral: ‘Some had spent
the early part of the morning playing yet another game of golf, while others went shopping or strolled
around the grounds of Berida Manor’.

Nonetheless, the major commercial papers, without exception, represented the occupation of Bowral as
a response to a terrorist attack carried out on Australian soil. Defence Minister Jim Killen’s description
of terrorism as a ‘new kind of warfare’24 framed much of the media’s portrayal of the issue. Headlines
from the week give a sense of this: ‘Terrorism now ‘fact of life’ – All Australians should mourn: Wran’;25
‘Troops Placed on Anti-Terror Alert’;26 ‘The timetable of terror…’;27 ‘Now is the time to reject terror’.28

The Sydney Morning Herald editorialised:

Australia is not immune to the international disease of terrorism and violence … At least the
arrangements announced for the Bowral visit suggest that the lesson of yesterday morning has
been learnt.29

An editorial in The Australian the same week argued: ‘Today Australia is part of the ugly world of
terrorism. Today the Australia-initiated regional conference can speak out to make the world a safer
place’.30 On the Saturday after the bombing the Sydney Morning Herald’s ‘Good Weekend’ carried a one
page special written by Congress for Cultural Freedom member, Walter Lacquer, with the title ‘Terrorism’
appearing below a menacing cartoon of a stocking masked man carrying a grenade and machine gun.31

Local newspapers

By far the strongest of the hostile interpretations of the occupation was in the local press. There were,
at the time, two local commercial newspapers: the Southern Highland News (based in Bowral) and the
Berrima District Post (based in the neighbouring town of Moss Vale). In the weeks prior to the
occupation the Southern Highland News foreshadowed the CHOGRM visit, detailing preparations
underway and the luxurious features of Berida Manor (at the time, an innovative luxury resort, opened
in 1977) to be enjoyed by conference delegates. Both local papers conveyed a sense of excitement
around the impending visit, with particular interest in the increased tourism likely to be generated as a
consequence. The Berrima District Post began its coverage of the CHOGRM visit on Friday 13 January,
announcing with a front page headline ‘World leaders to holiday at Bowral’, introducing a story about
how the visiting leaders would have two days of ‘play and relaxation’.

For the Southern Highland News, such enthusiasm proved short-lived. On Wednesday, 15 February the
paper devoted its entire front page to the occupation. The commentary was highly critical. Mentioning
the ‘secrecy’ involved in the occupation the paper described ‘the virtual siege conditions in Bowral (and
to a lesser extent, Mittagong)’ and commented:

[T]hose who remember Franco’s Spain could see a parallel in the pairs of uniformed men, all heavily
armed, steadily walking their beat, always in sight of each other … A phase of darkness passed over
Bowral yesterday and few will forget it or the alien act of infamy which made it necessary.

The following week the editor referred to the occupation as a ‘tragi-comedy’.34

Concurrently, however, the Berrima District Post presented a far more benign image of the occupation.
In the Friday issue of 17 February, the first issue the Post had on the actual event given its production
schedule, the front page headline acknowledged ‘Two Days of Drama’, but conveyed in the text little
sense of that drama. The logistics of the event were summarised, and while there was reference to town
tension, this was put down to ‘the people of the district who were concerned at the possibility of something
happening to their distinguished guests’. On page two of this issue there was an account of the activities
of these guests over the two days: the report was headed ‘Just like schoolboys on holiday’.

Resident responses

Journalists from most papers noted both fear and confusion from local residents at the presence of
troops. According to their reports, some residents viewed the troops as a source of menace and expressed
their unease. Eleven year old Mandy Tutt said ‘I don’t like them ‘cause it’s sort of scary … Dad said
it’s like Belfast and that’s all bombs and soldiers’.36 Other residents commented ‘If two men hadn’t
died in Sydney, al [sic] this would be really funny”; another, ‘Now we have some idea what life in Northern Ireland is like. This is frightening’.37 The Southern Highlands News referred to ‘tense, grim-faced soldiers’, and a sense of tension between troops and townsfolk which eased ‘later in the day [Tuesday]’.38 Pervading everything was the unfamiliarity of troops in town, and constant helicopter activity over town; people talked of their inability to relax, and of tension headaches.39 For food writer, Margaret Fulton, one of the owner/operators of Berida Manor, the strain of the ‘retreat’, the sense of siege, the ‘enormous responsibility’ of hosting the heads of state, their partners and entourages, the tension of being under constant suspicion by security personnel, created ‘a state of shock’ she found personally and deeply disturbing, even traumatically so.40

A general lack of communication was conducive to fear and rumour. Some young mothers spoke of their fear of being caught in cross-fire. Uncharacteristically, parking spaces were easy to find in the main street of town during the first day of the occupation.41 Rumours were rife, and during the occupation there were spurious reports of gun-fire and arrests, including that of an armed man in the grounds of Berida Manor.42 There was talk of martial law, of curfews, of various roads being sealed off, and the comforting rumour that the soldiers were only play acting and there was not an Army bullet in town.43

Bowral Shell service station proprietor at the time, Colin McPhedran, was the designated Commonwealth fuel supplier during the occupation, but neither his company nor any occupation representative officially informed him beforehand. The service station was staked out by troops, pumps and drains in the complex were rigorously examined, and he and his staff were left to their own devices to work out what was happening. According to McPhedran, ‘the strange part was that no attempt was made to communicate what was happening’, leaving he and his staff ‘on edge and nervous’.44

Similarly no attempt was made by any Commonwealth representative to brief the town’s main organ of local news, the Southern Highlands News. The paper, and its meager resources, was left to its own devices. Managing Editor at the time, Mac Cott, recalls being given the impression ‘we would not be welcome at Berida Manor’; his newspaper was not invited to join the journalists who took the group photo shoot of the town’s distinguished guests.45 Perhaps the front page News story of Wednesday 15 February, before the photo opportunity, had not adopted the correct political tone.

Bowral’s Mayor during the occupation, a high profile local conservative political identity, Alderman David Wood, was briefed by an Army representative around midday on Tuesday 14 February. He was told that the town would be occupied for an unspecified length of time because of events in Sydney and that all care was being taken to ensure everyone’s safety. Wood accepted this as being necessary in the national interest, but was later surprised when, following the occupation, the same Army officer told him his home phone had been tapped during the operation and his responses to national and international media inquiries, about two-dozen in all, monitored. ‘It surprised me, I can tell you’, recalled Wood, adding that “[n]ational interest comes before anyone else’s”.46

The overwhelming sense is of residents going about their daily lives, relatively uninterrupted, but somewhat puzzled, bewildered, tense, even excited, by the unusual happenings around them. Cornford reported ‘[t]heir invasion was greeted with a mixed sense of outrage and curiosity’.47 Carolyn Parfitt of the Sydney Morning Herald presented contrasting reactions of townspeople to the presence of soldiers: ‘Children finishing school for the day ran up to some of the soldiers and asked for autographs’ while ‘[t]he air in the town was one of intrigue and mystery as everywhere the conversation turned to soldiers, bombs and conferences’. However, ‘[t]he normally quiet atmosphere of the town was turned to one of excitement, partly because of the war mood and partly because of the honoured guests soon to arrive’.48

Conclusion

Further qualitative and quantitative research would, of course, be useful in building a comprehensive picture of civilian responses to the 1978 Bowral call-out. Extensive surveys and/or interviews with witnesses as well as interviews with military personnel would supplement our findings. This, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, the indicative evidence presented here offers valuable insights for contemporary labour movement and progressive activists.
Two points arise out of our survey that bear directly upon the contemporary political milieu. First, from newspaper reports and from our own interviews, it appears that most residents of Bowral responded to the unprecedented events during the 13–16 February 1978 with a mixture of confusion, fear, and excitement. Although there were dissenting voices to the occupation (and the Franco image mentioned in the Southern Highland News was pointed), we found no evidence of organised opposition.

The second point is how readily the majority of the mainstream commercial press adopted the ‘terrorism as a new kind of warfare’ discourse. The framing of the issue in terms of a response to the threat of terrorism bears a striking resemblance to the contemporary media discourse surrounding the ‘war on terrorism’. Indeed, if the specifics were changed but the discourse retained, the reports would not be out of place today. Despite some disquiet about the occupation in the commercial press and despite some journalists questioning its legality, by framing the occupation in terms of a response to terrorism the press helped to legitimise it.

These findings may not be surprising, but they are certainly noteworthy. Of greatest note is how easily civil liberties were, potentially, dispensed with.

Of course, there are many reasons why the local community response to the occupation was muted. A conservative rural hegemony dominated the politics of the town, a feature of which was, and is, a high degree of support for the Liberal Party, and the occupation was visibly the response of a Liberal Prime Minister and his government. Residents are unlikely to have been aware of the occupation’s constitutional implications, something they shared with the Australian population generally. Few visible restraints on movement or association were experienced by residents and the occupation itself lasted only a few days. Further, the national press of the time responded to the event within the framework of ‘national interest’ and helped legitimise the martial response. But the fact remains that for three days in February 1978, armed Australian military personnel occupied the town of Bowral and its surrounds and, in so doing, helped to establish a precedent for the future use of the military against civilians in the name of counter-terrorism.

It would be foolish, we submit, to dismiss the possibility that emergency powers and military force could be used by the federal government against civilian dissenting groups in Australia in the near future. Using the ‘war on terror’ as pretext, the Federal Coalition Government, with the support of its Labor Opposition, has extended the range of civilian activities against which the use of the military by the government might be legally permitted. Such activities include, potentially, numerous actions likely to be undertaken by trade unions and labour movement activists. Analysing the responses of Australian civilians during the precedent setting 1978 call-out is thus a useful exercise. At the very least it throws into doubt the notion that ‘it couldn’t happen here’.

Endnotes

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2. For a brief chronological account of the day and its events see Jenny Hocking, Terror Laws: ASIO, counter terrorism and the threat to democracy, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004, pp. 82-85.
7. Hocking, Terror Laws, pp. 116-119; this involvement is the subject of the documentary film directed by Daryl Dellora, Conspiracy, Film Art Doco, 1994, released nationally on ABC-TV, 19 February 1995. See also Tom Molomby, Spies, Bombs and the Path of Bliss, Potoroo Press, Sydney, 1986, pp. 409-412.
10. Ibid., p. 6.
18. Tim Dare, ‘Do the Bowral soldiers have the right to kill?’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1978, p. 7.
38. Ibid.
41. Cahill, ‘From the Bong Bong Picnic Races’, p. 12.
43. Cahill, ‘From the Bong Bong Picnic Races’, p. 12.
44. Interview with Colin McPhedran, 4 February 2005.
45. Interview with Mac Cott, 4 February 2005.
46. Interview with David Wood, 10 February 2005.
NSW Labor governments at the hands of their hostile British governors

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This chapter traces how Labor governments in NSW had to conduct battles against the reigning British governors to implement their political mandates. The Governors were deeply conservative, retired British military officers who called on the Dominions Office and their regal connections to thwart the Labor governments' programmes. The struggle between the Governor and Premier Jack Lang culminated in the Governor unconstitutionally sacking the Labor government.

NSW Labor governments during the inter-war years were particularly unfortunate in the choice of the British Governors they were forced to work with. These Governors were retired senior military officers with highly conservative political attitudes and unused to working with civilian governments and particularly Labor governments introducing economic and political changes that had been endorsed by the electorate. This study represents a new thrust into NSW political history and develops insights based on material in the National Archives, London, and the Game papers in the Mitchell Library. The issues in this chapter have not been significantly explored previously and their analysis demonstrates the distorted views that the British government departments held towards NSW, the leading state in Australia. It is important to note that the Governors were paid, housed and maintained by the NSW government, but they held to the pretence that they were responsible only to the reigning monarch and, at some distance, to the Dominions Office in London who actually recruited them. These men were hostile to the election of Labor governments and tried to thwart them at every turn. They seemed to believe that instead of being a vice-regal representative in a state with a functioning responsible government, they were overseeing a form of Crown colony where they held unfettered powers. Unsure of how far they could ignore instructions given by Labor governments, they consulted their contacts in the Dominions Office in London for advice. Unfortunately for NSW, some of these officers in London were themselves confused as to whether NSW was an independent dominion or a Crown colony. The Governors resorted to their own anti-authoritarian styles maintained their refusal to accept the advice of Labor governments in the conduct of their office.

In the colonial era, the Governors did function initially as military autocrats, but later worked with a nominated Legislative Council and by 1856 with an elected Legislative Assembly. The Governors were given Letters Patent by the British government to preserve their status, but they were required to function on the advice of the elected government. Such a precept is demonstrated in the following Instruction:

The Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, is hereby authorised, from time to time, in Our name by an instrument or Instruments under the Public Seal of the State, to summon to the Legislative Council of the State such person or persons as the Governor and the Executive Council shall think fit.

Traditionally, the governor was obliged to act on the advice of the NSW Executive Council, that is the Cabinet of ministers, and to endorse their nominations. Through the issuance of another Royal Instruction, Article VI, the governor was granted partial independence in the short term and under limitations:

In the exercise of the powers and authorities vested in him, the Governor shall be guided by the advice of the Executive Council, but if in any case he shall see sufficient cause to dissent from the opinion of the said Council, he may act in the exercise of his said powers and authorities in opposition to the opinion of the Council, reporting the matter to Us [sic] without delay, with reasons for his so acting.

That was how things functioned until the Lang Labor governments were elected in 1925 and 1930 when they introduced political and economic changes to which the Governors took exception. The Governors then resorted to the strict wording in their Letters and Royal Instructions in a way never intended by the British government and in defiance of the interests of the NSW governments.
The reign of Admiral Sir Dudley de Chair

Sir Dudley de Chair was a mentally destabilised former naval officer who believed that under Labor ‘foreign elements were behind the movement to recall [him] the Governor, and wreck the Constitution, and to establish a Communist Government’. Lang requested him to appoint 25 new Legislative Councillors, but the Admiral would appoint only fifteen. Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Dominions, was consulted by both parties, but he replied that the matter was not one in which he could give instructions. But Amery also sent a private telegram to the Admiral saying that the issue was not ‘strong enough to warrant the rejection of the advice of his Ministers’ and the Admiral prudently and quickly made the appointments. Some of the Labor Councillors deserted to the Nationalists and the Premier requested more appointees. Sir Dudley firmly refused and this time Amery secretly supported the Governor’s stand. He cabled saying that if the new members were being appointed for the purpose of abolishing the Legislative Council and if the Admiral’s refusal should ‘result in any protest or demand for your recall, you can be assured of my support’. The NSW Labor government was contending not only with an unsympathetic Governor, but with the British government as well.

The reign of Air Vice-Marshal Sir Philip Game

By the time of the election of Lang’s second government in October 1930, Air Vice-Marshals, Sir Philip Game, a retired British Air Force officer was Governor. Game was disoriented over the social and economic values of NSW. He viewed the local citizens as suffering from ‘want of moral fibre’ which he blamed on government action in taking away ‘the responsibilities which should rest on the individual. Child endowment — free education up to the University — free hospitals — free institutions for troublesome children, in fact State aid from birth to death.’ Game’s anti-Labor views were encouraged by his fellow military friend and Governor of South Australia (later to be Governor-General), General Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven. He told Game that he was ‘up against a cunning and unprincipled scoundrel’ in Premier Lang whom the General collectively linked with Scullin and Theodore as representing ‘scum’, needing to be brushed out of the way.

Game did not perceive himself to be responsible to the NSW government, but responsible upwards to the Dominions Office, its Secretary of State, and ultimately to His Majesty the King. Below him was the Premier and the NSW citizens who expressed their loyalty to the King through him. Game reminded Lang that he derived his authority as Premier from the King, but this authority was transmitted through himself as Governor. Game was close to Lord Trenchard who had established the Royal Air Force, and thereby indirectly to the royal family. Officiating as the King’s representative in NSW was for Game much more than a purely symbolic function. Game’s lifestyle in Government House reinforced his notion of being superior to NSW governments and Premiers. He was surrounded by a large retinue of domestic and official staff employed by the NSW government and he enjoyed his government salary of £5,000 to which he added his half pay as Air Vice-Marshal. He was faced with few personal expenses.

At the top of the new Labor government’s electoral mandate in 1930 again was the abolition of the Legislative Council and Premier Lang immediately asked Game to appoint the required number of Councillors. This was despite the Nationalists having amended the Constitution Act in 1929 making not only the abolition unlawful without holding a referendum but also preventing this requirement from being repealed without another referendum. Lang told Game that he would surmount this artifice by simply repealing Bavin’s Act and he provided Game with opinion from the government’s law officers legally validating the government’s plans. This advice stated that British parliamentary tradition prevented a government binding a future government, and the NSW Constitution could simply be amended to remove previous amendments providing for referendums. Game told Lang that ‘I accepted the view that the people desired the abolition of the Council’, but he refused more nominees until the measure had been rejected by the Council. Lang correctly foresaw the Council delaying by inaction and he warned Game that if he ‘could not bring himself to accept his advice, constitutionally rendered, a crisis must necessarily take place’. Confident that political justice would be on his side, Lang permitted Game to consult the Chief Justice, Sir Philip Street, and the President of the Legislative Council, Sir John Peden, to ascertain their views. Not surprisingly, no record exists of their advice to His Excellency. Game then resorted to delaying tactics by disputing with the Premier the number of nominees sought by the government. There was confusion over the exact figures with Game refusing the Premier’s demand on 2 December.
In the face of this refusal, Lang brought on the bills for the Council’s dissolution. But to the amazement of all, the Legislative Council quickly passed the legislation to procure the Council’s abolition. The reason for this apparent self-destruction was obvious. If they defeated the bill, the Governor would have to honour his promise to add more members. Hoping to frustrate the Councillors’ plot, the government sought to have this abolition act assented to immediately and asked London (via the Governor) on 10 December to approve Game giving immediate assent on the grounds that it was of ‘local character’. Game himself refused to give local assent and he cabled them for approval to London.\footnote{14}

The clever strategy of the Nationalist Councillors was revealed the next day, 11 December. They applied for an injunction to the courts to restrain the President of the Council or Ministers from submitting the bills to the Governor for assent and on this being granted the matter went to the full Supreme Court on 15 December by which a judgment was sought declaring that a referendum was necessary before Council could be abolished. The NSW government engaged Dr H.V. Evatt to argue the contrary. He said that ‘You cannot have Parliamentary sovereignty which can define and limit itself. One Parliament cannot substantially shackle or interfere with the discretion of a subsequent Parliament’.\footnote{15} But the judges ignored Evatt’s argument and on 23 December announced by a majority of four to one that Bavin’s constitutional amendment could not be amended. NSW appealed to the High Court where on 16 March 1931, by a narrow majority of three to two, its appeal was dismissed.\footnote{16} NSW then took the appeal to the judicial committee of the Privy Council. Dominions Office officials told British Attorney-General, who wished to appear as amicus curiae (friend of the court), that they wanted him to oppose the position of the NSW’s Labor government.\footnote{17} The Privy Council’s decision was not handed down until 31 May 1932 after the Lang government had been displaced by Game on 13 May.\footnote{18} Meanwhile the Legislative Council continued to obstruct the government’s legislation which Lang tried to counter by continuing to press Game for the appointment of more Labor nominees.

Early in 1931, Game decided to dismiss the NSW government and informed the Premier. Game consulted Hore-Ruthven in Adelaide who in turn consulted Sir George Murray, the South Australian Chief Justice as well as Lieutenant Governor, Keith Murdoch, the newspaper proprietor, and L. Duncan, of the *Adelaide Advertiser*. The General reported that the consensus of opinion in Adelaide was that if Lang refused to modify his policy in any way and ‘was dragging the good name of N.S.W. in the mud against the wishes of the majority of people, then no other alternative exists to save the situation then — but not until then, you would be justified in sending for Bavin to form a government, of course having first ascertained that Bavin was prepared to do so’.\footnote{19} Game decided not to continue with the planned sacking and wrote an apology to the Premier saying that after he was in a position to think quietly about the request he decided he ‘should be entirely wrong if I were to ask you to surrender your Commission’.\footnote{20}

The not unexpected refusal of the Council to pass the Interest Reduction bill on 26 March had the Premier again unsuccessfully asking for more nominees. It became characteristic of Game to report to London that the policies of the Labor government were driven by ulterior motives and that chaos and confusion would reign if Labor got its way. For the second time, Game began actively considering dismissing the Lang government. He cabled London that ‘It has been suggested to me on constitutional grounds I ought to consider whether I am right in retaining as my ministers a cabinet which has openly repudiated public debts’, and ‘If I am to do so on moral grounds of repudiation, it must obviously be done at once. Feeling among Labour [sic] opponents is strong’, he added, ‘and a petition is being prepared to ask me to exercise such constitutional powers as are vested in me’.\footnote{21} He looked to London for support.\footnote{22} London responded with a letter from the Minister, J.H. Thomas, saying that the matter had been discussed with the Prime Minister, and that ‘we should like to assure you of our warm personal sympathy’.\footnote{23} It would have been evident to the Dominions Office by then how single-minded was the Air Vice-Marshals Air Vice-Marshall in seeking to dismiss the government (seemingly twice that year) when it adopted a policy he disliked.

Sir Philip’s perception of ‘widespread dissatisfaction with the Government’s record and its proposals’ deterred him granting more Councillors. He believed that the projected measures did not ‘represent the wishes of the majority of the people’. To deter such political recklessness, Sir Philip again recommended that Lang’s government should be made to face another election despite its having been elected nearly six months previously.\footnote{24}
Willis to London in defence of NSW

It was clear to the NSW government that Game’s opposition to its policies had to be countered by an appeal to his political masters in London. The government sent its leader in the Legislative Council, A.C. Willis, to occupy the vacant position of NSW Agent General in London even though leadership of the Legislative Council would be difficult to fill. At that time, however, it was more important to have the NSW government capably represented in London as a means for countering the biased reports of Sir Philip and the distorted news about NSW published in London’s newspapers. Willis arrived in London on 14 May 1931 and visited the Secretary of State for Dominions, Jimmy Thomas, early in June to present NSW’s case and then met with Sir Edward J. Harding, the Under Secretary, and H. Grattan Bushe, Legal Adviser, to the Dominions Office on 23 June 1931. Willis directed discussion to the appointment of additional Councillors, but the officials concentrated attention on the abolition of the Council which, being sub judice, Willis could assure them was not an issue. The Governor should ‘concede to his Premier the number of appointments necessary to give effect to legislation’, he said. Aware of the British Minister’s refusal to give ‘formal instructions’ to the Governor, Willis suggested that the Dominions Office should propose an indirect course of action to Game whereby the Governor ‘could intimate to Mr Lang that an approach’ on his part for the appointment for more members ‘would have a favourable reception’. Harding sent a report of these discussions to Game on 7 July. It was a clever presentation by Willis, clearly demonstrating the demands of the NSW government. It was unfortunate for the NSW government that it produced such a negative response from the British officials.

Meanwhile in Sydney, Lang had returned with flying colours from the second Premiers’ Conference in Melbourne in June. Elements of his Lang Plan involving large interest reductions and the conversion of loans to lower rates, ridiculed at the previous February Conference as repudiation, were adopted in May and implemented as orthodox policies. There was even some jovial tolerance at this Conference for his shifting NSW’s responsibility for London loan interest payments to the Commonwealth.

By the middle of 1931, Sir Philip became more entrenched in his opposition to the government’s policies and determined that the Legislative Council should remain the bulwark against its enactments. Game sent reports to London painting alarming scenarios of a possible Labor-dominated unicameral parliament bent on introducing radical legislation. He based his startling propositions on the unlikely assumption of the Privy Council judgment actually favouring Labor’s abolition of the Council. In another letter he had an imaginary Labor government, now in a single-chamber Parliament, introducing a bill to prolong the life of Parliament indefinitely. ‘I realise the difficulty … has not yet arisen’, he wrote, but I should be grateful for guidance on how a Governor could ‘warrant an appeal to the Electors before it becomes law’. In painting this exaggerated scenario, Sir Phillip did his best to convince his London masters of the political extremism he believed he faced in NSW. It can be conjectured that he had intentions of dismissing the government and was preparing the Dominions Office for this possibility.

Game denied the continuing requests from the government for more Councillors after each of its bills was defeated in the Council. For example, when the Emergency Taxation Bill, designed to raise £16 million to offset the deficit and provide aid for the unemployed, was predictably defeated, the Premier asked for more Councillors. Lang angrily informed Sir Philip that the electorate and the Labor Party’s exercise of authority was being ‘reduced to a nullity’, and the administration of Government, directed at the solicitude and ‘welfare of the State’, was ‘rendered abortive’ by Game’s tactics. A resolution was passed in July by the Legislative Assembly declaring that the Governor was obliged to accept the advice of his ministers. On 8 July all the cabinet ministers met the Governor in the Executive Council. There the ministers signed a minute recommending the appointment of additional Councillors, but Sir Philip refused to sign it. Game was not only becoming more intolerant towards Labor but contemptuous of its members as well.

About this time, Sir Philip expressed in writing his model for governing NSW. It followed the British pattern of a sovereign and upper and lower houses of parliament. Game claimed to represent the monarch, but unlike the King, Sir Philip saw no necessity to follow the advice of his ministers. Nor would he permit this model to be modified akin to Queensland’s unicameral parliament. The nub of Sir Philip’s design was as follows:
I hold that Government consists of myself, as Representative of His Majesty the King, and 2 Houses, that New South Wales adopted this form of Government 75 years ago and has adhered to it, and that I require strongest possible grounds for what amounts to eliminating one of the trio making use of Royal prerogative … To swamp the Council would place Government in position of being able to pass any legislation, however extreme, and, apart from all other considerations, I feel that there are very strong reasons in best interests of country against doing this … I would gladly accept his [the Premier’s] advice if I felt entitled to do so, but must make it quite clear that I am totally unable to reconcile acceptance [of his advice] with duties of my position.31

NSW appeals to London

To circumvent Game’s stalling tactics, the NSW government approached his masters in London on 6 July asking them to instruct him to conform to the government’s policies. NSW also asserted that just as ‘the advice of Ministry is always accepted by the King’ so was the King’s representative in Sydney obliged do the same. It concluded with the remark that ‘It would be an intolerable position if … an individual unacquainted with the State and responsible neither to the Imperial nor local Parliament’ were to have ‘an independent discretion’ in NSW government affairs.32

The Dominions Office responded by preparing a statement under Thomas’ signature for cabling to Game. It informed him of the Labor government’s representations and suggested that a compromise on the number of appointees be arranged by Game with the Premier. Most unusually, Sir Edward Harding then telephoned the message to Game at 6 am London time. Game seemed unrepentant. He replied to Harding that there was a very strong public feeling in his favour wherever he went — although admittedly from those opposing Lang. The government, he added, might be voted out if an election was held. On the Council numbers, he said that even if Lang accepted them it was doubtful that he would adhere to the arrangement.33 It appeared that Game felt in an invulnerable position and would be prepared to tough it out, knowing that the Dominions Office would support him.

British ministerial intervention

The British officials in the Dominions Office and the Attorney-General’s Office in London seemed unable to understand the situation where the largest state of Australia, that had been settled for 150 years and had a population of 2.5 million, was insisting on official British assistance to make the Governor accountable to its recently elected government. These British officials took a reactionary stand by arguing that the Governor was not accountable to his state government, that he could act unilaterally and that he would not be recalled by British officials just to suit the wishes of the state government. Lang was outraged at this decision.

Cooler heads prevailed in other parts of the British government, however. Jimmy Thomas seemed aware that an alternative course was required if NSW was to be rescued from an increasingly absurd situation and Willis seems to have helped Thomas arrive at that assessment.34 There was an understanding between the two men that the ‘no directive’ principle applied in Game’s situation, that is that he could not be directed to give in to Lang. In a discussion between them at Thomas’ retreat house at Hove in the middle of an impending split in the Labour government, to occur on 24 August 1931, it was agreed that Game would have to be pressured to give ground if the ‘no directive’ principle was to be followed. An alarmed Game seemed to know what was afoot and cabled Thomas on 24 August urging no change in the Council’s numbers. Game said he had offered Lang a smaller number of 21 Councillors but it was not accepted by the Premier. ‘The feeling of the country’ was no longer with Lang, continued Game, and he was ‘persuaded not to expand’ the offer of more Councillors. But then seeing more clearly the writing on the wall, Game concluded with the unexpected offer that he was ‘quite ready to make way if necessary’ for another person prepared to accept the Premier’s advice.35 Thomas’ reply was carefully crafted; he made a ‘suggestion’ to Game about more appointments while denying that the ‘suggestion’ had any official connotation to it.36 Game had no alternative but to back down in response to his Minister’s veiled suggestion.

In early October, Game responded to Thomas’ indirect pressures by abandoning his anti-Labor policies. He now judged the Labor Party to have wide support. Lang was praised for introducing the interest reductions to the Premiers’ Conference and for ‘postponing the repudiation of overseas interest’.

Cain: NSW governments at the hands of their hostile British governors 67
While the ALP had lost support in the rural areas, he wrote, it still retained firm support in the industrial areas and that Lang was ‘undoubtedly the outstanding political figure in the State and possibly in the Commonwealth’.

Game’s startling transformation from opponent to supporter of the Labor government was eclipsed by his announcing on 20 November that he had agreed to appointing 25 additional Councillors. Game claimed that the number exceeded by merely four his earlier offer of 21. Three other reasons for the increase, said Game, were that the government still maintained electoral popularity; that more Labor Councillors might reduce the harmful anti-Labor propagandists; and that the Nationalists were acting in their own financial interests. The possibility of the Privy Council not announcing its judgment until April 1932 also influenced him. It was better to make the increase now than to delay when ‘factiousness [sic] of Opposition by the Legislative Council’ might insist on him appointing more than the 25 and give the government a permanent majority.

The archives are silent on how Game learned of the policy shift in the Dominions Office as they are on the relationship between Thomas and Willis who enjoyed the common ground of leadership in trade unions – one from British railway workers and the other from the Australian coal miners. But Game’s reversal of hostility to Labor was only superficial and his dislike erupted six months later by his dismissal of the government.

At this time Thomas Bavin resigned from leadership of the UAP and leader of the opposition because of illness. He was consoled by his close friend, Governor Game, writing to say ‘what a knock-out it is to me to realise that we shall not again be working together, when this nightmare is a thing of the past. I have always looked forward to that’.

His Excellency, even then, was plotting to be rid of the NSW Labor government and end his ‘nightmare’.

The Bridge opening

The NSW government had decided that their Premier would open the Sydney Harbour Bridge on 19 March rather than Sir Philip as the King’s representative. Game was to play the secondary role of unveiling a tablet associated with the Bridge’s construction and then hand Lang the scissors to cut the official ribbon opening the Bridge. Game desperately tried to have the Dominions Office endow him with the authority to open it in place of the Premier. Game told London that NSW was politically divided and that the opening should be conducted by a neutral figure, such as himself. Game reported that one of the threats to stability was the right wing private army known as the New Guard consisting of 30,000 members bent on being rid of the Lang government.

King George initially supported Game’s suggestion that the Governor open the Bridge, but he soon changed his mind. This did not deter Game who kept pressing the Dominions Office to intercede on his behalf. This annoyed the Dominions Office and caused Sir Edward Harding to minute Game’s cable as follows:

I am sorry that Sir P. Game has ‘gone back’. I think it would have been better to leave well alone—more especially as there was no formal request to H.M. for approval of details of ceremony.

The outcome was that a dispirited Game had to play second fiddle to the Premier he detested. The ceremony was disrupted, however, by the New Guard’s officer, Francis de Groot, protesting at Lang rather than Game opening the Bridge. It was highly unlikely that Game was involved in the planning of this disruption, but he would have wryly noted that had he presided, expressions of anti-government animosity would not have occurred.

Game’s final coup

Under the terms of the Australian Loan Council legislation, the Commonwealth government took responsibility for the repayment of all previous loans, but it demanded that the states continue to pay the Commonwealth the interest on their previous loans even though the states’ revenues had fallen drastically while the Commonwealth’s had gained through its collection of tax on petrol sales. NSW’s revenue had declined to such an extent that Lang asked the Commonwealth to assist in meeting interest payment falling due in February 1932. On 30 September 1931, Lang and the Scullin government had come to a settlement over NSW’s earlier refusal to pay the Commonwealth for outstanding interest, but the new Lyons UAP government refused to be as compliant. When the NSW Treasury was unable
to find sufficient funds, the Commonwealth paid the interest and legislated to seize monies from the NSW government bank accounts or elsewhere such as from the Harbour Bridge tolls. Lang removed all funds from the banks and for a time operated government finances in cash through the NSW Treasury. Public servants paid revenue into the Treasury instead of the banks and the cash was paid out in wages or sustenance to the unemployed. After speaking to Lang and the Attorney-General, Game accepted that the actions were approved under the Audit Act. Game reported events to the Dominions Office saying, correctly, on 23 April that it was a dispute between the two governments and did not require his involvement. But at 5.00pm. on 13 May Game dismissed the government and appointed Bertie Stevens, the opposition leader, as Premier until general elections were held. What made Game change his mind in this regard is an open question. Was it his being out-maneuved by Willis in London? Was it the slight over the Bridge-opening affair? Was it an ex-military commander mistakenly believing that he had to do something – anything? Certainly it decided future NSW Labor governments that the Governor’s position would thereafter be filled by an Australian.

This paper demonstrates how imperialism did not sit easily with the British. London officials knew little about the Australian states and the retired military officers they appointed as Governors were often unfortunate choices. They received no training for their appointments and could not relate to reformist Labor governments. They were badly advised by those whom they consulted in the upper class Sydney circles who bore a particular enmity to Labor governments. Unable to overcome their prejudices towards Labor governments and unable to grasp the constitutional issues at hand, they resorted to the techniques used in solving personnel problems in their military careers — they simply discharged the offending soldier from the service with a dishonourable certificate. Game was not called to account for his dismissal of the NSW government. A new government was elected and Game’s actions were barred from analysis or discussion in the new parliament. The NSW public media did not investigate the history or the ramifications of the affair and Game returned to London to be promoted to the position of commissioner of London’s Metropolitan Police.

Endnotes

5. Memorandum, ‘Relations Between the Governor of New South Wales and the Premier’, 30 March 1931, DO 400/11156/21, NA.
6. Minute to Sir E. Harding, 15 April 1931, DO 400/11156/10, NA.
7. Game to King George V, 13 March 1931, frame 16, CY3207, Game Papers, MSS 2166/2, Mitchell Library, Sydney, hereafter ML.
8. Hore-Ruthven to Game 10 March 1931, ibid.
10. Memorandum, ‘Repeal of Constitution (Legislative Council) Amendment Act, 1929’, 6 November 1930, Papers Regarding Differences Between the Governor and Lang, CGS 4545 reels 2784-5, State Records Agency of NSW, hereafter SRANSW.
11. Game to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 11 November 1930, DO 35/11156/9, NA.
12. On 7 November Game agreed to appoint ‘as soon as we agree on numbers’: letter Game to Lang, NSWPP, vol. 1, 1930-32, p. 511.
13. Cable, Game to Dominions Office, 2 December 1930, DO 35/11156/10, NA.
14. Cable, Game to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 10 December 1930, DO 35/11156/10, NA.
15. Labor Daily, 18 December 1930.
19. Hore-Ruthven to Game, 13 February 1931, Game Papers, MSS 2166/1, ML.
22. Telegram, Game to Dominions Office, 28 March 1931, Game Papers, MSS 2166/2, ML.
23. Telegram, Dominions Office to Game, 30 March 1931, ibid.
24. Extract From Secret Dispatch from the Governor of New South Wales, 13 May 1931, DO 35/1098/3, NA.
25. The cabled material was sent via G.M. Crutchley, the Representative of the British Government in Australia for
dispatch to Game on 1 July 1931. There were indications that Lang had gained access to some of Game’s cabled
transmissions. Game Papers, vol. ML, MSS 2166/2, ML.
26. The Premiers joked about Lang being jailed his government’s prison for not making his withheld interest payments.
Their Conference ended on this jocular note. See report in Sydney Morning Herald, 11 June 1931.
27. Secret and coded message Game to Dominions Office, 26 June 1931, DO 35/11156/21, NA.
28. Letter, Game to Thomas, 18 August 1931, DO 35/11156/21, NA.
29. Lang to Game, 30 June 1931, copy of letter, DO 35/11156/21, NA.
30. Lang to Willis, 8 July 1931, Willis transmitted it to Dominions Office, DO 35/11156/44, NA.
31. ‘Political Situation in New South Wales’, Distributed From Office of Cabinet, 2nd July 1931, No. D.O. 277 (31),
DO 35/11156/29, NA.
32. Telegram, Lang to Willis, 13 July 1931, copy DO 35/11156/29, NA.
33. Note of Conversation Between Sir E. Harding and Sir P. Game, 8 July 1931, DO 35/11156/40, NA.
34. Report by Sir E. Harding, 13 August 1931, DO 35/11156/58, NA.
35. Decode of cable, Game to Thomas, 24 August 1931, DO 35/11156/63, NA.
36. Paraphrase of cable, Thomas to Game, 31 August 1931, DO 35/11156/63, NA.
37. Letter, Game to Thomas, 9 October 1931, DO 35/11156/11, NA.
38. Cable, Game to Thomas, 20 November, DO 35/11156/4, NA.
39. Game to Bavin, 30 March 1932, Game Papers Correspondence, MSS. 2166/2, folio 35, ML.
40. Cable, Game to Dominions Office, 19 January 1932, Do/35/412/11728/7, NA.
41. Sir Clive Wigram, Secretary to the King, to Dominions Office, 24 January 1932, DO35/412/11728/5; E.J. Harding
to Malcolm Macdonald, Assistant Secretary of State, 8 February 1932, DO35/412/11728/5, NA.
42. E.J. Harding to S. of S., 11 February 1932, underlining in original, DO35/412/11728/5, NA
43. Game to King George V, 18 May 1932, frame 125, CY 3207, Game Papers, MSS., 2166/2, ML.
44. Cable, Game to Dominions Office, 23 April 1932, DO35/303/9374/15, NA.
Arbitration, business strategy and labour management at Mort’s Dock

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The paper explores the development of labour management practices at Mort’s Dock and Engineering Company’s with respect to metal workers and examines the influence of arbitral regulation on these practices. The discussion reveals that arbitral regulation introduced constraints but it was the firm’s business strategy and the ability of workers to take advantage of their labour market power that had the greatest influence.

Arbitration has often been accorded a higher influence in shaping the employment relationship than other factors such as product and labour markets. For example, it has been argued that employers, until recently, adopted a passive approach to industrial relations and abrogated their responsibilities to employer associations who would argue their case before arbitral tribunals. Plowman is most commonly associated with this view. He argues that arbitration is largely responsible for employers adopting a reactive approach to policy making, and consequently playing a limited role in structuring the industrial relations system in Australia. The popularity of the labour process approach in the 1980s challenged this interpretation and highlighted the importance of management strategy in structuring the employment relationship, as did Wright’s important history of management in Australia. Wright drew on the work of Gospel to demonstrate the complex and contradictory strategies of management and their influence on the employment relationship. Within this tradition, product and labour markets are accorded greater importance in shaping labour management strategies. Gospel argues competitive or volatile product market will encourage management to externalise control and employment issues. In contrast, management are likely to internalise control and employment issues when this will prove a more efficient regulator than the market. In other words, technical and bureaucratic forms of control are more likely in large organisations which have greater control over their product markets and a more complex division of labour requiring more sophisticated employment policies.¹

In Australia, market orientated control methods dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century workplace, a result of the limited size of the domestic market and small scale of production. Various studies have shown arbitration actively encouraged the reorganisation of work through mechanisation and task fragmentation, however, until after World War II, the actual use of internal control methods was restricted to a small number of large organisations, such as the New South Wales Railways. The more short-term impact of arbitration on traditional labour management methods is less clear and more open to debate.²

The purpose of the paper is to explore and compare the influence of product and labour markets and arbitral regulation on labour management practices at Mort’s Dock and Engineering Company. Mort’s Dock began when a partnership of Captain T.S. Rowntree, T.S. Mort and J.S. Mitchell built a dry dock in Balmain in 1954. Over time the business grew into a large engineering and ship repair establishment with Mort taking full control and formally establishing the Mort’s Dock and Engineering Company in 1872.³ By the time arbitral regulation was introduced in New South Wales a stable pattern of labour management practices existed at Mort’s. The paper follows the development of labour management practices for Mort’s metal workers from the earliest years of the firm until the 1920s. The first section examines the industry environment and how this shaped Mort’s response to labour management issues. The method of labour hire and use of overtime distinguished Mort’s approach and ensured labour management was largely externalised. The subsequent sections explore the impact of arbitral regulation on these issues, first dealing with NSW arbitral and wages boards’ regulation and finally exploring the influence of the Commonwealth arbitral system. As the discussion below will show, the awards of the various Wages Boards and Arbitration Courts placed constraints on the management of labour but it was the firm’s business strategy and positioning within the product market, as well as the ability of workers to take advantage of their labour market power that had the greatest impact on the changing worker-management relations at Mort’s.
Labour management and workplace regulation prior to arbitration

Mort’s Dock quickly became one of the largest engineering establishments in the Australian colonies, with extensive facilities for shipbuilding and ship repair, as well as all other types of general engineering. Ship repair and marine engineering dominated the work of the Dock but facilities for general engineering provided Mort’s with flexibility when shipping was quiet. Throughout the period under review, Mort’s expanded its facilities by extending existing docks, building or acquiring new docks, and extending the engineering works. Mort’s extensive facilities for ship repair provided a clear advantage over its much smaller competitors. For the international shipping companies who were forced to overhaul ships at the end of a long journey, facilities rather than costs were main issue. Mort’s faced stiffer competition in marine and general engineering where overseas imports dominated. Mort’s main line of work, docking and associated ship repairs, placed the firm in an unstable business environment. The docks could be empty for several months of the year but when a ship came in the works became a hive of activity, operating around the clock. Much of the work was essential repair work that had to be done within a limited time to allow ships to sail to their timetable. This irregularity and instability in the market caused employment levels to fluctuate greatly from day to day.\(^4\)

The concentration of Mort’s business activity in ship repair raised specific labour problems for management. In contrast to many employers, the minimisation of per unit labour costs was not the main concern of the firm as Mort’s could pass on increased costs to shipowners. For Mort’s, the main labour issue concerned ensuring an adequate and adjustable supply of labour, engaging labour at short notice and dispensing with it when the job was complete. Strong union organisation of the workforce also put Mort’s in a vulnerable position as industrial action while a vessel was waiting for repairs could cause the firm serious financial loss. In this sense, securing an adequate supply of labour and avoiding industrial disputes were far more important than minimising per unit labour costs.

Top management at Mort’s operated at a distance from the general workforce. While the owner-manager was a common figure in engineering firms, Mort’s employed a specialist manager. Thomas Mort appointed the young James P. Franki to the position of general manager in 1869 and he held this position until his retirement in 1923. Although Franki lived in Balmain, and occupied a prominent position in the local community, he had little contact with the general run of workers that made up Mort’s workforce. Indeed, according to Wyner, upper management considered the mass of workers, both tradesmen and labourers, to be mere ‘hands’ rather than ‘employees’. For these workers, contact with management came through the works superintendent and the foremen, who handled the bulk of day to day employment relations issues such as hiring, allocating work and discipline. The firm reserved the title ‘employee’ for the foremen and leading hands who occupied a special place at the firm.\(^5\)

More than half of Mort’s workforce comprised skilled metal trades’ workers, predominantly boilermakers and fitters, and their assistants. Mort’s workers were active union members, with a long history of spearheading industrial campaigns. The achievement of the eight hour day in the metal trades owed much to workers at Mort’s. Both the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and the Federated Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders (FSB&IS) had good membership at Mort’s, including union officials of the FSB&IS. The assistants also had a long history of militant organisation beginning with the Balmain Labourer’s Union before it split into the separate Ship Painters and Dockers and the Amalgamated Ironworkers’ Assistants Union at the instigation of Mort’s workers.\(^6\)

Unable to avoid unions, management embraced them. The firm’s need to minimise disputation called for a stable and consistent approach to wage determination. Unions provided an acceptable channel for workplace conflict, with the firm demonstrating a distinct preference for dealing with workers collectively, and if possible, external to the workplace. Thomas Mort took a leading role in forming the Iron Trades Employers Association (ITEA) and Franki, maintained a prominent role in the affairs of the association and occupied the position of president for several years. In keeping with this, wages and working conditions at Mort’s conformed to industry wide standards. Management kept abreast of the standard rates paid in other large engineering establishments, exchanging information regarding the level of wages paid. In some cases Mort’s conditions were better than the industry standard, and the various unions appear to have had few problems maintaining union conditions at the works.\(^7\)

While the majority of the workforce suffered intermittent employment, a small number of workers obtained regular, ongoing employment. These permanent workers, known as ‘royals’ by the other
workers, acted as leading hands and remained at work even during slow periods. The core workforce obtained privileges unavailable to the rest of the workforce, such as first preference for overtime. In the 1870s, Mort sold shares in the company to foremen and leading hands in order to encourage the formation of a core workforce of loyal and committed employees. The strategy was relatively successful, with a number of foremen and leading hands taking up the offer. The majority of the workforce experienced irregular and unstable patterns of employment. The short nature of most ship repair jobs, some lasting a few weeks but many only a day or two, meant Mort’s hired and dismissed labour on a daily basis. The practice at Mort’s was to hire men for a particular job and terminate their employment at the end of the job. The men would then have to reapply for work again. As such, even a regular supply of work at the Dock did not guarantee workers constant employment.

It was the method of engagement which most distinguished Mort’s and other repair shops from inland metal trades employees. The selection of men followed the traditional maritime practice of a line-up. Workers lined up in a row in the morning and the Assistant Superintendent, or a foreman, selected the men needed for the new jobs that had come in, a practice the boilermakers termed ‘toeing the line’. A separate line existed for each trade, including a separate line for tradesmen’s assistants. Only ‘royals’ avoided ‘toeing the line’. First preference was given to those men who followed Mort’s regularly, and made themselves available throughout the day. In this way Mort’s encouraged loyalty to the firm and ensured a regular supply of labour.

Overtime compensated workers for the irregular nature of work. With ships sailing to timetables, and limits to the number of vessels that could be docked at one time, marine repairs relied heavily on overtime work, especially by fitters and boilermakers. Overtime added considerably to workers’ earnings, though not all workers made high wages. Unions claimed the firm distributed overtime unevenly and a small number of workers, most commonly the ‘royals’, received preference. These men could work up to 60 or 70 hours per week while others were turned away in the morning line-up. Union action to force Mort’s to distribute work more evenly proved ineffective with the firm punishing workers who refused overtime by refusing to rehire them. Overtime was a reward to workers to encourage them to follow Mort’s regularly. It lured workers to the dock, compensating for intermittent employment and ensured a large pool of labour remained unemployed and hungry for work.

Prior to the introduction of arbitral regulation Mort’s adopted a labour management strategy similar to other employers. This strategy relied on the labour market to control and discipline workers and externalised industrial relations issues. While the method of hiring and use of overtime was specific to waterfront employers, the main thrust of the strategy was the same. The reliance on a continuous and ready supply of skilled workers was a significant weakness in the strategy, and as the labour market for skilled metal workers improved this weakness became more apparent.

Labour shortages and the breakdown of management strategy

The introduction of arbitral regulation in the NSW metal trades coincided with a surge in economic activity. Industrial tribunals, labour shortages and workforce pressure combined to reduce management control over the distribution of overtime at Mort’s and forced management to spread employment among a wider workforce. Improved economic conditions highlighted Mort’s vulnerability to workplace action as workers took advantage of their strong labour market position to improve wages. In contrast, the ironworkers’ assistants continued as before, and, in some cases, became worse off under the award system, with waterfront workers particularly hard hit. Any gains achieved by assistants were the result of combined action with skilled workers, not arbitration.

The firm had limited options for dealing with the shortage of labour. Attempts to import tradesmen faced union opposition and in any event were prevented when World War I ended immigration to Australia. While the NSW Arbitration Court and the various wages boards showed a favourable attitude to the reorganisation of work to accommodate new technology and simplified work processes, the jobbing and repair nature of ship repair prevented this at Mort’s. For example, the 1908 Engineers’ Award allowed an employee to work more than one machine but at Mort’s there was only one automatic machine. Similarly, Mort’s could not take advantage of a clause enabling piecework. Although Franki had pushed for piecework for years, unions did not report any attempt to introduce piecework at the firm.
Even during the Commonwealth government’s shipbuilding scheme which pushed for dilution and piecework, Mort’s continued to accept craft standards while government-run shipyards and other private shipyards carried out contracts under the scheme. Afraid of antagonising the unions while labour shortages persisted, the most common and most effective means by which Mort’s and other employers coped with labour shortages was through overtime and the employment of more apprentices. Systematic overtime became a regular feature of employment among Mort’s workforce. Unions continued to complain about the unequal distribution of work and memories of depression and unemployment stimulated action designed to spread employment opportunities more broadly. While liberal apprenticeship clauses enabled Mort’s to take on a greater number of apprentices, particularly under the Engineers’ Award, award restrictions placed limits on the use of overtime by the firm. The 1908 Engineers’ Award limited engineers to 24 hours overtime per week, with the 1911 Engineers’ Award reducing this to 20 hours per week. When the Engineers’ Wages Board further tightened overtime restrictions in 1915, reducing the limitation from 20 hours per week to 24 hours per fortnight, this exacerbated Mort’s labour problem. Led by Mort’s, the ITEA successfully appealed this decision in respect to marine engineering. Judge Edmunds concluded that the evidence on the unfair distribution of overtime was inconclusive and the limitation was causing serious delays to ships which increased costs and made Sydney less attractive as a site for marine repairs. The result was the reversion to a limit of 20 hours overtime per week for maritime shops, as opposed to 24 hours per fortnight in general engineering. The Boilermakers’ Award did not restrict overtime until 1915. In the absence of arbitral support, Mort’s boilermakers attempted to use their labour market strength to gain more control over hiring, and sought to emulate a successful overtime ban by the Ship Painters and Dockers Union which had forced Mort’s to employ casuals rather than resort to overtime. On several occasions, boilermakers at Mort’s sought to collectively impose a ban on overtime on Friday night. Initially, management responded by dismissing the men concerned. Moreover, the FSB&IS refused to endorse the action of Mort’s workers, claiming that they could individually refuse to work on Friday nights but not collectively. Despite the Society’s position on the matter, it became standard practice at Mort’s for overtime to be worked Monday to Thursday. In a further effort to limit overtime at Mort’s, Falkingham, the Vice President of the FSB&IS and a casual at Mort’s, organised for the men to ‘toe the line’ three times a day. Through this method the Society sought to ensure a regular supply of labour was always available, eliminating the need to work overtime. This action also eliminated the need for workers to hang around the works during the day waiting for work, as was the practice. Even with award-imposed restrictions, the unions had to police overtime and ensure employers adhered to the law and both the ASE and the FSB&IS had problems with Mort’s. In both cases, union officials had to keep a keen eye on members at Mort’s to ensure that they did not exceed their overtime limit. In 1914 a large number of ASE members at Mort’s flouted the 20 hour overtime limit, claiming they thought the award exempted transport work but close attention by the ASE Organiser put a stop to the excessive overtime. Labour shortages, and restrictions on working overtime forced Mort’s to employ a wider range of workers. By 1916, over half the fitters employed by Mort’s were constant hands. While not permanent, these men assumed the status of ‘first preference’ men, that is, they formed a separate line from which management made the first selections. These constant workers averaged ten months employment a year, while the casual workers averaged between six to ten days a fortnight. While the ASE and the FSB&IS continued to complain about the unequal distribution of overtime and the victimisation of members who refused to work overtime, the curtailing of systematic overtime undermined management’s main labour control strategy, at least with regard to tradesmen. In contrast to the skilled workers, the position of ironworker assistants did not improve during the War. While there was strong demand for craftsmen, unemployment continued to exist amongst unskilled metal workers. Consequently, ironworker assistants lacked the ability to influence their working conditions and arbitral and wages board decisions failed to compensate for this lack of bargaining power, with employers, including Mort’s, often ignoring award conditions. The position of the assistants did not improve until they took direct action, causing Mort’s maximum discomfort when they left work while boats were in dock undergoing repairs. The firm was forced to halt operations when allied trades ceased
work in support of the assistants. Continuing to support external regulation and loyal to ITEA policy, the firm refused to negotiate, insisting the matter go before the New South Wales Arbitration Court. The strike lasted three weeks, before the assistants returned to work on the understanding employers would meet the union in conference. As a consequence the ironworker assistants obtained a separate wages board and a new award followed in 1915.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite this success, ironworker assistants at Mort’s were not happy with the efforts of their union, the recently constituted Federated Ironworkers’ Association (FIA). During 1915 and 1916, the Sydney Branch of the FIA lost many of its members in Balmain to the Ship Painters and Dockers Union. In response, the FIA established a separate branch at Balmain. While there is no clear evidence as to what caused this discontent, it is likely to have been prompted, in part, by features of the 1915 Ironworkers’ Assistants’ Award. Under the award, assistants received allowances for dirty work and working in confined spaces only if the tradesman being assisted was entitled to the same allowance. This issue particularly affected waterfront workers who were prone to working in dirty conditions onboard vessels while the tradesman worked in the open air. For example, when riveting on the ship’s bottom, the boilermaker worked in the open air while the assistant worked in the ship’s ballast tanks. The issue prompted much dissatisfaction with assistants at Mort’s who refused to hold rivets in confined spaces unless the firm paid the confined spaces allowance. However, the FIA refused to support the men and an official of the Balmain Branch convinced them to continue to work under the award. It was not until after the War, when the ironworkers’ assistants joined industrial action led by skilled workers, that their conditions improved.\textsuperscript{18}

The combination of boom conditions and a shortage of skilled labour put Mort’s in a vulnerable position, a situation its workers zealously exploited to cause considerable disruption to Mort’s business activity. With award wages stagnating during the War, unions sought wage increases outside of arbitration. Efforts by metal unions to obtain a general wage increase moved to the workplace after the ITEA refused to negotiate with the unions. Towards the end of the War the ASE and the FSB&IS imposed an embargo on overtime and night shift in the Sydney district until employers conceded a wage increase. Despite misgivings, Franki held the ITEA line and refused to negotiate with the unions, insisting the matter be dealt with by the ITEA and the NSW Arbitration Court.\textsuperscript{19} The ITEA strategy centred on forcing unions to the Arbitration Court, correctly surmising that the Court would constrain wage increases. The Court fined both the ASE and FSB&IS for participating in an illegal strike. Despite protestations from both unions that the action at Mort’s was locally based and initiated, the Court, in both disputes, found the action was part of a general wage campaign that had the full support of officials of both unions.\textsuperscript{20}

The intervention of the Court served only to provoke further action by the unions. By the end of the War union opposition to the New South Wales Arbitration Court was running high among unions. The erosion of real wages during the War and the actions of the Court in the aftermath of the 1917 General Strike when it deregistered numerous unions had alienated the union movement and prompted several unions to question past tactics that had relied heavily on arbitration. Also, with the ASE deregistered at the time, it had little alternative to direct action. The penalties imposed by the Arbitration Court did not lead to a cessation of the overtime embargo and the bans continued into 1919. While the Sydney District Committee of the Engineers’ Society organised the embargo, as time passed the men at Mort’s became more persistent. Although they agreed to leave the matter in the hands of the District Committee, they insisted that the Committee approach Franki again. Eventually, the action of the workers forced employers to concede a wage increase.\textsuperscript{21}

The ITEA’s handling of the wages dispute highlighted the conflicting interests of inland engineering employers and marine engineering shops and led to Mort’s resignation from the ITEA. In its decision to withstand the overtime embargo the ITEA caused Mort’s considerable inconvenience and financial expense, hampering operations and causing ships to be delayed in the docks. From the beginning of the dispute, Franki advocated acceding to the wage claim of the engineers and boilermakers. Nevertheless, he abided by the decision of the ITEA. The unsatisfactory outcome led Franki to sever Mort’s long association with the ITEA and turn to the NSW Employers Federation for industrial support.\textsuperscript{22}

With inflation continuing to erode wage gains, and the success of the unions’ tactics in 1919, the unions imposed further overtime bans in early 1920. The ASE led the way, with an overtime ban operating in all engineering shops in the Sydney district. Other metal trades unions soon followed suit.
Free from the constraints of the ITEA, Mort’s entered into negotiations. Under pressure from shipping companies, Mort’s offered an 8s.6d. per week increase to tradesmen, and 6s. to the ironworkers’ assistants, in return for unions giving an undertaking to remove all restrictions on overtime. Initially, ASE members at Mort’s rejected the offer and demanded more money but were overridden by the ASE Sydney District Committee. All metal trades unions eventually accepted the offer, and entered into written agreements. These over award payments spread to metal workers in other waterfront shops, and become known as the ‘waterfront loading’.

Overall, the second decade of the twentieth century had represented a period of change in labour management at Mort’s. The decade opened with Mort’s control over hiring and the allocation of overtime providing management with powerful weapons to control and discipline the workforce. By 1920, economic conditions had eroded management’s position of authority, a situation taken full advantage of by Mort’s skilled workers. Awards had a limited impact on this development. Even where provisions were favourable, such as the restriction on overtime, strong workplace action by workers was required to uphold the award. Moreover, though the NSW Arbitration Court punished unions for industrial action, this failed to curb independent action by workers. Despite the gains made by the workforce during the decade, depressed economic conditions and a change in business strategy by Mort’s encouraged further changes during the 1920s.

Changing employment practices and a new business strategy

Two important changes occurred in the 1920s which affected workplace industrial relations at Mort’s. First, Mort’s business strategy changed, with general engineering becoming far more important than had been the case in earlier periods. This had implications for the structure of employment and the firm’s attitude to industrial relations, with labour costs becoming a more important consideration. Second, arbitral regulation shifted from the New South Wales system to the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, introducing a major innovation – weekly and daily hiring.

The distinction, in the 1921 Engineers Award, between two methods of engaging labour, weekly hiring and daily hiring, had a major impact on employment relations at Mort’s. Although this distinction paralleled the practice at Mort’s to employ constant and casual hands, the new award categories introduced new payment structures depending on the type of employment. Weekly hiring guaranteed workers a full week’s work or payment in lieu and provided payment for gazetted public holidays and absences due to sickness. While Higgins anticipated weekly hiring becoming the norm, he provided casual employment for situations where weekly employment was not practical. The award specifically acknowledged the particular situation of Mort’s Dock, and other waterfront firms, and made provision for casual employment at one-sixth of the weekly wage plus ten per cent to compensate for the absence of holiday and sick pay. The introduction of daily hiring was itself an innovation. Previously, employers engaged labour by the hour and only paid for the time worked. The award’s daily hiring provision required Mort’s to pay workers for a full day, regardless of their starting time. This ended the practice of ASE men waiting around the Dock while a ship came in without being paid.

The Court extended the weekly hiring provision in the ASE award to the Australasian Society of Engineers and the Blacksmiths’ Society in 1922. However, when the boilermakers and moulders came before the Court in 1924 Justice Quick refused to grant weekly or daily hiring, instead adopting a wage loading, compensating for holidays and absence through sickness, paid to all workers irrespective of their security of employment. The following year, the FIA registered a consent award with the Court which provided for a wage loading in lieu of weekly hiring despite the union’s attempts to gain weekly hiring from the New South Wales Arbitration Court in 1922. It was not until the Metal Trades Award in 1930 that the Court extended weekly hiring to these other branches of the metal trades.

Alongside these regulatory changes, Mort’s changed business strategy, shifting the emphasis from ship repair to general engineering. While ship repair remained an important and significant part of the firm’s business, from the early 1920s management became more focused on obtaining general engineering contracts. The substantial protection introduced by the Greene Tariff for general metal working and machinery provided an incentive for the firm to improve this side of the business. More importantly,
changes in shipping, such as larger vessels and improved design, reduced the demand for ship repair while increased competition from the government dockyards, which were being leased to private operators, also influenced the change in direction. Mort’s redirection gained a further boost when Franki retired as Managing Director in 1923, after 54 years at the helm. The new manager, Thomas Silk, a marine engineer, had extensive experience in the shipbuilding industry in Great Britain. Against this background, Mort’s works, which had experienced spasmodic investment in plant and equipment, would have looked small and outdated. Despite his background in marine engineering, Silk continued to redirect Mort’s business to general engineering. He also set about updating the plant and machinery, improving Mort’s competitive position.26

The economic downturn and Mort’s changing business strategies produced a new, more intransigent managerial style. General engineering established a new set of priorities at the firm. While repair work continued, and industrial disputation remained a major concern, labour costs also became more relevant and managerial style changed accordingly. Mort’s treatment of workers hardened during the 1920s. The firm stopped paying the waterfront loading to metal workers, raising the ire of the tradesmen, particularly the boilermakers, and unions also began reporting more breaches of awards. While in the proceeding decade the Engineers’ Society had seen Mort’s as a good employer, during the 1920s the union repeatedly dealt with complaints by Mort’s workers and breaches of the award. In several cases Mort’s management responded slowly to the union’s complaints, forcing the union to threaten action to enforce a change.27

Offsetting these changes was the increased incidence of permanent employment at Mort’s. As the amount of work done in the workshops increased, so did the number of permanent workers. At the time of the hearing of the Engineers’ Case in 1921, Mort’s employed 25 fitters in the workshop and 217 fitters on outside work. During the 1924 Engineers’ Case the number employed in the workshop exceeded the number employed outside and from the mid-1920s until the onset of the Depression in 1928, the number of constant engineers employed at Mort’s averaged 120. Other trades experienced a similar increase in constant employment. At the time of the Boilermaker’s Case in 1924, Mort’s employed 80 boilermakers, of whom only around 20 were casual. Despite this, ship repair continued to be performed by casual workers and size of the workforce increased dramatically if a ship came in for repair.28

Upper management rather than shopfloor management pushed for the conversion of constantly employed men to weekly hiring. Almost a year after the introduction of the award the central office drew the attention of the Works Superintendent, Wilkinson, to the position of ten fitters employed as casuals but who had been employed constantly since the September 1921, and inquired if these men should be put on weekly hiring. Evidence before the Court in 1924 suggested that Mort’s continued to employ a number of workers who received fairly constant work on a casual basis. While head office focused on financial matters, shopfloor management focused on maintaining control and clung to their traditional externally oriented strategies. In the ship repair side of the business the majority of those employed on repair work continued to be casual and continued to ‘toe the line’. The daily hiring provision in the Engineers’ award did improve the position of engineers who ‘toed the line’ only once a day, unlike the boilermakers and ironworkers’ assistants. When daily hiring was restored in the 1927 Interim Engineers’ Award, Mort’s workers strongly and successfully resisted management’s attempt to reintroduce hourly hiring.29

Conclusion

Mort’s Dock developed a labour management strategy compatible with the volatile market within which it operated. Mort’s used hiring and overtime to ensure market mechanisms operated to discipline metal workers and maintain control. Mort’s preference for dealing with trade unions though an employer association predated arbitration and was part of a broader strategy to externalise labour management to the market. In this respect, Mort’s labour management strategy was similar to that of many other Australian manufacturing firms in the late nineteenth century. The introduction of award regulation in 1908 challenged the firm’s traditional mode of control, but product and labour markets were more important in explaining the changes in labour management strategy.
Labour market conditions were central in limiting the firm’s control and necessary to enforce award conditions. Encouraged by the nature of the ship repair product market and the added industrial strength the severe shortage of skilled labour provided, Mort’s skilled workforce took a leading role in workplace campaigns organised by their unions to secure general wage increases throughout the engineering and allied industries. In this respect, Mort’s commitment to the external determination of wages and employment conditions through the ITEA proved problematic and led to a reconsideration of this approach to the management of industrial relations.

Arbitral regulation further challenged Mort’s method of employment through the introduction of weekly hiring in the 1921 Engineers’ Award. However, here too other factors appear equally as important in raising the number of permanent workers employed by the firm, particularly the shift in product market conditions as Mort’s management redirected the firm’s business strategy towards general engineering rather than ship repair. The loading for casuals did not deter the firm from continuing its traditional labour management strategy with respect to men employed on ship repair work. Thus, while award regulation of labour hiring and overtime curtailed managerial freedom, product and labour market conditions appear more influential in changing labour management practices.

Endnotes

* This paper is based on a chapter from my PhD and I would like to acknowledge the help and advice provided by my two supervisors, Peter Sheldon and Bradley Bowden.


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The end of the line: an examination of the 1990 Victorian tram dispute

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This paper is an examination of the 1990 Melbourne tram dispute. A fiscal crisis generated by colossal financial failures led the Cain Labor government in Victoria to attempt to rationalise the workforce of Melbourne’s tramways. Such a move followed the dictates of the Federal Labor government’s Accords which enforced union amalgamations. The attempt to introduce a new ticketing system threatened the jobs of the trams’ conductors. The tramway union’s refusal to comply with the new ticketing led to a lockout and the struggle to save the conductors’ jobs. Depot occupations and a tram blockade ensued. Throughout the dispute, the government refused to negotiate with the union. The dispute left the tramways’ union divided and defeated. While conductors’ jobs were eventually eliminated, the government remained in debt.

The 1990 Victorian tram dispute represents a significant episode in Australian labour history. The tenuous position of small unions during the period of the Hawke Labor government’s Accords was encapsulated in Victoria’s tram dispute. Although there is a growing body of literature on the Accords’ effects on union membership, amalgamations and mergers, the eventual disappearance of the Victorian tramways’ union was the direct result of a government lock-out. Nevertheless, Michael Rafferty’s argument that union amalgamations locked the labour movement into support of both the state, and the profitability of capital has proven accurate. In alliance with the federal agenda to reduce the number of Australian unions, Victoria’s Cain Labor government embarked on a programme of reform by targeting one of the state’s smallest unions, that which represented the ‘trammies’.

A fiscal crisis confronted the Cain government by the end of the 1980s. Elected in 1982, Cain’s neo-Keynesian economic policies had substantially increased the state’s budget deficit. The Cain government was placed under increasing pressure following the collapse of two key financial institutions during the last years of that decade. The Victorian Economic Development Corporation (VEDC) had been established to encourage economic growth in Victoria, but was declared insolvent in 1988. Many of the VEDC’s loans had been granted to fraudulent or high-risk companies that were unable to service the debt. The collapse of the VEDC represented an estimated $112 million loss for the Victorian government. Tricontinental, the merchant subsidiary of the Victorian State bank, was deemed insolvent in May 1989. Tricontinental had approved large loans that were often unsecured, or secured through high-risk investments. Tricontinental’s insolvency added a further $1.7 billion to the Victorian government’s debt. After five years of Cain’s leadership, an enormous public sector debt had accumulated. The government’s worker’s compensation initiative, Workcare had unfunded liabilities of at least $5 billion, and the State superannuation bill had reached $4 billion.

Following its 1982 election victory, the Cain government had resolved to reform the Victorian public service. The 1980 Public Bodies Review Committee concluded that there existed a largely inefficient public service where innumerable departments remained virtually unaccountable to public scrutiny. The government’s efforts to reform the public service were largely focused upon the State’s transport system.

Through the 1983 Transport Act, the Cain government repealed more than 100 Acts of parliament and replaced the previous ten transport authorities, including the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, with four new organisations: the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MET), State Transport Authority (STA), the Road Construction Authority (RCA), and the Road Traffic Authority (RTA). In enacting these changes, the government emphasised the need for efficiency in the operations of the public transport system, and focused on cost reduction. To this end, these four new organisations were each given a corporate structure, a set budget, and were made accountable to the Minister for Transport through the Victorian Transport Directorate. Ironically, the ‘reform’ measures adopted by the government increased managerial numbers within the public transport sector while decreasing the workforce required for the State transport system to function. The number of blue-collar workers had declined from 27,000 in 1985 to 20,000 by 1991.
Moreover, the executives and board members recruited to the managerial ranks of the MET were employed for their experience in private enterprise, rather than knowledge of the public transport system.\textsuperscript{15}

The Cain government’s paradoxical public transport policies during the 1980s contributed substantially to the State’s fiscal crisis. While ostensibly attempting to reduce costs within the public transport sector, the government began recruiting greater numbers of employees at the managerial level, and devoted $3 million in its first term to the repainting of Victoria’s trams.\textsuperscript{16} Within Premier Cain’s initial years in office, Melbourne’s older W-Class trams were refitted and upgraded, but by 1989, only 30 per cent of these trams were still in operation.\textsuperscript{17} Although public transport had traditionally been an unprofitable Victorian government service, under the Cain government’s management, the public transport deficit achieved a record high of $1 billion.\textsuperscript{18}

In 1983, a voluntary redundancy scheme was initiated to decrease the size of Victoria’s public transport workforce. While intended to reduce the government’s wages bill, the redundancy programme created further financial problems for the State. Public transport workers over the age of 50 were offered generous retirement provisions.\textsuperscript{19} The scheme led to the loss of senior train drivers and specialised operating staff, which then needed to be replaced.\textsuperscript{20} Within four months, new employees were recruited to fill these vacancies, and a large number of those workers who had accepted redundancy packages returned in temporary, permanent, and even consultancy capacities.\textsuperscript{21} The voluntary redundancy programme had cost the government $71.3 million, and resulted in the transport ministry exceeding its budget by $19 million in 1984.\textsuperscript{22}

With the Victorian State’s debt increasing during Cain’s reign, the government adopted a neo-liberal policy, ‘rationalising’ State assets during the late 1980s. Schools, hospitals, land and other public assets were sold during 1989 and 1990. In 1989, trams were sold to Japanese, German and Dutch companies, and then leased back by the State’s Metropolitan Transit Authority (MET). The leasing of the now foreign-owned trams cost the Victorian State government an estimated $1.3 billion.\textsuperscript{23}

As the Cain government approached the end of its second term, the State’s mounting debt crisis appeared irreversible and the government’s popularity waned. During December 1989, Premier Cain’s approval rating dropped by 13 per cent.\textsuperscript{24} The government needed to reduce the deficit and, at the same time, regain the confidence of the Victorian population. Decreasing the funding for health and education would have been an unpopular move, so a more benign target was selected within the public transport sector. In motorcar-dependent Victoria, the service provided by the tramways system was primarily limited to inner-city Melbourne. With a small patronage and large deficit, the tramways service was potentially the most vulnerable component of the State’s public transport system.

The Cain government’s neo-liberal plan for the public transport system was revealed in August 1989. A scratch ticketing system was to be introduced on Victoria’s trams, buses and trains at the expense of 500 tram conductors’ jobs. Conductors on the Z Class trams were to be eliminated, with 300 conductors retained on W Class trams, and a further 300 to be re-deployed as roving conductors.\textsuperscript{25} Trams would be converted to ‘driver-only’ mode by the installation of doors, isolating the driver from passengers. Security cameras and the ticketing system would replace conductors in order for the government to save an anticipated $24 million per year.\textsuperscript{26} In selling the scratch tickets through chemists, news-agencies, Seven Eleven stores, and milkbars as well as Metropolitan Transit Authority shops, the government could avoid the additional costs that would have been incurred through selling tickets to commuters solely through State-owned outlets.\textsuperscript{27}

The $24 million revenue from this ‘rationalisation’ would be insufficient to contribute to a significant reduction in the Victorian State’s debt. Nevertheless, the reforms were valuable politically as an election loomed and the Cain government needed to create the perception that it was in control of the State’s economy. The changes to the public transport system were to come into effect from 1 January 1990.

Conductors were an easy target for government expenditure cuts: they were members of a small union, with little political clout, and a high natural attrition rate. The workers could be replaced by scratch tickets, which ‘required little capital and organisation’.\textsuperscript{28} Many of the unskilled labourers employed as conductors were also recent immigrants. Eighty-five per cent of Victoria’s conductors were from non-English speaking backgrounds, and could not easily find employment elsewhere.\textsuperscript{29}
The tramways union, the Australian Motor Omnibus and Tramway Employee Association (ATMOEA), had not been informed of the cuts to conductors’ jobs prior to the announcement of the reforms during the government’s unveiling of the budget in August 1989.\(^\text{30}\) As New Year’s Day 1990 approached, the ATMOEA attempted to prevent the impending changes being enforced through sporadic industrial action. One hundred tram drivers, conductors and maintenance workers who had disrupted the implementation of the new ticketing system by the MET were sacked on 2 November 1989.\(^\text{31}\) Twelve days later, the union responded to the dismissal of these workers by refusing to collect fares.\(^\text{32}\) Trams were abandoned in Melbourne’s CBD, causing traffic congestion, but the workers were not reinstated, nor was the government willing to revise its policy.\(^\text{33}\)

The transition to the ticket system began from December 1989, despite opposition from disability organisations, women’s groups and the Public Transport Users Association, who questioned the safety and convenience of the new scheme. The attempts by the ATMOEA to block the introduction of the ticket system were supported by other Victorian unions, who banned the printing and transport of scratch tickets. Members of the ATMOEA and Australian Railways Union (ARU) also picketed the South Clayton warehouse that distributed the scratch tickets during December. The scratch tickets then had to be printed in South Australia and, due to the warehouse picket, the tickets were often distributed from executives’ car boots.\(^\text{34}\) Despite the actions of the public transport employees, the distribution of the Cain government’s scratch tickets continued. Unions placed bans on the conversion of trams for ‘driver-only’ operation, and private contractors had to be hired to do the work.\(^\text{35}\)

The tram workers were initially supported in their industrial action by public bus and train employees. The public transport unions held a mass stop work meeting in the City Square from 10am to 2pm on 4 December 1989. Following the meeting, 1,000 public train, tram and bus employees marched to the office of Jim Kennan, the Victorian Minister for Transport, where security guards prevented the workers entering the building.\(^\text{36}\) A picket by 500 ARU and Amalgamated Metal Union members at the Jolimont railway yard prevented a number of train lines from operating on 6 December 1989.\(^\text{37}\) Public bus employees maintained support for the tram workers with a 24-hour public bus and tram strike occurring on 13 December 1989, and another bus and tram strike disrupting services the following evening.\(^\text{38}\)

The Municipal Officers Association also challenged the Cain government’s scheme during December by refusing to check scratch tickets or process the paperwork required for the dismissal of conductors.\(^\text{39}\)

Although these other Victorian unions resisted the ticketing system intermittently, industrial action was primarily limited to the tram services in the final month of 1989. The ATMOEA organised stop work meetings at depots on 11, 12 and 13 December, suspending services throughout Melbourne and leaving trams stationary.\(^\text{40}\) The ATMOEA undertook a programme of civil disobedience, as conductors refused to check scratch tickets during December and urged commuters to purchase tickets from conductors and boycott the new system.\(^\text{41}\) Conductors no longer accepted Victorian parliamentarians’ gold passes, which had entitled the politicians to free travel on public transport.\(^\text{42}\)

To avoid alienating commuters, tram workers endeavoured to maintain most peak weekday services in December 1989. ATMOEA members resolved to ban tram services into the centre of Melbourne from 10am to 4pm on weekdays, while continuing services at the peak times during the morning and afternoon.\(^\text{43}\) Fare free days won the tram workers support from commuters, the majority of whom apparently wanted to retain conductors on tram services.\(^\text{44}\) However, the Victorian Employees Association, the Retail Employers Association and the Victorian Chamber of Commerce condemned the tram workers, denouncing the disruption to transport services during the retail industry’s key trading period prior to Christmas. Stores such as Myer, David Jones, Katies and Prouds claimed that they had experienced considerable losses and a reduction in pre-Christmas sales because of the tram workers’ industrial action.\(^\text{45}\) The Cain government refused the demand from the Retail Employers Federation for compensation, and was unmoved by the ATMOEA’s ongoing defiance of the ticketing system.

The government continued to exert pressure on tram workers, demanding that employees sign contracts before they could be issued with their uniforms. Without their uniforms, conductors were not permitted to work and would not be paid.\(^\text{46}\) The ATMOEA asserted that it was discriminatory for conductors, who were overwhelmingly from non-English speaking backgrounds, to be required to sign contracts they may have difficulty reading.\(^\text{47}\)
The tram drivers and conductors refused to sign the contracts, and instead implemented a short-lived form of workers’ control. The ATMOEA members drew up their own timetable and, intensifying their resistance, operated the trams for free on New Year’s Day 1990. The trams were driven without State approval, and the Cain government declared that the union had ‘stolen’ the trams. In late December 1989, an ATMOEA representative had warned that the union would run the trams themselves during the following month. After the fare free day on 1 January 1990, the government sought legal advice with regard to disconnecting the power to the tramlines.

Anticipating the government’s actions, drivers drove 250 trams into the centre of Melbourne early on the morning of 2 January 1990, and the government disabled the tramlines’ electricity supply later that day. The trams were parked two abreast between Elizabeth and Flinders Street Stations, while dozens more were parked along the central city tram routes. Picket lines were established beside trams to prevent the government towing them away. Public buses were carefully positioned to ensure that the trams could not be moved. Tramways workers also occupied the depots to ensure that the government could not execute the lock-outs that had been threatened. The workers manned the depots and the trams 24-hours per day for the duration of the strike. Makeshift kitchens were established in depots, where workers and their families shared meals. Public support for the tram drivers and conductors was demonstrated through donations of food and money to the workers.

The unity of the Australian Motor Omnibus and Tramway Employee Association lasted a mere four days. Both public bus and tram employees were represented by the ATMOEA, but the Cain government’s reforms to public transport primarily affected tram workers alone. By the 4 January 1990, the ATMOEA was already divided, with bus drivers from the Doncaster and Elwood depots voting in favour of ending the strike. Six hundred bus drivers and 400 tram maintenance workers had abandoned the strike and returned to work by 5 January 1990. Tram drivers and conductors were left to continue their industrial action.

A split became evident between some rank-and-file members and the executive of the ATMOEA. The Doncaster bus depot’s union delegate declared that their buses would operate, but would avoid the city to ensure the bus drivers’ safety from the wrath of picketers. With many public bus employees determined to return to work, the ATMOEA executive was forced to revoke its earlier directive and endorse the restoration of government bus services. To salvage the impression of solidarity among the union members, it was claimed that bus drivers were returning to work to support the tram workers financially. However, public bus workers appeared resolute on returning to work with or without union approval.

The ATMOEA and the ARU organised a strike on 15 January 1990 that shut down Melbourne’s public transport for the day. Despite the ATMOEA’s ability to attract support from the ARU, the tram workers’ industrial action was increasingly untenable. Further divisions had emerged within the ATMOEA by the end of January, with militant members establishing unauthorised pickets at the head office of the MET, and the North Fitzroy bus depot. Tram workers from the Brunswick depot were also involved in a picket at the Jolimont rail yard on 31 January 1990 that had not received the approval of the ATMOEA executive. The frustration of the tram employees had intensified as the dispute persisted, with workers receiving no wages during the strike.

The Victorian government maintained its refusal to reconsider its reforms to the public transport system. Premier Cain instead threatened to remove all conductors and replace them with scratch ticket vending machines. He warned that the government would employ non-unionised labour on the State’s tramways, and that employment on the trams would be on a casual basis, eliminating the benefits received by permanent employees. While the Premier’s threats were not fulfilled, an agreement was reached between the State, the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), and the tram union on 2 February 1990.

The ATMOEA capitulated, accepting the scratch ticketing system and ‘driver-only’ trams. The IRC determined that no conductors would be sacked, as their numbers would decline through natural attrition. Four hundred conductors would be retained on W Class trams, and 300 would be redeployed and promoted. Tram drivers were to be paid at the same level as public bus drivers, receiving a 9.7 per cent pay increase that was equivalent to an extra $35 per week. ‘Driver-only’ trams would begin operating immediately from the Camberwell, Essendon and Kew depots, and would be introduced after two weeks at all of Victoria’s tram depots.
The response to the resolution from the members of the ATMOEA at the union’s mass meeting on 2 February 1990 was disparate. The meeting was described as violent and emotional. Many members were relieved that the dispute had ceased, believing that such an agreement was inevitable. Some workers responded to the decision by throwing food and water at the union’s senior officials. Thirty workers from the militant Brunswick depot advanced on the ATMOEA’s executives, shouting that they had been sold out, before the executives were ushered from the meeting. One worker recalled that union officials had speculated during the meeting about being fined and embroiled in legal action, and that the agreement with the government had been ‘sold’ to the union membership through fear.

From the announcement of its public transport reforms to the eventual agreement with the ATMOEA, the Victorian government did not waver in its determination to enforce changes to the operations of the State’s tramways. The government demonstrated a reluctance to compromise its key transport reforms for a small union that would soon be forced to amalgamate with another union or face deregistration under the Accord. Indeed, Premier Cain remained on holiday for the majority of the tram dispute, ignoring the Liberal Opposition’s demands that he return to resolve the dispute.

Although the Essential Services Act had been invoked by Victoria’s Liberal government to break the 1972 rail strike, the Cain government avoided using these powers during the tram dispute. Premier Cain was instead willing to shut down the tram system for the duration of the dispute. The small number of passengers and the limited area encompassed by the trams meant that the service could be suspended with relatively little effect upon the Victorian population. However, it was the timing of the tram workers’ industrial action that permitted the government to turn off the power to the tramlines without significant repercussions. Politically, January was the safest time for the tram system to be immobilised, as the impact on corporate Melbourne, whose staff and productivity levels decrease during in this period, was minimised. Ironically, the suspension of tram services potentially benefited the Cain government during its fiscal crisis, as the government did not have to cover the costs of operating the trams for an entire month, nor was it required to pay wages to striking government employees.

In the aftermath of the dispute, the small ATMOEA disappeared in an amalgamation negotiated in December 1992. Conductors finally vanished from trams in 1998, replaced with automated ticket machines. The reduction in numbers and eventual elimination of conductors saw a rise in assaults, robberies, graffiti and vandalism on trams staffed only by drivers. One hundred roving conductors were employed on Victorian trams in 2000 in an effort to combat these problems. In 1989, the Cain government believed that replacing conductors with scratch tickets would save $24 million annually. With automated ticket machines installed on trams, operators estimate that $50 million is lost each year through fare evasion.

**Endnotes**

1. This paper is dedicated to Dick Curlewis, life-long labour activist, advocate of workers’ control, and supporter of tram workers during the dispute. Research for this paper is derived largely from Kristie Martin, ‘Derailing the Trammies: A Study of the 1990 Tram Strike’, BA Honours Politics thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2004.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 51.

7. Ibid., p. 53.

8. Ibid., pp. 57-68.


12. See the 1983 Transport Act, Victoria.
17. See Metropolitan Transit Authority of Victoria Annual Report, 1983-84, MET, Melbourne, 1984; and Figure 3.1 in METPLAN: Metropolitan Public Transport Industry Plan, Discussion Paper, MET, Melbourne, October 1987.
20. Robert Murray and Kate White, The Fall of the House of Cain, p. 84.
26. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. John Cain, John Cain’s Years, p. 215.
44. A survey conducted on a city tram indicated that fifty of the passengers wanted conductors rather than ticket machines, with only nine commuters agreeing with the removal of conductors. See Tim Pie, ‘Conductors Improve Manners Survey’, The Melbourne Herald, 18 December 1989, p. 2.
46. Mark Davis, Lynne Cossar and David Thompson, ‘What are they arguing about?’ The Age, 2 January 1990, p. 4.
47. See John Lyons, ‘Melbourne’s great tramway bizarre’, p. 3.
57. Dick Curlewis, Anarcho Syndicalism in Practice, p. 15.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
62. See Mark Davis, ‘Tram union splits as 1,000 go back to work’, p. 1.
63. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
Why women took on BHP: gender bias and the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign, 1980-94

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This paper draws on my current postgraduate research at the University of Sydney’s Department of History. It also draws on my own experience in launching and helping to organise the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign and working in the Port Kembla steelworks for several years as a labourer and crane chaser and as an elected delegate for the Federated Ironworkers’ Association.

Wollongong in the 1980s

‘41 GIRLS IN 6 MONTHS’ blared the front-page headlines of the *Illawarra Mercury* on 30 January 1980. The article that followed revealed that a Wollongong chicken shop owner had sexually molested his female employees. From August 1979 to January 1980, 41 young women aged between 14 and 17 were told to report to his bedroom above the shop for a ‘medical examination’ as a requirement and qualification for being employed.

This scandalous example of exploitative employer behaviour took place in the context of higher than national average local unemployment.¹ It came to light when two of the girls who had applied for jobs at the shop told their parents, who in turn raised it with the Shop Assistants Union, the Australian Workers Union, and members of the Wollongong Working Women’s Charter Committee. The matter was then brought to the attention of the South Coast Labour Council. Fay Campbell, organiser for the Australian Workers Union, was reported in the *Mercury* article as saying she intended to inform the Minister for Youth and Community Services, Rex Jackson, and would ask him to disclose the facts of the case in Parliament and to name the proprietor under Parliamentary privilege.² The chicken shop owner, who was also found to have scammed a Commonwealth Employment Program (CEP) youth subsidy scheme during this time, was subsequently drummed out of town and prevented from opening another business in Wollongong.

Extreme as this example may be, it is a striking illustration of how gender relations and class relations shape each other, and how the sexual division of labour and its associated gender ideologies play an integral role in capitalist societies. As Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle have pointed out, an adequate understanding of the social relations of work cannot be gained without taking this fundamental relationship into account.³

Wollongong, the third largest city in New South Wales, developed around the quintessentially masculine industries steel and coal which continue to employ an overwhelmingly male workforce. While the massive migration programs of the 1950s and 1960s were designed to bring European men to work in the steelworks, there were no jobs provided for the women who migrated with them. Despite the establishment of clothing factories with government grants and the late growth of a small service and community sector in the 1970s and 80s, there are relatively few jobs available for women in the region.⁴ Until 1994, women were prevented by law in NSW from working in underground mines and since 1927, when the Hoskins brothers from Lithgow established the first blast furnace at Port Kembla for what would become Australian Iron and Steel (AI&S),⁵ the steel industry has been virtually ‘off limits’ to women.

Australia’s biggest company, BHP, acquired its major subsidiary AI&S in 1935 and has since consolidated its monopoly control over the steel and coal mining industries, collecting a network of almost 400 local companies that provide goods and services to the steelworks. According to its own estimates, BHP accounted directly and indirectly for 71.6 per cent of the pay packets in the Illawarra at its peak in 1980-81.⁶
In April 1980, AI&S had a total workforce of 20,635. Of this number only 1,037 were women, including canteen workers, cleaners, labourers, typists, clerks, apprentices, cadets and professional staff. The steelworks had not retrenched at that point and although a dirty and dangerous industry, it was widely regarded as the most secure workplace in the Illawarra. Furthermore, in production ironworker classifications, men and women were paid the same rate for the job, and AI&S was the only employer in the region still advertising for labour and hiring people every day. That is, they were hiring men. Although a total of 2,061 women had applied for production ironworker steelworks jobs from 1973 to 1980, they were routinely rejected.

**Launch of the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign**

The chicken shop scandal was the spark that helped to ignite a determined campaign by unemployed Wollongong women that challenged BHP’s discriminatory employment practices. On 20 April 1980 a public seminar on Women, Unemployment and Sexual Harassment was organised by the Wollongong Working Women’s Charter Committee. Led by Peggy Errey, a long-time ALP activist and organiser of the Miscellaneous Workers Union, the Charter Committee was an all female committee of the South Coast Labour Council, formed to promote a Charter of Working Women’s Rights and to lobby for its adoption by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). It was at this seminar that the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign was launched.

The Campaign began during an economic recession that hit the Clothing and Textile Industry in particular and resulted in the loss of mainly migrant women’s jobs from local factories like Bonds, Berlei, Whiteware and King Gee. In the related retail and service sector, women’s jobs such as shop assistants and cleaners were also scarce. Some of the women pushed out of the sewing factories were forced to accept work in small private sweatshops, but many, like Hristina Treneska who later became an organiser for the Jobs for Women Campaign, preferred to work as outworkers in their own homes doing piecework for the factories, although this meant paying for their own machines and electricity and being paid a pittance. Others tried to find work in Sydney.

Of the registered CES figures in 1980, 34 per cent of all unemployed were overseas-born.

Slobodanka Joncevska and Rosika Tot, who later joined the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign in 1980, were two of the women who gained jobs as labourers at the steelworks following an earlier successful protest by women’s liberationists who, amongst other things, chained themselves to the steelworks gates in 1973. But the onset of the recession from 1976, combined with a lack of maternity provisions in awards, the absence of anti-discrimination laws, and propaganda campaigns suggesting married women were depriving their sons and daughters of jobs, forced most of the women who had recently gained jobs, including Rosika and Slobodanka, out of the steelworks.

In the weeks that followed the Working Women’s Charter seminar in April 1980, 31 unemployed Wollongong women lodged complaints of sex discrimination with the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board and began a legal and political challenge against AI&S, in order to win jobs at its Port Kembla steelworks. It was through the Campaign that women who’d been told ‘there are no jobs for women’ at the steelworks employment office found a political voice to express their needs and frustration and an organisational means to fight for their rights. Most of these women were migrants from Macedonia, Croatia, Turkey, Chile and Greece.

**Labour movement and community support**

A crucial aspect of the Campaign’s success was the fact that it was able to gain support not only from many women’s organisations, but also from 16 different unions around the country. Significantly, the Campaign gained strong support from the Port Kembla branch of the Federated Ironworkers’ Association, the main union covering production ironworkers in the steel industry, even though the women were unemployed and not union members at the time. In addition to 11 supportive Members of Parliament, the list of over 60 organisations supporting the Campaign included the South Coast Labour Council and the ACTU, as well as 12 ethnic and community groups, 14 ALP branches and three leftwing political parties.

During the well-publicised Jobs for Women tent embassy outside the steelworks in July 1980, leaflets in seven community languages were distributed and thousands of signatures were collected from male steelworkers on petitions supporting women’s right to work. By mid-1981, 368 women, including all
the original complainants, had gained jobs at the Port Kembla steelworks (about 60 women were also employed at the Newcastle steelworks) as a result of the Campaign and negotiations by Carmel Niland, then President of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board.

**The first class action anti-discrimination test case**

The company began retrenching workers in 1983. Having been denied equal opportunity with men for jobs in the first place, women were among the last to be hired and therefore, according to seniority principles, the first to be fired. So, as well as taking part in the unions’ industrial action to defend jobs, the women decided to take BHP to court, claiming that the company had not only discriminated against them (directly) by denying them jobs as women, but also that they were now suffering the (indirect) effects of previous discrimination in terms of loss of seniority and the threat of, or actual retrenchment.

There were 34 complaints in the test case, which succeeded from the NSW Equal Opportunity Tribunal through to the High Court of Australia, despite BHP’s appeals at every stage. The test case had to be resolved before negotiations for settlement could begin on behalf on 709 additional complainants in a representative action. It took 14 years from the lodging of the first complaints in 1980 to the settlement of the representative complaints via conciliation. The campaign’s anti-discrimination case, Najdovska and Others versus Australian Iron and Steel (AI&S), was the first class action of its kind in Australia and was of national significance, affecting employment practices, industrial policies and manual handling legislation.14

In taking on BHP’s steel company and eventually winning, the women challenged not only a major employer but also the sexual division of labour fundamental to contemporary social relations and the ideologies of femininity and masculinity that reflect and reinforce it. The fight to get jobs in the steelworks was also part of a larger, international movement – at least in OECD countries – to transform the organisation of work, the location of women in the economy and prevailing ideas about ‘femininity’.

As Canadian feminist academic Meg Luxton has pointed out, ‘the struggle to get women hired in ‘non-traditional’ jobs is at once a struggle to redefine the characteristics of those jobs and to eliminate the notion that there are such things as ‘women’s jobs’ or ‘men’s jobs’’.15

**The gendered division of labour**

In Australia, as in other capitalist societies, the social and economic consequences of the sexual division of labour and its associated gender ideologies have been seriously detrimental, leading to a general impoverishment of women compared to men and reinforcing broader patterns of male dominance and female subordination, within the family, in the workplace and in the public realm.16

Biological assumptions about physical and reproductive capacity and ‘natural’ affinities as well as the unsubstantiated presumption that most women are supported by breadwinner husbands and not responsible for any legal dependents, have been used repeatedly to justify the continuation of lower wages and different classifications for women and the undervaluing of women’s work in general.17

A report for the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board explains:

Segregation of workers by sex into certain occupations and industries is held largely responsible for the lower overall wage structure for female workers. Typically, females are crowded into industrial jobs which involve precision and dexterity. Traditionally, these jobs have been assessed by industrial tribunals as having a relatively low work value.18

The gendered division of labour has been challenged most noticeably by women’s increased participation in the workforce. The increasing employment of married women since the 1960s has also led to at least a partial redistribution of work in the home, as husbands or de facto partners of women workers have been gradually persuaded to take a more active role in their children’s care and in other ‘feminised’ domestic chores like cooking and cleaning.19

The disparity between women’s and men’s earnings in the paid workforce has been challenged to some extent by demands for ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ in so called ‘women’s jobs’. However in the context of a rigidly sex segregated labour force and the persistence of ideas that reinforce sexual inequality through the undervaluing of women’s work, interpretations of the slogan ‘equal pay for equal work’ (rather than ‘one rate for the job’) have had generally unfavourable consequences for women.
Progress has been made since the majority of female workers received only 54 per cent of the male weekly rate before and during World War II. Yet even today, women’s average earnings are well below that of men’s and occupations traditionally seen as ‘women’s jobs’ such as in Hospitality and Retail areas remain the lowest paid.

Women in ‘non-traditional’ jobs during World War II

Significantly, none of the conservative ideas about women as wage labourers have prevented women from being called upon to enter the paid workforce whenever economic or social conditions required an expanded labour force. During World War II, tens of thousands of Australian women quickly learned how to perform jobs which had previously been considered beyond their abilities in a range of defence and civilian occupations hitherto regarded as male domains, including telegraph operating and munitions and aircraft manufacturing. At the peak of female employment in 1943, there were more than 800,000 women in the workforce, an increase of 157,000 since the outbreak of war in 1939.

While women were expected to fill ‘male’ jobs, the question of what rates they were to be paid was so contentious that a special Women’s Employment Board was appointed for the duration of the war to oversee women’s working conditions including the wages of women in non-traditional jobs. The Board awarded rates between 60 per cent to 90 per cent of the male rate to between 80,000 and 90,000 women, provoking bitter opposition from employers and indicating that women’s productivity and capacity was considered relatively lower than men’s. The remaining 715,000 women employed in traditional female type jobs received wages set at about 54 per cent of the basic male rate before the war and pegged since the start of the war.

In order to maintain the cheap and expendable source of labour provided by women, employers resorted to reinstituting strict job segregation and squeezing out almost all the women employed in non-traditional jobs in favour of returned servicemen as quickly as possible after the war.

Limited job classifications for women

It had become obvious during wartime that work performed by women which was usually regarded as ‘men’s work’ was ‘neither more arduous nor more skilled than much of the ‘women’s work’ for which women got less pay. However, it should be noted that in Australia at least, the iron and steel industry was a ‘reserve’ industry during the war and although some ‘male’ positions were opened up to females, women did not work in all the classifications available to men in the steel and metal industries and were specifically barred from certain jobs due to the operation of the weight limit restrictions under section 36 of the Factories, Shops and Industries Act, upheld by the Women’s Employment Board. The trade union movement had also made it clear during the war that it would not tolerate women entering male occupations at cheaper rates of pay and, due to the disparity in women’s wages created by the Board’s much higher wage setting for some, there was a high level of industrial strike action and disputation by women.

The fact that there were limited classifications in which Australian women actually worked in steel and metal occupations during the war is made clear in one of the many incidents where male trade unionists objected to women working in ‘male’ jobs. In this case, metal trades unions disputed the right of women to work as coremakers at Metters Ltd on the grounds that they hadn’t had sufficient training. The dispute ran for two years from 1942 to 1944. Due to successful lobbying by Muriel Heagney and others, the women were eventually allowed to join the Australian Engineering Union and a motion supporting equal pay for women was passed at a metal unions conference in 1943, although in 1944 the Moulders’ Federation voted overwhelmingly against admitting female coremakers, fearing that demands for equal pay would lower the basic rate for men.

As Edna Ryan has noted, the metal trades unions need not have been so worried. A comparison between the Metal Trades Award of December 1941 and the Women’s Employment Board schedule of January 1943 showed that out of 243 classifications, women had gained permission to work in 81 and in 4 special sub-classifications. Women could work in non-trades positions such as machinists 3rd class, welders 2nd
and 3rd class, electroplaters 2nd class and so on. The pay women were awarded in 1943 strictly followed the Metal Trades Award of 1941. Women’s jobs that came under the Federated Ironworkers’ award in the steel industry, such as munitions workers and crane drivers, were awarded 90 per cent of the basic male rate in 1944 by the Board. In no case did women get 100 per cent of the male rate in the steel and metal trades at that time.28

**Impact of ‘protective’ legislation**

Historically, the Factories, Shops and Industries Act, together with other NSW statutes such as the Construction Safety Act (1912) and the Industrial Arbitration Act (1940), regulated the working conditions of employees in manufacturing, retailing and basic industry. The Act itself was introduced in 1896; section 36, which imposes manual handling weight limits on women and junior males, dates from an amendment in 1912.29 Ostensibly designed to protect women from harmful work environments, an alternative interpretation of the ‘protective’ nature of such legislation, based on the historical explanation of its development, has suggested that section 36 was intended to exclude women from heavy manufacturing industry and protect men’s jobs from intrusion by women. In the years leading up to the introduction of the Act, there had been an expansion of women’s employment in factories. Between 1897-1910, the per centage of women in factories rose from 23.7 per cent to 33.1 per cent in NSW.30 The annual report on the Factories, Shops and industries Act in 1911 expressed a concern to restrict female employment.31

Furthermore, the possibility of section 36 acting as protective safety law has been limited by the fact that it has only covered industries where women are not often employed and not the industries where women commonly work, such as nursing and childcare.32 While the Women’s Employment Board was dismantled after the war, the operation of section 36 of the Factories, Shops and Industries Act remained as a constraint on women’s employment opportunities in a range of male dominated industries such as steel.

It was this section 36 of the Act that Australian Iron and Steel cited in their defence for the first time on 15 August 1980 at the one and only attempted conciliation meeting between the Wollongong women complainants and AI&S in the Anti-Discrimination Board’s former offices in Bent St, Sydney. Section 36 was never given as a reason for rejecting women when they applied at the AI&S Employment Office in Cringila.33

While the Jobs for Women campaigners went back to Wollongong to hold a protest outside the steelworks employment office, the then Counsellor for Equal Opportunity, Carmel Niland, initiated a study of the application of manual handling laws at Australian Iron and Steel to assist the investigation of the women’s complaints.34

The results of the Anti-Discrimination Board study and other evidence produced at the hearings of the NSW Equal Opportunity tribunal between May 1984 and May 1985 showed that restrictions on women’s employment at the steelworks were not due to the weight limit but rather to sexist attitudes of the steelworks’ management and poor employment practices. Such practices included repeatedly refusing to hire women as production ironworkers; placing women’s names on a separate waiting list for up to seven years while men were usually hired straight away; and labelling 98 per cent of jobs ‘men only’ when most of these jobs did not require lifting over the 35 lb (16 kg) specified in the weight limit law.35

Researcher for the study, Chloe Mason36 explains how, by imposing restrictions on women, section 36 contributed to the maintenance of the sex-segregated labour market:

Section 36 provides a statutory basis by which women are clustered into certain types of factory jobs which only require light lifting. Its effect, however, reaches beyond the horizontal segregation of the labour market. It also operates to segregate vertically by blocking women from promotion. For instance, if a line of progression contains a job which is barred to women on account of section 36, then women could either be blocked from promotion up the line, or barred from entering that promotional stream altogether because of their statutory inability to gain experience in all prerequisite jobs.37
Changing industrial work: impact of the Women’s Liberation Movement

The growth and impact of the women’s liberation movement from the early 1970s called renewed attention to the marked sex segregation of the workforce and the inequalities experienced by women in terms of job opportunities, pay and promotion in Australia and in other OECD countries such as the United States and Canada. In the United States, following the displacement of women by men returning from the war, it took an affirmative action court order filed on 15 April 1974 before jobs would once again be opened up to women in the steel industry – this time on an equal footing with men.98

Nine major steel companies and the United Steelworkers Union of America agreed to establish an affirmative action program for many ‘male’ jobs. At the peak of their employment, women represented 14,500 of the maintenance and production workers in basic steel.99 However almost as soon as they were hired, the women were displaced again – this time by the ravages of ‘de-industrialisation’.100

Nevertheless, the implementation of effective affirmative action legislation in the USA and Canada has meant that a generation of women in those countries who have worked in underground mines, steel and metal manufacturing and a range of other non-traditional jobs are now retiring after 30 years in the workforce.

In Australia it would take another decade and another major campaign before affirmative action policies were introduced in any fashion in the private industrial sector. The impact of the Wollongong Jobs for Women case exposed and changed practices and attitudes to the employment of women, aiding the implementation of anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies. Ironically, from June 1984 on, while the case was being heard in the Equal Opportunity Tribunal, BHP was a participant in the Federal Government’s pilot Affirmative Action (AA) program, adopting AA programs at two of its subsidiaries at Whyalla and Mount Isa, although not at Australian Iron and Steel. However, following the outcome of the Tribunal hearings, the Federal Government introduced compulsory affirmative action policies for private sector employers of over 100 workers in 1986.

Due to the influence of the feminist movement in the late 1970s, the 1980s Jobs for Women Campaign was able to utilise a greater range of legal, political and even financial resources to empower its challenge to BHP than earlier attempts to open up steelworks jobs for women. The NSW Anti-Discrimination Act was introduced in 1977 and the newly established Anti-Discrimination Board took a pro-active stand with support from the Premier and feminists within the state bureaucracy. The Wran (Labour) Government established a Women’s Directorate in the Department of Industrial Relations to advise the Government on women’s employment issues and the Women’s Advisory Council (1976) and Women’s Coordination Unit (1977) to advise the Premier on feminist issues.41 The so-called ‘femocrats’, employed in these now-defunct bodies, provided some valuable practical support to the Campaign in the form of financial assistance when, after 16 months of hard lobbying and legal argument in four repeat applications to the NSW Legal Aid Commission by solicitors from the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, the unemployed women complainants had still not received legal aid to test their case before the Equal Opportunity Tribunal. As the campaigners stated in a leaflet distributed at the Women and Labour Conference in Brisbane in 1984, the rejection of legal aid for their test case raised the question ‘Who really has access to the law?’142 A one-off grant of $10,000 from the Women’s Coordination Unit came to the rescue on the eve of the Tribunal hearings and enabled the women to start paying their barrister, John Basten, until, after a deputation to the premier Neville Wran, legal aid at last came through on the third day in court.

Some outcomes

One of the outcomes of the Campaign’s test case was to bring about changes to section 36 of the NSW Factories, Shops and Industries Act that led to it being extended to cover all workers. In response to the case and the Anti-Discrimination Board report, a Code of Practice for Safe Manual Handling was developed by the ACTU and the Federal Government and adopted in every Australian state under revised Occupational Health and Safety laws. These policies were ratified at the ACTU’s 1985 Congress and are codified in its Action Plan for Women Workers in a booklet titled BHP/Australian Iron and Steel Equal Opportunity Case: Implications for Unions (1985).143

While the Tribunal’s decision in favour of the complainants did not actually over ride the ‘last on, first off’ principle, it did call into question the effect of the practice where it has been used in conjunction with
discriminatory hiring practices. This meant that all the women who were employed in the steelworks as a result of the Campaign gained backdated seniority to the time of their original application. Thus, all the women who had been retrenched were reinstated in their jobs and retained their seniority in terms of future opportunities for promotion. The only men with greater seniority who were retrenched were those who were not union members and who therefore had no defence.

The actual impact of the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign is yet to be fully examined and assessed and there are many further questions to be explored. However, at a time of industrial turmoil and when racism was becoming recognised as a major issue for the labour movement and for feminism, the Jobs for Women Campaign may be seen as an example of solidarity and support amongst women of different class and cultural backgrounds. The Campaign was able to win widespread community support, particularly the support of the labour movement, and its use of available resources and opportunities helped to empower a group of otherwise marginalised women of mainly non-English speaking backgrounds to utilise the law effectively and gain access to steel industry jobs.

Endnotes

1. According to the 1981 Census figures, Australia’s official unemployment rate stood at 7.8 per cent whereas in the Wollongong electorate of Cunningham, the rate was 39.3 per cent. ABS.
4. Erik Eklund makes the interesting observation that the male dominated formal economy ‘exposed men to the primary site of class conflict, the industrial workplace, while women were exposed to the key symbol of local cross-class identity, the main street’ in Port Kembla, to which they contributed as both consumers and workers in the town’s stores. However Eklund makes no mention of women in the Port Kembla steel industry and does not refer to any other regional workplace as a site of (class) struggle for women. Erik Eklund, Steel Town: the making and breaking of Port Kembla, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 2002, pp. 191-192.
5. Eklund, Steel Town, p. 19.
9. The Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign was launched at the Wollongong Working Women’s Charter Committee seminar on 20 April 1980 by the author, herself a member of the Working Women’s Charter Committee and a leading local member of the Socialist Workers Party at the time.
13. A full list of supporting organisations is printed on the back of the Wollongong Jobs for Women Action Committee leaflet, ‘Jobs for Women: part of the fight to defend all jobs’, 1983. (Note: The roles of specific networks and organisations in the building of the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign, as well as the ways in which interpersonal dynamics and relations between individuals within the Campaign group worked to establish (or sometimes destabilise) a sense of community and trust will be detailed and discussed in further work associated with this project.)
The Past is Before Us

Part A: Refereed Papers


21. ABS 2004 figures show women earn 84 per cent of male average weekly ordinary time earnings (AWOTE = $954.10) but only 65 per cent of the male figure of $862.60 for all employees' total earnings. The latter difference reflects the inclusion of part-time employees. Mining had the highest AWOTE of $1,443.90 for males and $1,054.30 for females. Lowest AWOTE paid in Hospitality: accommodation, cafes and restaurants ($674.30) and the Retail trade ($683.70).


24. Ibid., p. 91.

25. Ibid., p. 97.


27. Ibid., pp. 134-136.

28. Ibid., pp. 134-137.


31. Ibid., pp. 64-65.


34. NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, *Protective Legislation At Work*.

35. Ibid., pp. 47-73, 91-97.


Deregulation of Australia’s financial system has dramatically changed the face of our financial system. One of the most notable impacts is that long established forms of co-operative finance and self-help, Building and Friendly Societies and Credit Unions, have declined in number and membership. However, rationalisation by the large banks in regional centres combined with concerns about home affordability has led to co-operative finance schemes being considered anew. This paper provides an insight into one of the oldest, most enduring and least known of co-operative finance schemes, Starr-Bowkett societies, focussing on the genesis of and major personalities behind the schemes.

In 1843 Dr Thomas Edward Bowkett presented at the Poplar Literary Institution a series of lectures outlining his plan whereby ‘every mechanic in the country … may become a freeholder’. These lectures were published and the detailed plans delineated by Bowkett in this and future publications were to produce a scheme capable of providing housing finance to many low-income earners and others less favoured by traditional finance institutions. The scheme, as detailed by Bowkett, has over time been adjusted to make it more attractive to subscribers and less open to claims of gambling. Although Starr-Bowkett is the most popular and long-lasting form, other names under which Bowkett’s plans have operated are: Ninepence-Halfpenny; Poplar Freehold Provident; Poplar; Wenlock-Bowkett; Model; Self-Help; Richmond; Perfect Thrift; Popular; Economic; and Mutual. Claims that the schemes are merely gambling have been used to foretell the demise of the Bowkett scheme numerous times over the past 160 years, yet schemes designed along the lines delineated by Bowkett continue to provide interest-free finance and continue to have a future. The Starr-Bowkett Statewide Co-operative Society in Newtown celebrated their centenary last year and Bowkett’s principles comprise the basis for Rotating Savings and Credit Schemes (ROSCAs) which are today a substantial part of the microfinance network, providing credit throughout the developing world.

Starr-Bowkett societies are, in essence a form of terminating building society but differ from building societies and co-operative housing associations in that Starr-Bowketts do not borrow money to fund loans and do not charge or pay interest. All monies subscribed to the society are the only monies available for loan, and it is this distinctive feature that gives Starr-Bowketts the appellation of the most pure form of co-operative finance. This purity of form, combined with the longevity of the societies, an increasing interest in co-operative finance as an alternative where the formal financial sector is lacking, and the lack of any systematic study of the societies, make Starr-Bowkett societies a valuable field of study. As the co-operative sector has suffered an extreme decline with the on-going deregulation of the Australian financial sector, a detailed study of Starr-Bowkett schemes is not only overdue but can also contribute to discussions on the sustainability and value of co-operative finance. This paper is the first part of a larger study into the role and importance of Starr-Bowketts in providing home ownership during the twentieth century. The paper begins with a brief history and outline of the scheme as originally proposed by Bowkett, the changes wrought in his initial plan, and offers a brief history of Starr-Bowkett societies in New South Wales (NSW), concluding with the intended direction of future research.

Thomas Edward Bowkett

Bowkett was born in Bermondsey around 1805 and, after training as a doctor established a surgery in Folkstone Terrace, East India Dock Road, London. It was his work amongst the working class in the East End of London that shaped the form of his co-operative finance plan. In the few works that mention Bowkett, he is described as a ‘man held in honour…somewhat of a philanthropist’, a man of radical opinions, a ‘London Liberal’, and that his schemes had a ‘distinct radical pedigree’. Bowkett was involved in a range of radical and working-class movements of the time and through this involvement was associated with Richard Cobden, John Bright and Bronte O’Brien amongst others in the Chartist Movement.
Bowkett was also a vocal supporter of trade unions, involved in the Association for the Repeal of Taxes on Knowledge, a member of the Metropolitan Parliamentary Reform Association, a demonstrator against the further enclosure of Epping Forest and a promoter of co-operative stores.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, despite such associations and involvement there is nothing in Bowkett’s publications to indicate any direct philosophical leanings. He does not refer to writers such as Robert Owen, David Ricardo or Thomas Hodgskin, all writers whose writings he would have been acquainted with given his various concerns noted above; nor does he mention the Chartist Movement or the Chartist Land Company. In devising his scheme Bowkett appears to have been driven by more practical than philosophical considerations. He argued that, after ‘twenty years of medical practice, and a longer period still of anxious enquiry into the causes of the degraded condition of the working man of England’,\textsuperscript{12} the only means by which ‘every mechanic may work out his own emancipation; how he may obtain power which will enable him beneficially to influence the legislature of this country’,\textsuperscript{13} was by achieving economic power which in turn could only be achieved by ‘every mechanic’ becoming a freeholder. It was this belief that led to Bowkett to devise his scheme for a low subscription, interest-free ‘building society that could be of real utility to working men’.\textsuperscript{14}

**Poplar Freehold Provident Societies**

At a series of lectures during June and July of 1843 at the Poplar Literary Institute, and then at the City of London Scientific and Political Institution on Sunday 13 August 1843 Bowkett lectured on ‘The best means of obtaining Freehold Property, and emancipating ourselves from the tyranny of Landlords’.\textsuperscript{15} During the August lecture Bowkett stated that one Society along his lines was already operating at Poplar and that another was being formed. This latter lecture led to an invitation for Bowkett to attend the same institution the following Sunday where he:

will in a short address, challenge any visitant to the above Institute on the occasion, to disprove his plan of making Freeholder’s, for the purpose of emancipating the working class from slavery. Already Messrs. Cameron, Cowen and Lewis, have entered the field as disputants.\textsuperscript{16}

Messrs Spur, Benbow, Preston and Bolwell (?) joined the above named disputants on the Sunday in question, to whose oppositions Bowkett ‘made an able reply’, was given a unanimous vote of thanks and would have been pleased with his evening’s efforts, as the night concluded with several persons enrolling themselves as shareholders. The following Sunday, 3 September, Bowkett presented his lecture again, this time to the Chartists of South London at the Hall of Science, Blackfriar’s Road.\textsuperscript{17}

Bowkett’s scheme was part of the self-help, co-operative and thrift movements that characterised Victorian England, as evidenced in the growth of Friendly Societies, trade unions, co-operative shops and ‘Mechanics Institutes’. But Bowkett’s scheme was also a reflection of the movement for universal suffrage epitomised by the Chartist Movement and a reaction to the fact that existing institutions did not cater for a great part of the working population. Most of these working-class movements only catered for the skilled artisan and the better-paid workers especially in terms of the level of subscriptions required. This period also witnessed rapid growth in the number of Building, Friendly and Loan societies, and the rapid formation of these societies was a result of a number of factors. Increasing population pressures especially in the urban areas, decreasing prices which increased the value of money increases in wages especially during the second quarter of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{18} rising rents and political agitation for universal suffrage, all combined to create a demand for housing finance that was not being met by traditional financial institutions. Although a vocal supporter of schemes dedicated to promoting thrift and independence amongst the working class and an organiser of a co-operatives out of his surgery,\textsuperscript{19} Bowkett argued that existing societies comprised ‘much of good … and more or less of evil’.\textsuperscript{20} After presenting what he saw as the good and evil of existing societies in his 1843 publication, and in 1844 providing a comparison of the advantages of his society over an ‘Immaculate Accumulating Fund Society’,\textsuperscript{21} Bowkett’s 1850 publication *The Bane and the Antidote* contains an extremely detailed discussion of the good and evil that he saw in other societies, a discussion that has been subsequently described as, ‘the best statement of building society problems’ apart from the work of Arthur Scratchely.\textsuperscript{22} Bowkett argued against these other societies on the basis of the lack of control that could be exercised by members of these societies over their management;\textsuperscript{23}
that ‘Most of these Societies are set on foot by lawyers and artful money-lenders. Trickery and deception are therefore matters of course to them’;\textsuperscript{24} and the fact that the rates of interest charged\textsuperscript{25} and level of subscriptions required placed most of the existing societies and therefore the benefits of membership outside of the reach of the majority of the working class. Bowkett detailed six principles that would guide the society outlined in his plan and obviate the worst facets of existing societies. These principles were:

1\textsuperscript{st} Obtaining the fullest advantage of combination
2\textsuperscript{nd} Lending money without interest,
3\textsuperscript{rd} Having no fines, and no forfeitures.
4\textsuperscript{th} Exclusion of all offices of emolument.
5\textsuperscript{th} Giving the poorest members the greatest advantages.
6\textsuperscript{th} Returning to any member the whole of his subscriptions whenever he chooses to withdraw from the Society.\textsuperscript{26}

The distinctive features of Bowkett’s scheme, which had their first manifestation as ‘Poplar Freehold Provident Societies’, was the very small level of subscriptions required of share holders and the lack of interest charged or earned which allowed the benefits of building societies to be extended to the lower paid members of society. In his scheme the society would comprise 100 members, each of whom would subscribe 9½d per week, or £2 1s 2d a year, providing the society with £205 16s 8d at the end of the first year. Once expenses were paid this made £200 available for the first purchase of freehold land with which monies the society could purchase land and organise the building of a house or purchase a completed house. All subscribers would then go into a ballot to determine the subscriber who would gain the first loan. The successful subscriber, once he had taken his loan would then begin paying £20 rent per year for ten years, as well as continuing to pay their 9½d per week subscription (although Bowkett did state that a mortgage to the society may be preferable to a lease).\textsuperscript{27} The next ‘drawing of lots’ would then occur earlier than 12 months later as the continued payment of subscriptions plus the £20 per annum repayments from the first loan increased the amount available to the society for lending. By the fifth year, two loans each year were able to be balloted for; three per year after 11 years of operation; and four per year after 15 years. At the end of the society, each subscriber would possess ‘freehold property which cost £200, and receive back his £62 in money’.\textsuperscript{28}

Bowkett argued that he had chosen 9½d per week as it was an amount that could be afforded by the greatest number of working people and that an amount twice (1s 7d per week) or three times (3s 2d a week) although allowing the society to end in half or two-thirds of the time, was at £8 or £4 per annum ‘too much for a working man to have to pay for many years, in addition to maintaining a family and paying rent’.\textsuperscript{29} The amount of £200 for a freehold property was based by Bowkett on the sum required to purchase a ‘house in the neighbourhood of London, of such a kind as working men in general would desire to possess’.\textsuperscript{30}

Bowkett’s original scheme closely followed that of the early building societies. In their original form building societies actually built the houses for their members with the order of home acquisition being determined by ballot and the houses remaining the property of the society.\textsuperscript{31} Disagreements over the size and price of houses in differing localities soon pushed the building societies away from building houses themselves and into becoming financial institutions which borrowed money, charged interest and also passed the expenses of operation onto members – all facets with which Bowkett disagreed:

We have no appointed solicitors, no surveyors, forming part of the association, and receiving their perquisites in the shape of fees, no expensive office rents to pay, not one single official in the society, or connected with the society, to derive profit …\textsuperscript{32}

As was the case with building societies at the time, Bowkett societies were terminating, with the society ceasing to exist once all subscribers had obtained a house and repayments were completed, which Bowkett estimated initially would be at the end of 31 years, and the subscriptions paid (£62 by each subscriber) were returned to the subscribers. One area of controversy that Bowkett societies had difficulty in avoiding was the manner in which loans were allocated. The drawing of lots, or the balloting for loans amongst subscribers, was decried by many as constituting a lottery. This criticism was to necessitate a change in the wording of the rules from ‘drawing lots’ to ‘making an appropriation’.\textsuperscript{33} Bowkett was quite clear in distancing societies developed along his principles from building societies and other societies using the drawing of lots to determine the order in which loans were distributed:
It has always appeared to us a degradation to call our Societies, Building Societies. It is getting into bad company. Building societies have been so long known associated with deception and fraud, and also when formed and conducted by sincere and intelligent men, so constantly found to disappoint the expectations of the members, that to be identified with them is no recommendation. Considered however merely as Building Societies, ours have much less of that inequality of gain which causes the condition of one set of members to be improved at the expense of others, than all the schemes that have been devised since ours began.

Under Bowkett’s scheme, the drawing of lots or appropriations for the £200 did not affect other subscribers to the society and therefore did not constitute a lottery. To Bowkett this distinction clearly differentiated his societies from those where the order of appropriation was determined by the order in which members joined the society, first-in-first-served, and where each member could be awarded as much money as he chose, despite the value of the shares in the society and whether or not other subscribers had received a loan. A major criticism of Bowkett’s scheme was the length of time that it might take some subscribers to draw a loan, which was found to force some members to leave the society or to ‘buy’ an appropriation from a successful member. Such a situation Bowkett saw as advantageous to both the society and its members, as ‘a member who would not have been punctual in making his repayments, will have been exchanged for one who will give the society no trouble’.

Bowkett did not attempt to counter the criticism on the time taken for the conclusion of his society as he believed that the only way that the term of the society could be shortened was by increasing the level of subscriptions. He was not ready to countenance any shortening of the society as noted earlier, as any increase in subscriptions would alienate a fair proportion of the working class that he wished to assist with his scheme. A major advantage of Bowkett societies, an advantage that holds today, is that due to the relatively small size and localised nature of each society, repayments are able to be, and are, adjusted to account for changes in a member’s financial situation.

By 1850 the eighth ‘Poplar Freehold Provident Society’ was accepting subscribers and Bowkett was also able to point to ‘not fewer than from one, to two hundred’ societies established on the same principles as the Poplar. The radical tradition of Bowkett and the acceptance of his scheme amongst the radical community is evidenced by the fact that the scheme was widely reported and advertised in the noted radical papers, Reasoner, Utilitarian Record, Northern Star, New Moral World and the English Charter Circular. In addition, Henry Hetherington, noted Chartist and owner of the London Dispatch and the Oddfellow, produced a modified version of Bowkett’s scheme which was adopted by the Socialist John Street Institution. It is not surprising that Hetherington supported Bowkett’s scheme as he, Hetherington, was a disciple of Robert Owen, yet believed that Owen’s scheme could not be carried into practice until the working class was enfranchised and Bowkett’s scheme could achieve this aim by providing the means with which the working class could become freeholders.

The intervention of Richard Benjamin Starr

Although the early Poplar Societies had a degree of success it was not until R.B. Starr (1813-92) altered Bowkett’s original scheme and became a whole-hearted promoter of what came to be known as Starr-Bowkett Building Societies that the societies achieved a degree of success and dispersion across England. Starr, given the list of his previous employments, ‘a hatter, a coffee house keeper, an auctioneer, a coal merchant and an omnibus proprietor’, may be described as something of a commercial adventurer. He was not drawn to Bowkett, whom he first met in 1855, and his scheme by any philosophical or ideological yearnings, but by a chance to make money. Starr altered Bowkett’s scheme so that the life of the societies was shortened, the subscription was raised to £10 per year and conditions were made more equal between members by reducing the proportion of subscriptions going into management fees for those members getting late appropriations and increasing the share of any surplus at the termination of the society going to this same group. By obtaining a copyright on the amended rules and the various forms associated with a Starr-Bowkett society, Starr was to find a very profitable source of employment. His profits arose from: charging £5 for addressing any meeting on the manner in which to form a Starr-Bowkett society; charging a fee of £25 for the appointment of a local solicitor as Secretary; £3 for the appointment of a surveyor; owning the printing and stationery company that produced and distributed the rule books and forms; charging a commission of £3 or 12.5 per cent, whichever was the largest,
for the supply of the rule books and forms; and then in 1881 founding the Starr-Bowkett and General Insurance Company from which all new societies had to insure their properties. Further alterations to Bowkett’s initial plan, but more especially the increasing commercialisation of the Starr-Bowkett societies, was to cause Bowkett to back away from the schemes promoted by Starr and to also bring Starr-Bowkett societies severe criticism. Starr’s alterations were to lead to a situation where ‘increasingly, gamblers rather than prospective home owners appear to have played a larger part in the balloting’. Some societies began to borrow money to be lent back at interest in the open market and, as societies were allowed to buy back appropriations, it was possible for a society to never advance any money but to become ‘purely gambling institutions’, an appellation which Bowkett had fought against so strenuously.

The first Starr-Bowkett Society was formed in London in 1862 and by 1874 over 150 societies had been formed, 200 by 1876 and over 700 by 1885. Table 1 presents the number of Starr-Bowkett societies and societies based on Bowkett’s principles but operating under different names, formed in England up to 1891 from either 1874 or their date of establishment. The growth in numbers, and dissemination of Starr-Bowkett societies displays a strong correlation with urban growth trends in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The first societies were in the major urban centre of London, then in the smaller towns around London, then moved from there to other large regional centres and then began to diffuse through the smaller towns surrounding these centres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Society</th>
<th>Date of First Society</th>
<th>Number Formed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starr-Bowkett Societies</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Help</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>1884</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Thrift</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>1583</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The passing of the Building Societies Act in 1894 which made balloting illegal checked the growth and spread of Starr-Bowkett societies in England, with later societies evading this stipulation by a further amendment of Starr’s rules. Although Starr can be criticised for taking Bowkett’s scheme away from its first principles, he must be recognised for the role that he played in advertising and disseminating the ideas behind and advantages of Starr-Bowkett societies. The number and spread of Starr-Bowkett societies throughout England by the end of the nineteenth century can be considered as evidence that through the intervention of Starr, Bowkett was able to achieve in part his aim of providing the means by which every mechanic could become a freeholder, and therefore many workers were able to achieve this end whereas without such societies they may never have been able to achieve this goal.

**Transportation to the colony**

The concept of Starr-Bowkett societies was quick to be adopted in the Australian colonies with NSW gaining its first in 1868 with the subscribing of the Nos 1, 2 and 3 Sydney Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Societies. By 1869 there was reputedly a total of 45,000 Starr-Bowkett members in NSW, which is a remarkable rate of membership take-up. Table 2 presents a list of some of the Starr-Bowkett societies formed up to 1904. It must be borne in mind that this list is by no means definitive as many Societies especially those located in regional towns did not register nor provide returns to the Registrar of Friendly Societies.
Starr-Bowkett societies arrived in the colony at an economic stage similar to that evident when Bowkett first lectured on his scheme. Population pressures were increasing in the urban centres creating a severe housing shortage, rents were high, incomes rising, rates of personal savings were high from gold-mining, and existing financial institutions were either unable or unwilling to service the growth in demand for home building. Also, in line with the English experience, after first gaining acceptance in the major urban centres Starr-Bowketts moved out into firstly, the larger regional towns, such as Dubbo and Bathurst, and then into the surrounding smaller towns.

Table 2. Starr-Bowkett societies, NSW 1868-1904

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name of Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Sydney Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society Nos. 1, 2 and 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Starr-Bowkett Benefit and Building Society, Dubbo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Dubbo Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>City of Bathurst No. 2 Starr-Bowkett Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Sydney Starr-Bowkett Building Society No. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Sydney Starr-Bowkett No. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bathurst No. 3 Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mudgee Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Orange Starr-Bowkett and Benefit Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>Sydney Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society No. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>No. 4 Bathurst Starr-Bowkett Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Sydney Starr-Bowkett, No. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Mudgee Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society No. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>No. 8 Sydney Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forbes Starr-Bowkett No. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>No. 5 Bathurst Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>No. 1 Cowra Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orange Starr-Bowkett Society, No. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Wellington Starr-Bowkett Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. 9 Sydney Starr-Bowkett Benefit Building Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Broken Hill Starr-Bowkett Society No. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leichhardt, Petersham and Annandale Starr-Bowkett Society No. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>Silver City Starr-Bowkett Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Barrier Starr-Bowkett Society, No. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>No. 1 Starr-Bowkett Newcastle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Newtown and Enmore No. 1 Starr-Bowkett Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is not the space in this paper to detail the growth, decline and distribution of Starr-Bowkett societies throughout Australia in the twentieth century, nor the space to examine carefully the factors that directed the pattern of growth. Table 3 provides an idea of the growth, decline, resurgence and then rapid decline in Starr-Bowkett societies in NSW during the twentieth century and it would be expected that this pattern was followed in the other states.
Table 3: Number of Starr-Bowkett Societies, NSW 1906-84\(^{16}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Societies</th>
<th>No. of members</th>
<th>Assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£124,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£464,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£1,127,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£1,813,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£2,798,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£2,799,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>£2,022,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>17,877</td>
<td>£1,685,381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>26,449</td>
<td>£1,614,288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>31,070</td>
<td>£3,21,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>27,726</td>
<td>£5,216,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>41,796</td>
<td>£8,342,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>41,074</td>
<td>$17,778,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>31,337</td>
<td>$21,295,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>22,888</td>
<td>$27,677,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>$23,345,498(^{57})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14,464</td>
<td>$22,824,739(^{58})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The height of Starr-Bowkett membership was in the early decades of the twentieth century with a resurgence occurring with the post-war economic boom. During both periods Starr-Bowkett filled the void left by formal financial institutions. In 1985 the Newtown-Enmore Starr-Bowkett Societies could boast that they had issued 75,815 shares, giving a lending power of $7.5 million, with $1,060,000 in ballots having taken place in the previous year, and advanced loans totalled $912,400 across five societies.\(^{59}\) But by 1997-98 only 29 societies\(^{60}\) remained operating in NSW. One interesting feature of the data in Table 3 is that it shows that Starr-Bowketts experienced a decline in number in NSW prior to the deregulation of the financial sector. Why Starr-Bowketts began their decline so early can only, at this stage of research, be compared with the concurrent growth of other co-operative finance schemes. Starr-Bowketts declined in number after 1965, whilst Building Societies and Credit Unions increased rapidly in terms of numbers and proportion of total financial assets and then declined just as rapidly\(^{61}\) as deregulation brought increasing competition into the housing finance market which was the mainstay of the co-operative finance sector. Further reforms of the sector arising from the Financial System Inquiry of 1997 brought Building Societies, Credit Unions and Friendly Societies under federal rather than state regulation. Other co-operative schemes are to remain under state legislation as long as that legislation is consistent with national competition principles and does not permit co-operatives to engage in anti-competitive behaviour such as exclusive dealing. Unless state legislation is amended in this manner co-operatives will be moved to federal oversight as long as they can obtain a licence as a deposit taking institution.\(^{62}\) What this will mean for the future of co-operative finance schemes in the various states is at this time unknown.

The structure and relatively small and localised nature of Starr-Bowkett societies has proved to be an advantage on many levels. It has allowed for personalised knowledge of members to be retained and has provided a degree of financial stability unknown to many other lending institutions especially in times of economic distress. In 70 years Starr-Bowkett societies in NSW have suffered a total loss of less than $4,000,\(^{63}\) and in 100 years of operation, the Newtown-Enmore Starr-Bowkett Societies have never had to call in a mortgage, as the personalised knowledge inherent in the Society has allowed repayments to be rescheduled to meet the member’s changed circumstances.\(^{64}\)
Yet, it can be argued that their localised nature has played a part in their decline. As the societies do not advertise, knowledge of their existence and the advantages that they offer in terms of thrift and interest-free loans are only spread by word of mouth. As the spread of the societies narrows the knowledge of the existence of the societies also narrows, it is therefore imperative for the knowledge base to be expanded. This paper and further research on Starr-Bowkett’s can be viewed as an attempt to expand the knowledge base.

Future research will detail and analyse the growth and spread of Starr-Bowkett societies during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the reasons for and extent of their ability to weather economic downturns; their role in providing finance for housing and small businesses; the sector of society that has and is currently accessing such sources of finance; and the extent to which the societies and the co-operative sector as a whole has been able to survive the deregulatory process. As the longest continually operating Starr-Bowkett Society in NSW, the Newtown-Enmore Branch, now the Starr-Bowkett Statewide Co-operative Society, provides an ideal resource for such a detailed investigation.

Starr-Bowkett societies have lasted over 160 years and in that time have provided housing finance and a means of building savings to innumerable people throughout Australia, many of whom would have been unable to attain their own home without the existence of this form of co-operative finance. Although initially under threat from reforms posited by the Wallis Inquiry and National Competition Policy guidelines on co-operatives, the future of Starr-Bowkett societies in NSW at least is assured with the decision of the NSW Government to update the relevant state legislation. Starr-Bowkett societies will have a future as long as their existence and the benefits associated with being a member of a non-profit, co-operative finance scheme that provides interest-free loans is recognised and publicised.

**Endnotes**

1. I would like to thank Mrs Joan Glennie, Past-Secretary of the Newtown-Enmore Starr-Bowkett Societies and current Director of the Starr-Bowkett Statewide Co-operative Society and member of the NSW Co-operative Housing and Starr-Bowkett’s Advisory Committee, for her assistance and enthusiasm. Thanks to anonymous referees whose helpful comments on this paper have presented new avenues of analysis for this topic.
2. T.E. Bowkett, ‘Freehold Property for Mechanics’, Notes of Lectures delivered by T.E. Bowkett at the Poplar Literary Institution, in June and July 1843; containing Instructions for the Formation of Societies, by means of which every mechanic in the country, receiving wages, however low in amount, may become a freeholder, London, John Cleave, 1843.
15. Ibid., September 2 and 9 1843.
28. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 44.
34. Ibid., pp. 56-60.
35. Ibid., pp. 56-60.
36. Ibid., pp. 56-60.
37. Ibid., p. 57; and Personal Communication with Joan Glennie, 24 January 2005.
38. Ibid., pp. 238, 353.
46. Cleary, *Building Society Movement*, p. 105; Robson Urban Growth, p. 156
53. For years 1868-1900, Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development*, pp. 250-3. Other years as indicated.
55. A major difficulty in presenting an Australia-wide picture of Starr-Bowketts Societies is the lack of any Australia-wide data. As the societies have always been under the control of the various States any data is scattered, and the ABS when it did collect data on Starr-Bowketts included such data in with co-operative housing schemes or terminating building societies and then ceased to collect any data on Starr-Bowketts.
58. Ibid.
61. In 1970s Building Societies controlled 2.8 per cent of total assets held by financial institutions in Australia which rose to 7.1 per cent in 1980, falling to 5.7 per cent in 1985 and 3.1 per cent by 1990. Credit Unions controlled 0.3 per cent in 1970, 1.4 per cent in 1980, 4.6 per cent in 1985 and 1.2 per cent in 1990. M.K. Lewis and R.H. Wallace, *The Australian Financial System*, Longman Cheshire, South Melbourne, 1993 reprint, p. 86
65. Archives of the Newtown-Enmore Branch from 1911 are held in Mitchell Library, Sydney.


From the ‘people’s war’ to the ‘people’s occupation’: Australian and Japanese communists, 1945-52

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University of Western Sydney

Between 1945 and 1952, Australians participated in the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF) in Japan, based in the Hiroshima prefecture. Among those Australians were members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and fellow travelers, who made contact with members of the Japan Communist Party (JCP). This paper seeks to explore the attitudes of the CPA towards Japanese labour and communist activity, and the interactions between Australian and Japanese communists. These attitudes and relationships reflected the CPA’s desire to aid the radical transformation of the Asia-Pacific region in the postwar era, and reveal a little-known aspect of Australian grassroots participation in the Occupation of Japan.

After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) changed its policy from one of condemning the war as ‘imperialist’ to one of support. The Communist Review informed CPA members in 1942 that ‘in the prosecution of a just war, a people’s war … it is obvious that the working class must become the leading force’[original emphasis]. Australian communists joined the armed forces to fight fascism and conduct political activity amongst the troops. However, these roles did not end in August 1945 with VJ Day, when the allies celebrated victory over Japan. Many Australian communists and fellow travelers went directly to Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF), and the aims for fighting the ‘people’s war’ were revived to wage the ‘people’s Occupation’. While many publications on the CPA give at least some attention to the uniformed communists of the Asia-Pacific War, those who went to Japan after hostilities ceased remain invisible. This paper, based on the early stages of current research, intends to examine CPA attitudes and practice towards Japan and its labour movement during the Occupation. Textual sources, including CPA publications and archival records, will primarily be used, supplemented by oral histories from Japanese communists. These sources indicate that there were interactions between Australian communists in the Occupation forces and Japanese communists, though, as with domestic CPA policies and activities, they were greatly impeded by the developing cold war.

W.J. Brown, in his account of communist soldiers in the Asia-Pacific War, asserts that it ‘is a rich part of CPA history that has largely been neglected. A more widely cast record of the many valuable experiences of Australian communists in the armed forces remains to be written’. This assertion can be extended to include those communists who joined BCOF. Occupation historiography remains largely centered on the United States, as not only did the United States dominate Occupation policies and practice, they have extended that dominance into the scholarly domain. This means that Australians and Australian policy in general rate little mention or analysis. There are only two main studies in Occupation literature that focus solely on the Australian experience. Of these, neither Davies’ The Occupation of Japan nor Wood’s The Forgotten Force mention communists or sympathisers in the Australian forces. In relation to the CPA, Wood does acknowledge that ‘Lance Sharkey, who was identified with meetings of communists in Asia, claimed later to be instrumental in the upsurge of communist success in Asia’. However, no mention is made specifically of Japan. Rather, communism is linked either to attempted Soviet interference in the Occupation, or to the Japanese communist movement. For example, Wood relates that in Tokyo on 24 June 1949 the Japanese Attorney General, Shunkichi Euda, declared that ‘only the presence of occupation troops kept Japanese communists from throwing the country into turmoil’ and in Washington a State Department official on 29 June 1949 claimed ‘Russia was pushing an active calculated campaign to communise Japan from within’.

Thus, the Occupation forces are portrayed as a defence against communism in Japan, not as a possible source of communist activity.

In Australian communist historiography, the Occupation of Japan does not make an appearance. Japan is only mentioned in terms of its militarism, ‘fascism’ and subsequent defeat. Discussions of the postwar period are preoccupied with domestic issues and the domestic decline of CPA influence within the context of the cold war.
The exception to this rule is coverage of CPA and trade union support of Indonesian independence. As Damousi states, after the glorious days of the war, CPA

popularity and respectability were shortlived. During the post-war years, the Party entered the most difficult phase of its history. In the climate of international tensions between the superpowers, the Communists came under close surveillance and were the subject of harassment and intimidation … The CPA indeed found its commitment and sacrifice during the war ‘forgotten and in vain’.  

The CPA’s, and individual communists’, commitment to the Occupation of Japan has never had the chance to be forgotten – it was and remains generally unknown. This neglected history forms part of the story of the CPA’s postwar difficulties, and also helps illuminate CPA policies beyond the domestic sphere, giving substance to claims it attempted to aid postwar movements in the Asia-Pacific region. It can be seen as an extension to the research conducted on the Asia-Pacific War by such persons as Johnston and Symons by extending research on uniformed communists beyond VJ day.

The CPA found itself in a relatively positive political environment during and after the Asia-Pacific War, one where it could pursue its internationalist ambitions. As Symons et al have stated,  

With the Curtin and Chifley governments exercising a powerful capacity to harness public enthusiasm for a more independent foreign policy, wartime controls, and economic planning, the CPA had a secure place from which to develop a perspective that was both internationalist and able to capture the spirit of the Australian radical nationalist tradition.

CPA attitudes towards Japan in the immediate post-hostilities period shared some characteristics with those of the Chifley government. Both, for instance, exhibited elements of duality. On the one hand, both wanted retribution for war atrocities; on the other, each wanted to encourage ‘democratic’ forces in Japan. In the rhetoric of communism, the former required the defeat and punishment of the ‘ruling class’ or ‘Japanese fascists’; the latter in giving support and encouragement to the Japanese working class and other revolutionary forces.

As in other sections of Australian society, the CPA viewed Emperor Hirohito as a war criminal and demanded his removal: ‘either the Emperor goes, or in years to come Japan will make the whole democratic world a Pearl Harbor’. R. Dixon, Assistant General Secretary of the CPA, in a speech delivered in Sydney on 11 August 1945, claimed that the ‘Son of Heaven is the highest representative, the symbol of that monstrous system of militarist-feudalist-fascism, that is characteristic of the Japanese ruling class. He must bear the responsibility for all the crimes perpetuated’. Many published articles called for retribution for the treatment of diggers, and attacked the zaibatsu, the ‘monopolistic capitalist super-trusts’ for their role in the war. Thus, there was both a parochial nationalist and internationalist ideological basis to the CPA’s attacks on Japanese ‘fascism’. There was also an orientalist undercurrent: in an April 1945 article, Rupert Lockwood wrote an article entitled ‘Why are Japanese So Backward?’ The article paints the Japanese peasantry as flesh-eating, Emperor-worshipping, head chopping peoples who sell their daughters into prostitution. Lockwood claims in this article that the ‘Japanese workers offer more hope than the backward peasants, but they need a separate article’. Despite Lockwood’s position on the Japanese peasantry, the CPA placed some hope in the capacity of workers and peasants to act as a revolutionary force in Japan, and indeed throughout the colonial territories of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In February 1945, Dixon declared:

In 1937 just before I left Moscow, Comrade Dimitrov in a conversation urged that the Australian Communist Party must do everything possible to make contact with the great mass of colonial peoples in the countries that border this country … We have a real job to do in the Pacific.

The theme of the ‘unleashing of great forces of democracy and progress in Asia’, as engendered by the war, occurred with regularity in CPA speeches and articles in the communist press throughout 1945. Australia, especially the CPA and trade unions, could nurture and guide the great unleashing. This scenario included Japan, but the great threat to CPA ambition was the United States:

The point we are concerned with here is not vengeance in itself. Above all, we are concerned that American policy hinders the unleashing of genuine democratic forces in Japan; it helps the continued suppression of Japanese workers and peasants – the only classes who can make for a democratic Japan living at peace with her neighbours.
Concurrent, then, with the spectre of Japanese militarism/fascism/imperialism, was a sense of paternalistic hope in the possibility for democratic change. The April 1945 *Communist Review* carried an article on Japan by P. Mortier, which explained:

> It is true that the Japanese labour movement has been denied any period of ‘normal’ development, such as we in Australia have enjoyed. Consequently, it never achieved a large numerical strength. But what it lacked in numbers was countered by its courage and virility.24

There is a sense that the articles were trying to convince membership of the viability of radical change in Japan. The *Tribune* published excerpts from the *London Daily Worker* that demonstrated Japan had previously possessed trade unions and communist activity, but these had been suppressed by ‘military fascism’.25 Earlier, an Australian sergeant submitted to the *Tribune* his personal story of a Japanese soldier. As the sergeant was escorting the captured soldier along a track, he stopped occasionally to offer items to him, such as a cigarette or piece of PK chewing gum, which were gratefully received. Suddenly, the Japanese soldier ‘stood up, tore off his cap, threw it on the ground, stamped on it and said, “Me-Australia!”’ as much as to say, “What the hell have we been fighting you for?”26 The sergeant’s story goes on to suggest: ‘Surely … this proves that the ordinary Japanese soldier and civilian could be taught to live along democratic lines if they were not shackled by a militaristic and blood thirsty caste.’27

Armed with this sense of missionary zeal and belief in the revolutionary potential of ‘ordinary’ Japanese, CPA members and sympathisers made their way to Japan to contribute to the great unleashing of democratic forces and counteract the effects of US policy. Over the next couple of years, the early CPA paternalistic, orientalist, vague sense of hope and encouragement towards the Japanese labour movement transformed into a sense of awe and admiration. The *Tribune* regularly carried articles to keep readers informed of events in Japan. For instance, it carried an article challenging the legitimacy of the first post-war elections in April 1946, claiming it was too early – ‘had the elections not been held prematurely, both the Socialists and the Communists would have gained formidable strength to fight the reactionaries in the Diet’.28 The article also alleged that ‘several Communist candidates were attacked and beaten up during the election campaign’.29 The perceived moral superiority of communists was also highlighted. When Japan Communist Party (JCP) leader Tokuda Kyuichi attended a political luncheon organised by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, he refused to eat the lavish meal. When queried over his behaviour, Tokuda was reported to have replied: ‘I am always in support of any good government measure. But in the midst of the current food crisis, may I enquire as to where all this rich food came from?’30

After May Day 1946, CPA concern began to grow over the Occupation’s treatment of Japanese workers. The term ‘kamikaze’ was given a new meaning – it emerged as a label to describe the activities of strikebreakers, who were ‘crashing picket lines of Japanese workers fighting for better wages and the right to organise’.31 These ‘new kamikaze’ began to appear, it was claimed, during and after the infamous Yomiuri dispute.32 A clear line was being drawn between Western icons of Japanese militarism and anti-labour actions. The article also reflected a common emerging theme – concern at the apparent US policy of turning Japan into a cold war ally against the Soviet Union. ‘Japan’s workers’, the article concluded, ‘allowed to develop democratically and to build their own free unions, would not support a war’.33 Encouragement of the labour movement was equated with the pursuit of peace.

In the lead-up to the planned general strike of 1 February 1947, the *Tribune* exuded admiration for the Japanese labour movement, and it represented the height of optimism for change in Japan from the CPA. ‘Japanese labour leaders’, asserted one article, ‘say that trade unions here reached the level of workers in more advanced countries in their recent strike struggles’.34 Detailing the struggles of the electrical workers, Japanese communist Shiga Yoshio claimed it ‘raised the Japanese labor movement to a new stage’. This was because it was not the fight of an individual enterprise-style union, but ‘the All-Japan Electrical Workers Union stood for struggle on a national scale’.35 It was precisely this development in the union movement, and its successful application, that inspired the fear amongst Occupation authorities and Japanese conservatives that led to the notorious general strike ban. After the general strike ban, obviously deplored by the CPA, *Tribune* articles and CPA speeches were increasingly imbued with fear and anger at the deterrent apparently imposed upon Japanese labour. One May 1947 article details the increasing censorship of leftwing, especially communist, publications, and alleges the attendance of US and Japanese ‘spies’ at communist meetings.36 On May Day 1947 in Osaka, the same article claimed, red flags were seized from demonstrators and replaced with white ones.37
As the so-called ‘reverse course’ in US policy became further apparent, *Tribune* coverage of Japan became even more nationalistic, anti-US and anti-Australian government in flavour. When MacArthur approved the sailing of Japanese whaling fleets in 1947, security and racial fears ran hot. Japanese whaling, and possibly pearlers, would ‘drive Australians out of the industry’ and would ‘be a definite danger from a military point of view’. Further, ‘poaching in Australian territorial waters and the abduction of aboriginal [sic] women are mathematical certainties if this Jap fleet is allowed to operate’. Economic revival of Japan was heavily criticised:

General MacArthur’s peace plan for Japan, which has the blessings of Dr Evatt, will transform that country into an appendage of Dollar Imperialism, and the cheap goods produced in Japanese factories, now run by American capitalists, will be used to capture the markets of Asia, so important to Australia, for the Yankee billionaires.

The statement exudes economic nationalism, quickly taking precedence over comradeship with Japanese workers. Criticism of ‘Emperor MacArthur’ became more obvious, and is best exemplified by the following joke that appeared in the *Tribune* in December 1947:

‘Did you see they’ve locked God up in the psycho ward?’
‘No, why?’
‘He’s been going around saying he’s General MacArthur’.

For the remainder of the Occupation, CPA publications regularly ran stories detailing the repression of workers and communists by Occupation authorities and the Japanese government. Stories of police bashings, raids on the JCP organ *Akahata*, and ‘persecution’ of Japanese POWs returning from the Soviet Union all made appearances. The removal of communists from many sectors of the Japanese workplace was especially newsworthy, for example the purge of the film industry, ‘modeled on the Thomas-Rankin Un-American Committee’s “red” probe’, and the proscribing of communists from government employment, headlined as ‘Japs Return to “Thought Control”’. The removal of the right to strike and bargain collectively for government workers was described as a ‘New Fascist Terror’, but there was some hope with the 1949 elections. The JCP won 36 seats (they previously held four), which had been ‘won in the face of every kind of persecution and terror by the US occupation forces and the Japanese secret police’. In a letter to the editor, L. Murphy complained:

In addition to using troops to smash Australian strikes [1949 Coal Strike], Chifley & Co. have used our troops to smash the struggles of the Japanese workers at Hiroshima… This is a blot on Australia’s good name that must be wiped out. Every trade union, every worker, every citizen should protest to Mr Chifley. Demand that he protest to MacArthur, that he withdraw our troops from Japan.

Australian troops were being used for an agenda that was anathema to CPA views. Despite Murphy’s appeal, Australian workers remained rather reticent on the issue.

Economic nationalism and security issues were also exacerbated by the trajectory of US policy in the latter part of the Occupation. Of concern was the dumping of cheap Japanese textiles and other goods onto the Asian market (which would affect the growing textile industry of Australia), and proposals to settle Japanese in New Guinea and the Pacific (ostensibly to relieve overcrowding, according the *Tribune*, but actually ‘to provide the imperialists with “reliable” fighting forces against democrats and militarists in Southern Asia and Australasia’). CPA publications, therefore, reflect the duality of its approach towards Japan throughout the Occupation period: supportive of their Japanese comrades and appropriately outraged at their treatment by Occupation authorities and the Japanese government, while at the same time fearful of Japanese militarism and economic competition, combined with a level of orientalist mistrust and suspicion. Additionally, a sense of the moral superiority of the communist was maintained. An article in the *Communist Review* criticised the Reverend Frank Coaldrake, an Australian Anglican missionary in Japan, for riding in a rickshaw. Comparatively, ‘when he was in the East recently, our [CPA] General Secretary, Lance Sharkey, wouldn’t ride in a rickshaw. He said he couldn’t bring himself to use a man as an animal’.

CPA members made direct contact with JCP members while part of BCOF. Considering the influence of the emerging cold war and bipolar world on Occupation policies, this had to be done with the utmost secrecy. J.B. Miles told the Central Committee Plenum in 1947 that
Although it will be necessary to be extremely careful as to what may be said publicly, ... our comrades in the Occupation Forces in Japan have done quite a good job in assisting the really democratic movement in Japan, including the Party, and so far as possible we are sending through our comrades the literature desired by members of the Japanese Party. The need for care is due to the fact that the United States dominates the situation, [and] they are continually on the alert dealing with the Communists, trying to discover [liaison] between Japanese Communists and other progressive people in the Occupation Forces and if they knew the facts they would become still busier.\footnote{51}

The CPA made donations to the Hiroshima District Committee of the JCP. For example, on 22 June 1946, ¥1765 was given, another ¥2100 on the 22 July 1946, and ¥1000 on an unspecified date.\footnote{52} Despite their eager intentions, there were many barriers for Occupation comrades to overcome. Language was the major obstacle, both for verbal communication and reading of written materials, including Japanese newspapers for the Australians, or material in English for the Japanese. Additionally, Akahata was continually getting its circulation reduced via ‘newsprint restrictions’. Comparatively, the larger, non-left newspapers, ‘so fantastically pro-American and anti-Russian that they were generally regarded as unreliable’, were busily increasing their circulation levels.\footnote{53}

Similar stories emerge from the Japanese side. Okamoto Kazuhiko, now 87 years old, joined the JCP in 1945. Despite the language barriers, Okamoto-san came to know a few of the Australian soldiers, in particular a man named ‘Sam’, whose family had a property somewhere near Sydney. Sam was part of a group of about six BCOF soldiers who were members of the CPA, and who asked Okamoto-san if they could hold their meetings in his home. Okamoto-san obliged, and around ten such meetings were held there. Okamoto-san also received a copy of ‘an Australian Communist newspaper’ from the group. Unable to read English himself, he sent the copy on to the head JCP office. Strict censorship made it difficult for the JCP to gain access to international communist newspapers, so the grateful head office wrote a letter of thanks to Okamoto-san ‘for the valuable information’.\footnote{54}

Okamoto-san also remembers the same six Australian communists giving money to the local JCP to help fund a communist candidate for the general elections in 1946. He was given a cake tin filled with rolled-up ¥1000, or possibly ¥10,000, notes.\footnote{55} According to Okamoto-san, the JCP needed ¥2,000,000 to fund a candidate, and the Australian communists provided ¥300,000. Apparently, they gave similar amounts of money to the local JCP around ten times. The funds were also used for office-keeping expenses, and the making of leaflets and posters.\footnote{56} If correct, this is quite a remarkable level of financial assistance, and says something about the number of CPA members or sympathisers who must have been present in BCOF.

Watanabe Rikito, now 77 years old, also remembers Australian communist soldiers. Watanabe-san joined the JCP in October 1946. Often, when Watanabe-san was making speeches on the street, Australian soldiers on motorbikes would pull up, take a red handkerchief out of their back pocket, and wave and cheer.\footnote{57} Australian soldiers also visited the JCP office in Hiroshima but, due to language difficulties, little interaction could take place: ‘we basically sang L’Internationale together, shook hands, they gave us money and then we parted’.\footnote{58}

Like Okamoto-san, Watanabe-san remembers a fairly sustained effort by CPA members of BCOF to aid the JCP financially. While at first they visited the JCP office directly, the cold war and subsequent clampdown on communist activity in Japan made this increasingly difficult. By 1949, Australian communist soldiers would drive a jeep up to the JCP office, slow down without stopping while driving past, throw in a piece of cloth wrapped around stones and money, then drive off. By 1950, even this practice had become too dangerous and donations ceased. Watanabe-san remembers these donations being used for election campaigns, production of leaflets, Party activities, and, since the full-time JCP members received little in wages, items such as commuting expenses.\footnote{59}

The CPA’s policies towards Occupied Japan, and the direct contact between Australian and Japanese communists,\footnote{60} demonstrate the seriousness with which the CPA took its role in nurturing the ‘great unleashing’ of revolutionary forces in Asia and the Pacific, leading them to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the Allied Occupation. Beginning as uncertain and paternalistic, CPA media coverage quickly turned to one of admiration for the struggles of Japanese labour.
At the same time, a level of suspicion was maintained towards non-working class Japanese, especially in relation to war guilt, economic and security issues. Contact between Australian communists in BCOF and Japanese communists was done at great personal risk – not only did they have to deal with anti-communist offensives, they also had to violate BCOF’s non-fraternisation policy. Additionally, there were language and cultural barriers, and the recent memory of being wartime enemies. The discourse of communism and class allowed for a ‘dialogue’, at least temporarily, that transcended issues of race and other difficulties. Additionally, both optimistically shared, as Symons once described, ‘a deeply felt desire for a better postwar world’, and believed their actions would contribute to its creation.

However, CPA involvement in and attitudes towards the Allied Occupation of Japan were as nationalist as they were internationalist. As Gollan has asserted, the ‘greatest significance to be attached to the idea of the ‘people’s army’ [applicable also to the ‘people’s occupation], and the propaganda surrounding it, is that it was an incident in the growing claim of communists to express the genuine interests of the Australian nation’. Whether attempting to help forge a strong labour movement in Japan, or funding communist candidates in Japanese elections, or criticising economic practices and security issues in Occupation policies, the CPA was ultimately concerned with an Australian future and Australian workers. Overall, CPA involvement in the Occupation forms an integral part of the Party’s postwar experience from the early euphoria to the rapid decline in a bipolar world. Contact between Australian and Japanese communists also reveals the multifaceted nature of the Occupation experience – that aside from the ‘big players’, the governments of Japan, the United States and allies such as Australia, other groups participated in the Occupation at a grassroots level, attempting to pursue an independent agenda and forging their own postwar connections with like-minded Japanese. The Allied Occupation of Japan was a forum for the intersection of contesting ideas, each competing to influence the postwar trajectory of Japan’s reformed modernity and identity. The CPA, in its own minor way, contributed to this historical episode.

Endnotes

1. From 1945 to 1951, the CPA was known as the Australian Communist Party (ACP), but its more common name/acronym has been used throughout this paper.
18. *Ibid*.
22. E.J. Hanson, 14th National Congress 1945, in ML MSS 5021 Add-on 1936 2 (Microfilm).
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Tribune, 12 July 1946, p. 5. This article originally appeared in the Nippon Times, but made its way to the Tribune via 'a digger'.
32. Ibid. When workers at the Yomiuri newspaper locked out management and ran the factory themselves (a tactic known as 'production control'), the Occupation authorities approved the use of military and police force to get management back in control.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
42. Tribune, 2 November 1949, p. 2; 5 October 1949, p. 2.
43. Tribune, 28 July 1948, p. 5.
44. Tribune, 15 September 1948, p. 2.
45. Tribune, 4 August 1948, p. 2.
47. The writer is referring to a case where workers protested against planned job dismissals during the 1949 purges. This case is known in English as the Hiroshima Incident, in Japanese as Nikko. Australian troops played a minor role in protecting management and dispersing the workers.
48. L. Murphy, 'Troops in Japan', Letter to the Editor, Tribune, 19 October 1949.
49. Tribune, 1 May 1948, p. 2; Tribune, 10 September 1949, p. 2; Tribune, 10 January 1949, p. 6.
51. J.B. Miles, Speech to C.C. Plenum 14,15, 16 February 1947, pp. 2-3, ML MSS 5021 86(155), Speeches at Meetings of Central Committee and Political Committee, February 1945-January 1948.
54. Interview with Okamoto Kazuhiko, Kure, Japan, 1 September 2004.
55. Ibid.
56. Emails from Yoshioka Itsuko (Interpreter), Follow-up questions from interview, 6 September 2004 and 9 September 2004.
57. Interview with Watanabe Rikito, Hiroshima, Japan, 8 September 2004.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. No evidence has been found thus far to suggest there was any direct contact between Australian communists and representatives of the Soviet Union in Japan.
61. This policy stated that BCOF soldiers could not associate with Japanese, especially not in their homes.
Fellow-travelling in the Cold War: the Australian peace movement

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This paper concerns non-communist activists in a communist-controlled organisation. Such activists were usually dismissed as ‘dopes’ or ‘fellow-travellers’ by contemporary opinion and in subsequent literature. By examining a range of activists in the peace movement during the early Cold War both within and outside religious organisations, the paper seeks to challenge this established view. Generally, such non-communist activists have escaped historians’ attention. The paper seeks to restore to these individuals their moral integrity and political identity, which the label ‘dupe’ denies. In doing so, the paper will also question David Caute’s definition of ‘fellow-travelling’

In his ‘Man to Man’ radio broadcast on 25 September 1953, Prime Minister Robert Menzies denounced the Australian peace movement. It was, he alleged, a communist ‘front’ that cunningly ensnared the unwary Christian fellow-traveller:

> The Communists are very clever men, naturally much cleverer than their dupes. Their designs are so treacherous and evil that they would never succeed in Australia except in disguise. The best Communist disguise…is to put up a ‘front’, a public showing, which appears to be exactly opposite to Communism….Thus, atheistic Communism, the arch-enemy of Christianity, is willing to come in behind a Christian clergyman and use his name, provided that he is sufficiently unaware….It creeps up behind this peace-loving Christian and, by devious means, encourages a peace propaganda.

Implicitly, Menzies was arguing that deception and duplicity by communists was the overriding explanation for non-communists supporting the peace movement. Thus, non-communist Christian activists within the Australian Peace Council (APC) were either dupes or fellow-travellers. ‘Nothing nauseates me more’, he proclaimed in 1950, ‘than to discover the skill with which these communists can put into their vanguard some deluded Minister of the Christian religion’. This assumption, that non-communist proponents of peace were ‘duped’ and ‘deluded’ by communists, was one that Menzies, and others, persistently adhered to even during the decidedly Christian-controlled Convention on Peace and War in 1953.

This paper will argue for a contrary position: that peace movement activism – even when it occurred through the communist-dominated Australian Peace Council – was different from and more complex than the customary view. The paper will examine a range of individuals, both religious and non-religious, and one organisation, the Student Christian Movement, to demonstrate that the received wisdom about fellow-travelling or delusion ignores or, at the least, under-estimates, the sincerity, dedication and longevity of the commitment to the cause of peace. The customary view also fails to take into account the allegiance of Christians to the peace movement in the face of staunch opposition from their hierarchy, indicated by the endorsement by the leaders of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches for the apocalyptic anti-communist ‘Call to the People of Australia’ in 1950. To maintain active commitment, this paper will argue, depended on moral courage and political steadfastness far more than on the ‘devious means’ of the Communist Party, as Menzies put it, to entrap the uninformed. Although the international literature on the peace movement is impressive, studies of the Australian experience are uneven. Similarly, analyses and biographies of overseas fellow-travellers are extensive while comparable Australian studies are rare. This paper seeks to fill, in small measure, this historiographical gap. Its focus is on the previously overlooked non-communist activists in the peace movement during the early Cold War.

It should be stated at the outset that the issue of communist control of the APC is not in dispute. Despite constant denials from the Council to the contrary, the Communist Party was the early driving force behind the APC. The close involvement of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in the establishment of the APC was confirmed by an ‘insider’ – its first organising secretary, Ian Turner: ‘The post-war Australian peace movement had its origin in a top-secret meeting of party members…early in 1949. That meeting agreed to initiate a broadly-based Australian Peace Council’. He believed that the Party was ‘over-manipulative’ and that this led to the departure of individuals such as J.F. Cairns and Leonard Mann.
The religious peace activists

The political views of many ecclesiastical activists had their origins in the roots of early Christianity. Friedrich Engels pointed out that early Christianity was a movement of the oppressed against the existing social order. Thus, the Melbourne theologian, Rev. C.M. Churchward, believed that the Marxist aim of ‘each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ was nothing more than ‘the social and economic aspect of the kingdom of God on earth’. He declared that it was the task of religion to ‘Christianise Communism since the Christianising of capitalism was impossible because it was a system based on ‘selfishness’, Soon after the end of World War II, Rev. David Garnsey, secretary of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) believed that Christians were involved in ‘the struggle of a dying order’. In an address to the 1947 National SCM conference, Canon Maynard stated that Christians who accepted the Marxist view of history could only regret that it was linked to an anti-religious philosophy. These statements suggest clearly that religious activism was grounded in views that had their genesis in traditional Christian theology. In Australia, ministers of religion challenged military involvement from the late nineteenth century onwards. Between the two world wars, and especially in the 1930s, a plethora of Christian-based peace organisations dotted the political landscape. These included the United Peace Council, the Christian Pacifist Movement, the Legion of Christian Youth, the Anti-War Christian Fellowship, the Methodist Peace Committee and the United Christian Peace Movement. Religious activists were also heavily involved with the League of Nations Union and the International Peace Campaign. With the spectre of both Hiroshima and the apparent threat of global conflict associated with the onset of the Cold War haunting the post-war years, the issue of international peace once again assumed prominence for religious pacifists. Thus, if support for the peace movement derived primarily from religious outlook, we need to question the presumption of delusion.

While the aftermath of World War II found many men and women of religion committed to alternative ways of resolving international disputes (a widespread sentiment that reached its apotheosis in the establishment of the United Nations), the onset of the Cold War forced politics into rigid ideological frameworks. The space for occupying middle ground or a ‘third way’ sharply contracted. In effect, this meant that religious activists who questioned western government policies often found themselves in alliance with the Communist Party, the only other significant force prepared (or obliged, given its umbilical Soviet attachment) to challenge these policies of the West. Against the backdrop of a hostile political environment, the pressure from their own churches to refrain from association with the APC,
and the possibility of loss of employment, it was an act of considerable political will to challenge the conservative ideological hegemony and advocate a position that the majority of Australians found anathema. To ascribe naïve fellow-travelling to such dedicated activists wrongly implies woolly-headed ignorance of the consequences of collaborating with communists.

For those influenced by a religious theology, particularly Catholicism, a ‘just’ war had to fulfil seven conditions before it could be supported. In an essay detailing his opposition to nuclear war, E.I. Watkins explains why a nuclear war could not meet three of these seven conditions. Namely, that only right means may be employed in the conduct of the war; there must be a reasonable chance of victory; and the good that probably could be achieved must outweigh even the probable, if not certain, evil effects of the war. The fundamental difference between medieval wars and modern wars was that a modern war fought with nuclear weapons meant the possible destruction of all humanity and was a clear violation of these prerequisites. This was the core of the argument in Abbe Jean Boulier’s pamphlet circulated by the NSW APC, where he called on people to ‘give testimony of your Christianity on the petition where men, all men, can offer evidence of their humanity’. However, in only a few instances did mainstream Catholic organisations accept this argument and it was mainly other religious groups that were active in the peace movement, at least until the Vietnam War.

One exception was in France, which had a mass Communist Party and majority Catholic population. At the end of World War II the Catholic Church sent priests into the factories to counteract communist influence. Their experiences there of fighting social injustices convinced many to adopt a Marxist analysis of society. One, Fr. Montuclard, saw the Communist Party as a ‘kind of temporal arm of the church’. In Britain, Alan Ecclestone, a Church of England priest, joined the Communist Party along with his wife in 1948. For Ecclestone, it was a ‘gesture one makes to affirm one’s belief in the triumph of that movement of the whole human family to take its affairs into its own hands and to order its life in the ways which the Spirit requires’. In Australia in 1947, The Beacon, the periodical of the Unitarian Church, called on trade unionists to refuse to build the Woomera Rocket Range. This was two years before the formation of the APC, and indicates a long-standing commitment to peace issues. In August 1950 The Beacon specifically rejected prayer alone as a means of achieving world peace and insisted on the need of ‘determined political action’ to achieve this. Thus we can see that numerous religious peace activists drew on their own religious ideology to justify working on peace issues with communists.

Alf Dickie was one clergyman who faced strident hostility from within his own church over his peace activism. In his 1973 retirement speech, as Chairman of the Congress for International Co-operation and Disarmament, Dickie spoke of the difficulties he encountered from within the Presbyterian Church during the early part of the Cold War. He acknowledged that in the ‘late 1940s and early ‘fifties I must have been a terrible burden to my church’ and added that ‘it would not have surprised me if my pastoral tie with my congregation had been severed’. The crucial point Dickie made is that it was ‘important’ that his peace activity was carried out as ‘an accredited minister of my church’. During the Cold War, Dickie fought strongly for the right to be both an ordained minister and a peace activist. There was for him a strong congruence between his commitment to the peace movement, and his deeply held Christian perspective, and they could not be separated.

In June 1948, Dickie distributed the self-published pamphlet Should Such a Faith Offend? to the residents of North Essendon, where his church was located. Dickie stressed that ‘[t]his message I have given and will continue to give as if the Lord is my judge and not men; for if all who heard me were opposed to my message, I could give no other’. This underscored Dickie’s devotion to political activity even if it were to cost him his job as a minister. Such faith was entwined with his complaint that ‘the inactivity of the organized church in matters that affect the well-being of men has been an embarrassment to reformers of all ages’. While rejecting Communism as a ‘false religion’, he believed ‘that the zeal of the Communists in the study, propaganda and practice of their faith is a standing rebuke to the apathy of Christians in relation to their own faith’. Dickie’s political activity can therefore be placed within the radical stream that has often existed within Christianity.

Up to the outbreak of World War II, Frank Hartley had been a convinced pacifist. But the brutal nature of the Hitler regime and the need to ensure its defeat convinced him that this position was no longer viable, and he attempted to enlist as a private soldier. Since he was already a Methodist Minister, the church refused permission and he enlisted as a military Chaplain. Hartley served with great distinction and bravery in New Guinea, often risking his life to take letters and other comforts to the front line troops.
On his return trip home to Australia, he was alarmed to find his fellow officers warning about the dangers of a powerful Soviet Union and the growth of Communism, and the need to prepare for the next war. As the propaganda offensive against the Soviet Union and Communism increased, Hartley threw himself into the peace and civil liberties campaigns. In his view, he was defending the ideals that millions of people had died for during the war.\(^{33}\) He rejected the ideological polarisation of the Cold War, and believed that people of good will could overcome division. But Hartley was subjected to significant attacks from his own church for his political activity. Like Dickie, Hartley believed that there was a clear connection between his political activity and his Christian beliefs. If, at any time, the Methodist Conference had directed him to cease his political activity Hartley would quit the church rather than submit to being silenced.\(^{34}\) On the other hand, Hartley was occasionally able to garner some support for his views. At the February 1950 Methodist Conference, a motion on international affairs, that he proposed, denied war was inevitable and pledged support for the cause of world peace. It resolved ‘to urge upon the Commonwealth Government our deep sense of the incompatibility with Christian principles of any preparation for atomic, hydrogen, or germ warfare.\(^{35}\) The motion passed — even if most of those present later neglected to translate resolution into action.

The third ‘peace parson’ was Victor James, a Unitarian Minister. The roots of the Unitarian Church lie in the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, which ushered in the modern world. Over successive centuries, it came to reject the orthodox Christian theistic view of the world.\(^ {36}\) In the early twentieth century, two leaders of the church, John Dietrich and Curtis Rose, adopted a religious humanism perspective and in 1933 signed a humanist manifesto.\(^ {37}\) While a wide variety of theological and philosophical views existed within the church, it has consistently supported liberal, social, and ethical issues.\(^ {38}\) Its involvement with the peace movement therefore represented a continuation of a long-standing tradition in the church to support such campaigns. James, who was to play an active role in the APC, arrived in Melbourne from England in June 1947. Previously he had been a Minister in Somerset and South Wales.\(^ {39}\) Just before he retired as Minister of Melbourne’s Unitarian Church in June 1969, he asserted that his goal in life had been to ‘seek the truth and serve humanity’.\(^ {40}\) James believed that humanity’s progress to a more open and fulfilling society was blocked by the ‘archaic beliefs of Christianity’. James therefore stood within the humanist traditions of the Unitarian Church, and believed that this was ‘a philosophy of action’ which required an active participation in campaigns to change the world.\(^ {41}\) Apart from his involvement in the APC, James also addressed other issues. In a radio broadcast in June 1950 on 3XY, he condemned the sacking of Dr Paul James from the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital due, in part, to his involvement in the APC.\(^ {42}\)

Religious organisations as well as individual clergymen also supported the post-World War II peace movement. At its first post-war general committee meeting the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) passed a key resolution that shaped its activities in the immediate post-war period. It called on ‘all its members to do the utmost in their power that the post-war period may not be built on hatred, but on the sure foundation of that forgiveness of God which alone can unite people…’\(^ {43}\) Five hundred people attended the 1947 annual conference of the SCM at Corio. The members were disturbed about ‘the injustice, disorder and tragedy in the world’ and committed themselves to political action to resolve these problems.\(^ {44}\) Gordon Riley, who had just returned from missionary work in South Africa reported that the ‘native population is terrorized by repressive legislation’ and described how he and others challenged segregation in the church.\(^ {45}\) A study book, \textit{Christian Faith in Action}, issued by the conference, urged the SCM to ‘co-operate with non-Christians in the pursuit of limited aims which seem to hold the greatest possibility of justice’. Kurt Metz, who attended the conference, made a call for a joint conference with the Melbourne University Labour Club, because it was engaged ‘in action against the worst of our social ills: Imperialism, fascism, racial and religious discrimination, and segregation’.\(^ {46}\)

Two SCM members, Heather Wakefield and Judith Lyell, were foundation members of the APC, with Heather Wakefield being elected to the interim national executive.\(^ {47}\) The Melbourne University SCM voted to send two delegates to the APC Congress and hear a report back which would determine its future support. One reason was that the SCM desired a direct role in the formulation of the APC policy, to be decided at the Congress. It also emphasised that in order to avoid total communist control it was important that non-communist organisations play an active part in the organisation.\(^ {48}\) In July, the Melbourne University SCM voted 48 to ten with seven abstentions to oppose the bill to ban the
Communist Party. However, by August it had withdrawn from the APC. Its concern was with the degree of Communist Party domination over the direction of the APC. Despite this withdrawal, the SCM had not succumbed to conservative Cold War policies, as its resolution on the Communist Party Dissolution Act indicated. Although unwilling to work with communist-influenced organisations, it remained actively committed to ideals of the peace movement.

The central point about the religious figures involved in the peace movement is that they were activists. They were dedicated to doing more than issuing routine propaganda against the horrors of war. Once they made this decision, it bought them into contact with the Communist Party, which was the only other significant body active on the peace issue during the early years of the Cold War. The other key element, as stated above, is that all the religious figures had a long-standing involvement in peace issues prior to the formation of the APC. Whatever illusions some of them harboured about the Soviet Union, they must be seen in conjunction with their religious views.

**Other non-communist peace activists**

William Morrow, a Labor Party Senator from Tasmania, remained committed to fighting for peace through the APC structure. This commitment, along with his other strong socialist views, helps explain his loss of re-endorsement for the 1953 elections, and his disappearance from mainstream parliamentary politics. Morrow’s political outlook can be traced back both to the radical traditions of the early Australian labour movement and to his support for the Soviet Union. Such views were well known when he was first elected to the Senate in 1946, and they never fundamentally altered during his long political life.

Morrow first joined the Labor Party in 1908 and combined this with support for the militant tactics of the Industrial Workers of the World. During World War I, Morrow played an active role in the anti-conscription movement in Queensland, thus establishing his first link with what was to be a long-lasting connection with the peace movement. Like many pioneer socialists, Morrow hailed the Bolshevik Revolution and its ideals, which he later believed were embodied in Stalin’s Russia. In the late 1930s, both as secretary of the Tasmanian Australian Railways Union and as a supporter of the Movement Against War and Fascism, Morrow was again active in the peace movement. This led to his first expulsion from the Labor Party in 1938, when he challenged press reports that a motion supporting ‘universal physical training’ for home defence had passed the State Conference unanimously. Morrow’s commitment to the peace movement and radical politics rather than a possible career in the Labor Party was expressed a few days later when he remarked at a public meeting: ‘If the price of staying in the Labor Party is my silence, than the Labor Party can go to Hell’. By the time of the 1944 State Conference, Morrow was back in the ALP without having to recant his position and he was elected to the state executive. However, by the time of the referendum to ban the CPA, Morrow’s star within the ALP was in decline. At the 1951 Federal Conference, his was the only vote in support of widespread nationalisation. Morrow’s final departure from the ALP was made without regret and he devoted a large part of the rest of his life to the peace movement and other progressive issues. Morrow’s political outlook had been shaped by his early involvement in the Australian labour movement, and the heroic period of the Russian Revolution. Once his deeply entrenched views are located in this broader historical context, Morrow cannot be categorised so quickly as a ‘fellow-traveller’.

Many Australians during the Cold War considered Jessie Street to be a traitor to her class and country. With family roots that could be traced back via her father to Alfred the Great, and as the wife of a Judge of the Supreme Court, who later became NSW Chief Justice, Jessie Street was guaranteed a comfortable life. However, her commitment to radical causes, which became more pronounced from the late 1930s onwards, alienated her from the vast majority of Australians. Just after the first APC Congress in 1950, her commitment to the international peace campaign took her overseas for six years and away from family and friends. In common with many other peace activists of this era, Street’s loyalty to the peace movement came at considerable personal cost.

While Street, due to her inherited wealth, did not suffer personally during the Great Depression, her observation of the hardships imposed on tens of thousands of Australians convinced her of the necessity of a socialist society replacing a capitalist one. In fact prior to this she had often voted for the conservative parties.
From an early age, Street expressed strong support for feminism supporting issues such as equal pay and job opportunities. In March 1931, on behalf of the United Associations, she issued a circular opposing the dismissal of married women teachers. When Street travelled to the Soviet Union in 1938, and discovered that the train driver was a woman, she became convinced of the link between feminism and socialism. In a similar way to Bill Morrow, Street never lost her faith in the Soviet Union and the (mis)apprehension that it was building a just and humane society. At the end of the war Jessie Street seemed destined for a career in Labor politics. John Curtin appointed her as the sole woman on the Australian delegation to the founding conference of the United Nations to be held in San Francisco in April and June 1945. There she spoke with passion in support of Clause 8, which guaranteed full equality between men and women. Street returned to Sydney confident that she would win pre-selection for a parliamentary seat and make a lasting contribution to the welfare and social justice of Australians.

However, the NSW branch of the ALP became strongly influenced by committed anti-communist forces in the immediate post-war period. At its June 1946 Conference, a strongly worded eight-point resolution was passed denouncing the Communist Party. Street’s support for the Soviet Union, her ardent feminism, and espousal of the United Nations as a forum for solving international disputes made her unacceptable to the new leadership. When it sought, in vain, her resignation from organisations that it considered ‘communist fronts’, she was expelled from the ALP. When she stood as an independent Labor candidate in the 1949 elections, her election leaflet denied that she was a communist or the organisations to which she belonged to were communist fronts, and called for a mass peace campaign. With absolutely no chance of winning, Street departed from the ALP, just as Bill Morrow would a few years later, with few regrets. She remained committed to campaigning on peace and feminist issues for the rest of her political life.

Brian Fitzpatrick was a foundation member of the APC. This represented a continuation of his support for radical causes and socialist ideals. From September 1947, Fitzpatrick disseminated his views in an erratically published monthly newspaper The Australian Democrat. In its first issue, Fitzpatrick explained the aim of the paper was to ‘address readers who believe in toleration which is the essence of democracy, and who are prepared to lend themselves to a stiffening of the democratic spirit … ’. It was an attempt to challenge the increasing threats to curb the civil rights of communists and other dissidents. Fitzpatrick’s consistent defence of the civil liberties of communists made him a target of bitter attacks from anti-communist forces. It was alleged in federal parliament, for example, that Fitzpatrick had been expelled from the ALP because he was a communist. This dominant climate of anti-communism made it more difficult for radical liberals to offer any criticism of the Soviet Union. It would have meant for such individuals giving the appearance of subscribing to the ideology of the political forces they detested. At the Lowe Royal Commission when asked, Fitzpatrick could not recall having ever written anything critical of the Soviet Union. This made it more difficult for him to circumvent the charge that he was nothing more than a ‘fellow-traveller’.

Jim Cairns, a Melbourne University lecturer, was also a foundation member of the APC. Cairns had shown his support for civil liberties by chairing public meetings for the embattled Australian-Soviet Friendship League president, John Rodgers, and was chosen by the Communist Party fraction to be its candidate for foundation chair of the APC. His membership was to last less than 12 months: he resigned over the Communist Party’s excessively heavy-handed control. Indeed, his critical outlook and rejection of dogma made him an unsuitable communist, and he knew it. Yet Cairns never became anti-communist. Within a few years, in the December 1955 federal election in the seat of Yarra, Cairns was prepared to accept covert help from communists to defeat S.M. Keon, a leader of the breakaway anti-communist forces within the ALP. At the 1959 Peace Congress, Cairns refused to support dissidents including former communists and secretaries of the APC, who wanted to condemn Soviet as well as American aggression. Cairns’ reasons were based on his idealised concept of the need for a united movement and a refusal to support those who would risk this in the pursuit of higher ideals. Cairns was no dupe.

Conclusion

During the Cold War most observers discredited or dismissed the religious and non-communist peace activists as naive dupes or deluded fellow-travellers. Yet, as we have seen, these activists were motivated by a high degree of idealism on peace issues. This idealism and involvement predated the Communist
Party’s embrace of the peace movement in early 1949. Refusal to criticise the Soviet Union was, however, a distinguishing feature of the fellow-traveller – a product, in large part, of being trapped in a bi-polar world in which shades of opinion were limited and a decision regarding ‘which side are you on?’ had to be made. Such naïve faith in the inherent virtue and goodwill of the Soviet Union and the linked assumption that only the western powers threatened peace made the fellow-traveller susceptible to the allegation that he or she was a victim of communist duplicity. This sympathy for the Soviet Union shaped Caute’s analysis of the phenomenon: ‘Basically, fellow-travelling involves commitment at a distance... It is remote-control radicalism’. Caute thereby implies that, characteristically, the fellow-traveller is not especially interested in working with local communists or concerned about the struggle for socialist causes within one’s own country. This paper has strongly suggested that this was not the case, at least with fellow-travellers within the peace movement. Instead, as Turner has commented, they were ‘men and women who made their stand in public and who caught both the wrath of bourgeois society and the contempt of anti-Stalinists’. And this brings us back to Menzies’ ‘Man to Man’ broadcast. His statement that communists were, ipso facto, cleverer than the ‘peace-loving Christian’ who was easily out-maneuved denies the ‘dupes’ their agency. One of these ‘dupes’, Rev. Frank Hartley, was reported as stating that, insofar as peace activity was concerned, the Communist Party ‘relied upon him, a good

Endnotes

1. Transcript of Broadcast, ‘Man to Man – Australia Today’, Records of the Friends’ Peace Committee (Victoria), State Library of Victoria (SLV), MS 11096, Box 2742/5.
7. See, for example, the two-column letter from two of the ‘peace parsons’, Hartley and James, to The Herald, 2 February 1950; Victorian Executive, Australian Peace Council, You Can’t Ban Peace, Melbourne, 1950, p. 2, in Francis Hartley papers, Box 20, File 6, University of Melbourne archives; Marion Hartley, The Truth Shall Prevail, Melbourne, Spectrum Publications, 1982, pp. 251-4.
35. ‘This Goodly Fellowship’, *The Spectator and Methodist Chronicle*, vol. LXXVI, no. 12, 24 March, p. 179.
50. ‘Forum’, *The Australian Intercollegian*, vol. 53, no. 6, 1 August 1950, p. 96.
52. Ibid., pp. 41-2, 34-5, 50-1, 109, 112-15, 153.
Class, language and Labor tradition: towards the synthesis of discourse and experience

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This paper contributes to the ongoing theoretical discourse between cultural materialism and discourse analysis. Inclusive social and cultural histories have added undoubted richness to the fabric of labour history. Yet such scholarly developments have unfairly disconnected histories of institutions from processes of class formation and identity construction. I propose one way forward that seeks to mediate the poststructuralist claims within the field of cultural materialism, in which the themes of 'class, language and Labor tradition' can be usefully linked and each revealed more fully. Re-conceptualising Labor’s past in turn provides practical clues as to Labor’s present malaise and possible regeneration.

This paper is a simultaneous argument about class its relations to collective, institutional action. It is also a critical assessment of the role of discourse within those fields and upon the early Australian Labor Party (ALP). I will argue that these three fields can be usefully linked and that each reveals itself more fully through a theoretical approach that synthesises discourse with cultural materialism, understood as experience. This then is a contribution to what Sean Scalmer terms the ‘ongoing dialogue concerning the relative virtues of culturalist Marxism and discourse analysis in the study of labour and social history’.

I propose one way forward that seeks to mediate the poststructuralist claim upon fragmentation and perspective within the field of cultural materialism, while recognising that a final synthesis or agreement is perhaps impossible. Frameworks accentuating locality, uneven development, together with a wider acknowledgment of the social and cultural dimensions of the political and ideological (even without mentioning analyses of gender and race), have added undoubted richness to the fabric of labour history. Yet such scholarly developments have arguably and unfairly disconnected institutions, for our purposes, the, from processes of class formation and identity construction. This builds upon an increasingly popular, yet awkward tendency to downplay the import of class in past (often conflated with present) conceptions of the social order.

This paper seeks to look again at the concept of a Labor tradition. I would contend that studies informed by a poststructuralist framework can actually help to flesh out the complexities and contradictions of working class and labour experience. And while my ostensible concern is theoretical, it holds practical application and potential clues to Labor’s present and future challenges. The past is most definitely before us. In making an argument about the vitality of language and populism in inventing and sustaining Labor’s tradition(s), this is simultaneously a case for a present reformulation of populist class analysis though without the exclusionary baggage of the past. In attempting to re-conceptualise the issues of class formation and consciousness, and looking anew at the early ALP, I have relied heavily on two British theorists Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce. While these authors were the source of heated debate in Britain, their reception in Australia was virtually non-existent. While I can’t engage in a detailed critique of their work here, I do acknowledge notable objectors such as Joan Scott and Neville Kirk, amongst others. Indeed gender, in my theoretic perspecx, is crucial to the discursive mapping out of identity and class boundaries. Nevertheless applying their insights to the Australian historiography is an overdue exercise, though scholars such as Kirk have ably delineated such debates, considering the ostensible strengths and problems of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’.

In extending such discussions, I will initially discuss conventional approaches to Labor tradition, examining the way in which recent approaches have wrongly disconnected issues of class experience and formation from Labor tradition. Finally I shall make some suggestions as to how the Labor tradition can indeed be brought back into the realm of class analysis, in particular suggesting the formative role of language, class, and institution – upon each other and the whole – in turn moving towards the valuable synthesis of experience and discourse.

The historiography of the Labor tradition is at once vast, yet methodologically and etymologically narrow. Tradition is often seen rather narrowly, through constraining arguments over policy or ideological direction, and more than often viewed through the prism of betrayal; continuity or discontinuity; or socialism posited as the converse of a pejorative or celebratory labourism. Debating and positioning Labor tradition is an enduring, and is inevitably presented as tradition within itself.
At the same time, attempts to identify a monolithic Labor tradition are possibly mistaken. Labor can be more accurately understood as an evolving project: a contingent and essentially contested tradition, fluid, perhaps malleable to the point of corruption, sometimes contradictory, but never static. Tradition is or should at least be conceived as ‘conditional’ and ‘contextual’ to the times. However, for much of its history Labor demonstrated an exclusivist and nationalist (often xenophobic and outwardly racist) character. As such there are problems in ‘laying’ claim to a tradition even when one can be tenuously established. On the other hand, critiques often rest upon what the party is supposed to be, or could become – ‘a process of typification by subtraction’ – linked to persistent accusations of anti-theoreticism. Despite this paper’s poststructuralist approach, it is still possible to claim a coherent, if fragmented concept of a Labor tradition. However, in my thematic perspective, the project of Australian Labor draws upon historical, contemporary and even future discourses and debates, with language being the crucial mediating and constitutive force in the evolution of a seemingly coherent Labor tradition and it is through this perspex, rather than strict empirical studies that tradition should be conceived. At this point it is necessary to (re)state that at its birth Labor was bound up, and reflected the experiences (positive and negative) of the fragmented Australian working classes, but was as much involved in the process and working out of those formations, in particular the shared ontological sense of an imagined (yet not illusionary) **national** working class. A couple of related points of agency also require attention.

If workers, as Raymond Williams suggested, are genuine agents in the creation of values and cultures such as solidarity, then how have we so easily disentangled such clear examples of what Thompson famously termed ‘experience’ from the discourses bound up within the institutions and practical contingencies of class-based politics? A critical use of discourse is necessary however. Language does not totally govern social life, despite our attention to its ability to structure and contain, in the process shaping **real** collective and individual possibilities. Nor should we condemn the role of both historians and political leaders, as intellectuals, who in the Foucaultian sense of power and knowledge, structure and order actors: according degrees of historical agency. A larger critique of the concept of experience and cultural materialism is beyond the bounds of this enquiry, however it is eminently possible to use the concept of experience or better perhaps of **experiences** without decrying the actual and active structural transformations of material life that shape experience. As Scalmer claims ‘the study of labour discourse, of labour movement institutions and of classes may be complementary and mutually supportive’.

Traditional approaches largely ignore the role language plays in the very development and legitimation of such structures. In this schematic, early Labor becomes, in terms of culture, experience and language, something more and something less within the active making of the Australian working class.

The notion of a Labor tradition urgently requires a more critical and historically astute usage. Hobsbawm famously argued that ‘traditions’ can be ‘actually invented, constructed and formally instituted’. Yet as Hobsbawm counselled they constitute entirely human ‘responses to novel situations which take their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition’. While one must be careful about the application of a Eurocentric theory, the creation and consolidation of early Labor correlates with the suggestive notion of invented tradition. Both Bongiorno and Macintyre have hinted at the utility of the Hobsbawmian approach. Macintyre was acutely aware that ‘partly in response to its lack of strategic or ideological purpose, Labor developed mechanisms to mark it off from the existing political practice’. Yet institutional forms such as the supremacy and solidarity of caucus and the pledge were intimately bound up within the invention of tradition. In exploring the **historical** concept of a Labor tradition we need to delve back further, looking to the context of its ostensible invention, and the contingencies and specificities of this seminal period. Labor tradition should be viewed in the light of the making of the working classes during the late nineteenth century – suggesting that those constitutions are located within the interaction of experience and language. This is an argument about agency and tradition, and while my focus prioritises the language of leaders, I contend that that discourse (an expression and shaper of experience) was a result of an ongoing dialogue between workers and leaders as intellectuals: an argument that stresses the agency and contingency of both actors and institutions. Within this logic of cultural materialism, I concur with Williams’ primary sense of class culture as the important relations between material and symbolic productions. The ways in which workers and working class families made sense of and constituted the social order are a valuable addition to tracing the development of working class consciousness in the narrative of class formation. This is not to apotheosize the worker but rather acknowledges ‘a systematic linkage between culture and politics’. Lucy Taksa in particular has demonstrated the vitality and theoretical utility of such spatially specific and localised ‘cultural building blocks’.
However I think a more abstract and broader application of such theory is appropriate. At the same time, it is important to note that these cultural and relational concepts are far more complex for women and other historically marginalised or deviant discourses and social groupings. Men and women as Hall suggests did not ‘occupy the culture of their class in the same way. Ideologically their differences were emphasized, institutionally they were separated’. Yet we should also reject the unnecessary binary opposition of femininity and masculinity, acknowledging as Hall does ‘that they only make full sense when placed in a whole social, economic and cultural world’. The influence and usage of social histories and the critique of narrow institutionalism means we know more about working class life, but this also as Bongiorno observes, has the tendency to downplay the importance of ‘language in the construction of social and political identity, and to institutions’ role in class formation’. Bongiorno’s commentary itself derived from an extensive British literature. This is most explicitly discussed in one of the most important recent theoretical expositions pertaining to class. In his *Visions of the People*, Joyce argued for the vitality of alternate visions of the social order where: ‘the formation of social identities is not therefore something peripheral to a broader social and cultural history but is quite central to it … this formation was something accomplished in and by language’.6 The argument that follows becomes two-fold then. The abstraction and moulding of a particular (however peculiar) sense of Australian working class consciousness was created in and by language. However much this process was forged by external material changes, the internalised, dualistic role of language came to shape both a consciousness of, and resultant attitudinal relationship, to the social order. That said, I think it must be recognised that institutions, in particular Labor, came to play a significant role in this series of contextualised moments. Thus an approach which seeks to highlight the movement and seepage between the discourses of workers and their leaders in the creation of consciousness and experience opens the possibility of not only theoretical synthesis between the material and poststructuralist, but between the narratives of social and institutional. For the moment however I shall return to our sense of Labor tradition. It can be seen, perhaps pejoratively, as a way of legitimating current habits of thought and action, by creating a past or natural continuity. The empirical, labourist tradition which the Hawke-Keating governments enthusiastically and somewhat a-historically claimed, is also the tradition which they are paradoxically viewed as ‘emptying out’. Tradition is hegemonic, normalising and totalising. Subjectively formed, often decreed by leaders (defending their ‘fidelity’ to tradition), it proclaims an objective truth – fusing collective memory and consciousnesses – as *the* past. Australian Labor tradition is, in this sense, invented or imagined. For, following Hobsbawm, it was somewhat rapidly posited as ‘natural’ that the disparate classes of modernity, in particular the working class, ‘should tend to identify themselves through nation-wide political movements … and equally natural that de facto these should operate essentially within the confines of the nation’.7 Just as early Labor had to imagine a national politics in which it operated as an autonomous, and indeed legitimate actor, so do past and present commentators both imagine, and consciously invent, a coherent and politically viable sense of tradition where it was previously non-existent or tenuous. It is to those constructions of tradition that I shall now sketch and critique.

Labor historiography parallels the direction of the broader Australian historiography. Australian writers have historically interpreted Labor (in government) in pejorative terms, swaying between a Marxist understanding of the capitalist state, or lamenting Labor’s alleged pragmatism and anti-intellectualism. The posthumously known Old Left saw Labor as the native expression and inheritor of a past but opposition of femininity and masculinity, acknowledging as Hall does ‘that they only make full sense when placed in a whole social, economic and cultural world’. The influence and usage of social histories and the critique of narrow institutionalism means we know more about working class life, but this also as Bongiorno observes, has the tendency to downplay the importance of ‘language in the construction of social and political identity, and to institutions’ role in class formation’. Bongiorno’s commentary itself derived from an extensive British literature. This is most explicitly discussed in one of the most important recent theoretical expositions pertaining to class. In his *Visions of the People*, Joyce argued for the vitality of alternate visions of the social order where: ‘the formation of social identities is not therefore something peripheral to a broader social and cultural history but is quite central to it … this formation was something accomplished in and by language’.6 The argument that follows becomes two-fold then. The abstraction and moulding of a particular (however peculiar) sense of Australian working class consciousness was created in and by language. However much this process was forged by external material changes, the internalised, dualistic role of language came to shape both a consciousness of, and resultant attitudinal relationship, to the social order. That said, I think it must be recognised that institutions, in particular Labor, came to play a significant role in this series of contextualised moments. Thus an approach which seeks to highlight the movement and seepage between the discourses of workers and their leaders in the creation of consciousness and experience opens the possibility of not only theoretical synthesis between the material and poststructuralist, but between the narratives of social and institutional. For the moment however I shall return to our sense of Labor tradition. It can be seen, perhaps pejoratively, as a way of legitimating current habits of thought and action, by creating a past or natural continuity. The empirical, labourist tradition which the Hawke-Keating governments enthusiastically and somewhat a-historically claimed, is also the tradition which they are paradoxically viewed as ‘emptying out’. Tradition is hegemonic, normalising and totalising. Subjectively formed, often decreed by leaders (defending their ‘fidelity’ to tradition), it proclaims an objective truth – fusing collective memory and consciousnesses – as *the* past. Australian Labor tradition is, in this sense, invented or imagined. For, following Hobsbawm, it was somewhat rapidly posited as ‘natural’ that the disparate classes of modernity, in particular the working class, ‘should tend to identify themselves through nation-wide political movements … and equally natural that de facto these should operate essentially within the confines of the nation’.7 Just as early Labor had to imagine a national politics in which it operated as an autonomous, and indeed legitimate actor, so do past and present commentators both imagine, and consciously invent, a coherent and politically viable sense of tradition where it was previously non-existent or tenuous. It is to those constructions of tradition that I shall now sketch and critique.

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McQueen’s explicit and implicit ignorance of the socially explanatory role of language meant that the actual practices of Labor and the working class within hegemonic settings were never investigated. To be sure, the Australian working classes were present at their own making; the problem was McQueen wasn’t partial to what they had made. Around the same time however, Macintyre developed a clearer sense of labourism: ‘a set of institutions and practices rooted in a specific social formation at a particular historical juncture’ that ‘accepts both the economic relations of the capitalist mode of production, and the legitimacy of the capitalist state’. However, Macintyre suggests, adjusting McQueen that ‘this acceptance is qualified by a limited but powerful class consciousness – laborism forges its own associations, institutions and practices which are generally subordinate to, but nevertheless distinct from, bourgeois society’.8

Despite the New Left, a classical interpretation remained in vogue. Bede Nairn remains the most prominent, endorsing a moderate labourism as the mainstream ideology and practice from the outset. An ironic account of the pragmatic argument emerged, inverting the pejorative tones of labourism. Jim Hagan’s The history of the ACTU is the classic expression. The inversion reached its celebratory zenith when Costa and Duffy argued that free trade and non-compulsory arbitration ‘exist within forgotten strands of the rich labour tradition’. Such an account was indicative of the ways in which tradition could be melded and distorted to suit the political moment of the present. With the emergence of labourism as a political and historiographical tool in its own right, two clear strands of historiography formed: an orthodox and a more critical (neo)-Marxist approach. Though working out of differing theoretical traditions, both share a similar ‘political agenda’ in characterising tradition as non-socialist – one ironically defensive, yet celebratory, the other critical and mocking. The advent of the successful though iconoclastic federal Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, triggered the so-called betrayal debates and a dissenting view of ‘discontinuity’, which clamed a ‘break’ with a largely socialist tradition. A continuity of labourism also emerged within a new stream of thought, utilising a neo-Marxist functionalism, and emphasising the limits of reform within a liberal and capitalist society. Johnson is its most adept practitioner, and her notion of the historically contingent confluence of the discourse and practice of ‘social harmony’, was the stand out thesis amongst the betrayal debates.9

In the claims of both continuity and discontinuity theorists there exists an uncritical assessment of post-federation Labor, creating a ‘forgotten’ element of tradition. More recent accounts focus on the ‘three great epochs’ methodology by analysing the Curtin/Chifley, Whitlam and then Hawke and Keating governments as existing either in continuity or discontinuity. Hence, the foundational governments and oppositions are either ignored or written off as ineffectual episodes: the mere extension of colonial liberalism. It is not surprising that a critical appraisal of Labor’s leaders in the so-called Deakinite decade has not occurred. Sandwiched between the romantic deeds of the 1890s and the cataclysmic events of World War I, they are relatively tame years. The monolithic idea of a settlement also obscures the sense of conflict and complexity. Moreover, figures such as ‘Billy’ Hughes, are somewhat understandably written out of labourism, owing to their eventual ‘ratting’. Yet ratting, within the cultural discourse of labourism, was built into the very foundations of the party. Similarly, the non-Catholic or non-native background of the three early leaders and Prime Ministers John Watson, Andrew Fisher and Hughes, seems to lack the romanticism of the Irish-Catholic legend so crucial to the narratives of Curtin, Chifley and even Keating. Whilst avoiding romantic allusions, these foundational leaders should be crucial to any proper sense of tradition and the experience and discourse of class. Consciously and unconsciously, they invented and appropriated the historical notion of a Labor tradition. Metaphorically they broke away, via the power and mythology of language, from many of the strictures of bourgeois politics. Indeed Labor’s discourse of practical politics should be placed in the context of Labor’s actual struggles and its use against the barrage of conservative propaganda … Labor’s self-confessed practicality [w]as a part of its subtle, intellectual and counter-hegemonising practice’. This formulation reacted to ruling (and middle) class discourse – the abstract language of conciliatory class relations, autonomous citizens and shared material interests. It was, however, a paradoxical rejection and embrace. The ‘break’ was never whole and possessed ongoing implications for the later party. Out of the betrayal debates emerged a more nuanced and historically aware sense of tradition that acknowledged the socialist influence, but sought to critically explain the historical discourse and practice of labourism. Massey promoted a far more convincing interpretation of labourism as ‘an analytical device to catch the very real ambiguities, contingency … as a way of orientating the ALP to the often heterogeneous and contradictory agencies of
Australian state formations’. This successfully avoids Scalmer’s charge that ‘labourism implies that the
ALP has not changed at all, and therefore forfeits the ability to explain such changes’. Beilharz positions
betrayal as actually the ‘exhaustion’ or ‘emptying out’ of labourism, emphasising the cultural importance
of language and its anti-modernist roots. As labourism reasserted itself, further studies emerged, which
though localised, attempted to explain the nature and emergence of early Labor. In Bongiorno’s study
of Victorian Labor, class became just one ‘thread in a web of collectivities’. Labor’s ‘populist’ language
of mutuality, harmony and work connected, and necessarily abstracted, worker’s diverse experiences to
the struggles of ‘labour’, ‘the masses’ and ‘the producers’. In a similar vein, Markey working out of a
populist path trodden by both Gollan and Love,⁰ argued that populism rather than class was the central
ideological and practical inspiration behind the making of the ALP in NSW.

Such theoretical discourses of class and labour history point the way towards a new Labor history.
Bongiorno and Markey’s accounts are instructive of the way in which labourism actually developed,
catching the contingency and contradictions that bedevilled early Labor and the wider movement. Such
approaches illustrate the growing vitality of a methodology that aims to synthesise specificity and
locality with more abstract notions of a labour experience. However in accepting the counsel of both
authors, I would tentatively suggest that such populism, and at times radicalism, was a contingent and
contextualised working class theorising of social structure and possibility, imprecise in its program and
outlook: not simply the product of professional politicians and populist unions. Following the important
lead of Joyce, class exists alongside other populist visions of the social order. Joyce was criticised,
unfairly in my opinion, for replacing one meta-category of understanding with another. Indeed it was
Joyce’s later publication Democratic Subjects, in which he controversially argued that ‘meanings make
subjects and not subjects meanings’ that generated most dissent, practically muddying his more incisive
claims. Joyce’s ‘family’ of ‘populisms’ gives shape though ambiguity to class-consciousness, indeed
the meanings of class and populist terms such as ‘the people’ overlapped and were often substituted.
Populism also makes for an easy slippage between moral languages and the counter discourses of
collective politics, which again works to complicate, yet enliven the issue of class. And as Joyce
suggests, ‘the consciousness of a class need not be the consciousness of class’.¹ To look again at early
Labor is to look critically at how it engaged and drew upon the formation of the Australian working
class and the ontological discourse of modernity – seeking to relate this to the practices and discourses
of Labor after 1901. We can now critically position tradition as the inexact and contested product of the
ongoing but historically grounded discourse between experience, language and practice. In considering
Labor and its relations with the working class we should highlight the contingency and context, the
heterogeneity and contradiction: looking how these formations operate within the alleged settings of
class and ideological hegemony, but sensing the interconnectedness of this experience.

As I have been stressing, the dominance of a specific empiricist analysis of Labor in government, despite
recent additions, has characterised and limited shared understandings. Just as labour historians have
shown how the working class was present and active in its own making, so too should critical eyes look
to the ALP: as an active constructor of experience and class identity in itself. According to Margaret
Somers this means (re) engaging with ‘the constitutive place of narrativity in social theory’. The example
of Joyce (and by implication Stedman Jones) is also instructive. For as Joyce argues, ‘the emphasis on
the role of organisations is of historiographical interests in its own right … changes in outlook [can] be
seen as the outcome of changes in organisation rather than the other way round’. Such insights should
also be applied to the realm of leaders as intellectuals. Conventional analyses on all sides have generally
neglected more esoteric issues of language, ritual, style and culture. In reality, language and such cultural
productions lie at the heart of political and social experience, which inform and sustain tradition. As
W.H. Sewell argues (and I believe we can read this onto a specific Australian experience) ‘this means
reconstructing the meanings of the words, metaphors, and rhetorical conventions that they [workers]
used to talk about their experiences’. In doing so, the distinction between worker and leader is necessary,
though perhaps less bounded than institutional and social histories would have us believe. What is bottom-
up history can also be read as top-down, whereby as Reid echoing Joyce suggests ‘language works to
constitute rather than simply reflect social groupings’. In truth language works both ways: constituting and
reflecting; experience and consciousness forming imprecisely in that mediating interior. The languages
workers spoke, mediated, acquired and transmitted gave expression to the particularity of their social
experience derived from contextual material relations and from the relations of one class to another.
This claim upon class formation and experience perhaps needs further clarification. For as Reid also argues ‘[common] interests are constructed through both unconscious and conscious uses of language, and the meanings of specific actions take shape in relation to these constructions’. This is where the role of institutions in drawing and shaping political identities and the consciousness of such collective possibility and action can come into play. We should reject analyses that merely see institutions, acting under the pressure of bourgeois hegemony, as stifling or de-radicalising (militant) consciousness.

The issue of consciousness of class has been irrevocably muddied, but whether ‘it was not consciousness (or ideology) that produced politics but politics [and language] that produced consciousness’ as Stedman-Jones claims in his poststructuralist study Languages of Class, can only be born out by further particularised study. Yet there is some force in the suggestion that socially contextualised discourses, represent and mediated by institutions, historically defined Australian workers as abstract groupings, constituting and explaining their experiences. If we were to accept McQueen’s bourgeois nature of labor and the working classes of the late nineteenth century, this may make sense as the labor institutions, however circumscribed by hegemony, operated and took root themselves in the workings of bourgeois politics. This extension and particularisation of the role of discourse is however a highly suggestive though theoretically iconoclastic proposition – particularly set against an Australian scholarship which has only recently and often ambivalently taken the linguistically attuned turn within labour history. Bruce Scates incorporated such influences into his A New Australia arguing that ‘a new history of the labour movement must be a history written from below’. In a similar vein, Mark Hearn addressed issues of language, value and culture in his study of the AWU, ‘Mates and Strangers’. Yet we should be aware and prepared to clearly delineate how language acts to enliven our sense of the material world, in American historian Marc Steinberg’s evocative words, ‘where structural position and fighting words … conjoin’. Discourse, according to Steinberg, is thus a not the ‘powerful mediating force in the structuring of group consciousness’. So we are not caught in a ‘deterministic fix’ or even in the death throes of Marxism – the choice between culture and materialism is not and has never really been absolute. Steinberg’s work also deserves a wider audience in Australia (though I do not feel that conflictual discourse need be the prime determinant of consciousness) and provides an excellent model for the Australian experience.

It has been the core, though not entirely unproblematic, assumption of this paper that the dominant practices and discourses of Labor for better or worse have revolved around some of the central tendencies of the labourist paradigm. It is however far more complex than its empiricist form. Critically using the post-structuralist stress upon discourse we are able to more fully understand labourism as a process, contingent strategy and firmly rooted abstraction of experiences, rather than a monolithic and unchanging thing. This overarching discourse positions the concept of labourism as shaping the contours of thought, possibility and action. As Beilharz and Watts suggestively argue, there exists ‘a discourse of labourism understood… an unfolding pattern of perceptions, values, metaphors and prescriptions’. The practice and language of labourism, whether a victim of liberal hegemony or not, has acted in hegemonic fashion by ‘set[ting] up the political agenda for the Left in terms of ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ enemies, allies and directions’. Stuart Hall has explained how dominant ideological systems structure the legitimacy of values and discourses within an overarching ‘public language’: which ‘represent themselves as the natural mental environment and horizon of the whole society’. This is what Hall eloquently designates as ‘maps of meaning’, where certain groups and classes claims and arguments are legitimised whilst others are deemed and marginalised as ‘deviant’. In the Australian experience this has tended towards the practical privileging or imaging of a particular type of community, imbued with a particular character. Drawing on such theoretical apparatuses, our sense of labourism constitutes it as both the coloniser and colonised of a naturalised and hegemonic ‘language of legitimacy’. Australian labourism generally avoided being labelled deviant. Yet gender was a clear example of how labourism acted hegemonically not only in its attitude to female workers but in its representation and understanding of women’s relations to the means and mode of production.

Such understandings resonate with Connell and Irving’s sense of class hegemony as ‘strategic’ rather than ‘structural’. As we have seen, any use of discourse must be critical. For Labor’s discourse was combative but also reactive. Discourses need a connection to lived experience, and in this class context, nonlabour’s rhetoric of citizenship has historically influenced, and is inextricably linked, to the Labor’s growing sense of tradition and use of language. Judith Brett has referred to the term ‘citizen’s’ ‘partisan’
dimension whereby citizenship was ‘embedded in non-labour’s claim to political virtue, in contrast to its representation of the Labor Party, committed to the self-interested pursuit of sectional claims regardless of the national interest’. Labor was apparently more interested in ‘the people’, in general a pragmatic and populist pre-text signifying ‘workers’. However as I have argued elsewhere, an argument could be made, extending Scalmer’s sense of Labor’s discourse of practicality that Labor may actually have bequeathed non-labour with the abstract term, as it sat uneasily with Labor’s language of practical politics. In truth, both claims have merit. Language is a complex historical process, to be looked at through the lens of context and contingency, but recognising that culture and materialism are often bound up within the same reflective superstructure. Labourism has been a historical, contingent but partial and often ambivalent discourse about citizenship. Labourism is also, as Markey argued the inheritor of a specific ‘populist’ tradition and outlook – socio-economic geography was critical. Massey also sees that ‘at its birth, the Labor Party was a worker’s party reflecting the experiences, aspirations and fears of Australia’s [white] unionized workers’. In critically emphasising the material conditions and experiences of class, this view accords with Thompson’s classic and oft-repeated understanding of working class formation and labour history as defined by ‘experience’ and ‘relationship’. A linguistic focus upon labourism can help flesh out Thompson’s still relevant claim that ‘class-consciousness is the way … experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms’. Antipodean historians must continue to wrestle with the notion of experience while resisting the oft temptation ‘to collapse the cultural, the political and the economic onto a single plane’. At the same time as Stedman Jones warns, there exists ‘the impossibility of abstracting experience from the language which structures its articulation’. Similarly Joyce, in arguing for the centrality of ‘extra-economic’ populism within British popular radicalism, suggests that there exists the ‘formative role of language and ideas in the formation of attitudes to the social order’ whereby experience (which Thompson argues shapes consciousness) ‘is in fact not prior to and constitutive of language but is actively constituted by language’. However I feel it unnecessary to use a sequential and unfairly limiting paradigm of language and experience. They move imperceptibly within and against the forces of each other, shaping and narrating the outlook of the individual and collectivity. Yet as Joyce also argued, one should, while dispelling the notion of a linear or clearly singular development of class, also caution against a discourse or cultural usage of class that makes its subject fragmentary to the point of denial. Class has certainly and rightly lost its previous ontological and sociological certainties, but as Hobsbawm maintained, class is not simply reductive to class-consciousness. Class languages and representations operate in real and specific settings and contexts. An approach foregrounded in such theoretical insights mediates the post-structuralist denial of a singular working class experience with the historical abstraction of that formation – but noting the contradictions and paradoxes of working class experience and agency.

A more critical integration of the social, cultural and institutional should be applied to the Australian Labor experience: ‘class needs to be seen in cultural and political terms of the playing out of value and traditions in different circumstances’. However a similar argument has recently been put in Britain. Applying the lessons of much of the British literature, Jon Lawrence has argued for ‘studying the interaction between the worlds of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ politics, conscious that the relationship between the two is never unmediated’. In this paradigm, history from below acts to enliven our sense of the meanings of high politics or ‘the role of political organisations, formal political discourses and state policy’. Such an understanding points towards the revitalisation of a critically aware Thompsonian history. John Rickard first applied Thompson’s notion of experience to the Australian experience. Rickard’s sense of class consciousness saw that ‘the very rhetoric used by Labor leaders in Australia when they spoke of ‘the workers’ rather than the working class … was an appeal to class consciousness, [but] made in terms of what was seen as a tradition rather than revolutionary strategy’. We should build upon Rickard’s still path-breaking work, with a more critical take on experience, starting with the premise that when leaders spoke to a seemingly taken for granted tradition, they were consciously and unconsciously shaping the direction and consciousness of such class language and identity.

In utilising the insights of Stedman Jones and Joyce it should be clear that such arguments are more than complementary and indeed bear out a symbiotic and somewhat natural relationship to Thompsonian history. Indeed as Kirk points out, Thompson (and Williams) pioneered methodologies of non-reductionism later intensified (but ironically critiqued) by poststructuralists.
We should embrace the revitalisation of class as a historiographical and ever present tool. Whilst rejecting mechanical crudity, we should not completely reject the idea of a classical class analysis in itself, nor repudiate the tools of hegemony and consciousness (or lack thereof). On the contrary, I am arguing for a discursive complex of class and consciousness following Thompson’s sense of experience, but successfully mediating this with the poststructuralist claim upon discourse and fragmentation. In this more complex view, a dualist vision of class emerges, working backwards and forwards, one in which class constitutes language, and languages frames the experience of class. In the period before World War I, it is impossible to consider Labor without the notion of class. Labourism, as a contingently rooted tradition of discourse and practice, provides a valuable tool by which to re-examine the role of institutions in shaping class experience and identity, and vice versa. Australian labour historians should pursue such avenues, seeking to investigate the complexity of the relations between Labor and the Australian working classes. Rediscovering the richness and constitutive symbiosis of this past relationship while of important historiographical interest in itself, may also point the way towards a reinvigoration of a currently dysfunctional ALP’s practical and theoretical apprehension of and relationship to class experience. This may lead to a reformulated, inclusive class analysis based in the best traditions of populism for the present and future.

Endnotes

1. Sean Scalmer, ‘Experience and discourse: a map of recent theoretical approaches to labour and social history’, 
   *Labour History*, no.70, 1996, p. 156.

2. Nick Dyrenfurth, ‘Contending Judith Brett’s class: an argument about Labor’s past and present … and future’, 


Kim Mackay was an Australian socialist who played an important role in the British Labour Party, Common Wealth Party, and the movement for a federal Europe. His political trajectory highlights the links between the labour movement in Australia and Britain. He is a novel example of a socialist who moved in the opposite direction to the radical pioneers who left England to spread the gospel of labour politics to the United States, Canada and Australia. Mackay’s socialism was forged in Australia and reached maturity in a Britain that was undergoing social and political transformation as a result of the rise of Fascism in Europe and the outbreak of World War II. His most significant contribution to British politics was his advocacy of European federalism at a time when many on the left within the British labour movement were opposed to such a policy. It is argued that Mackay’s particular brand of Australian socialism allowed a greater doctrinal flexibility that remained absent from the politics of his contemporaries on the parliamentary left. Mackay produced an array of books and pamphlets, but his work merits little attention in the literature on the British Labour Party.

Ronald William Gordon Mackay, commonly known as ‘Kim’, was born in Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia, on 3 September 1902, the fifth child of Alexander William Gordon Mackay and his wife Mary née Knight. Both parents came from strongly Methodist families. His father was the Irish born governor of Bathurst gaol and his mother was the Tonga-born daughter of J.E. Moulton, who had been a Methodist missionary in the South Pacific. After showing early educational promise, Kim Mackay attended Sydney Grammar School 1915-19 and later the University of Sydney where he gained his LL.B in 1926 and an MA with honours in Education in 1929. He was admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales in 1926 and worked as a member of the law firm Sly and Russell, in Sydney. He married Mary Barker Hassall on 21 February 1928 at the chapel of St Paul’s College, the University of Sydney; the marriage produced two children but ended in divorce. While completing his education, he founded the New Outlook, a fortnightly publication of politics and economics. Mackay wrote articles attacking, amongst other things, militarism and the Versailles Treaty.

Mackay seemed set for an academic career when he gained a part-time post as a lecturer in History at St. Paul’s College (1926-32), but he continued to practice law. However, his greater interest was in the field of economics and he developed a keen mind for business and an acute sense of the problems of political economy. He steadily built up a publication profile beginning with The Industrial Arbitration Act of the Commonwealth of Australia (1928) and Some Aspects of Primary and Secondary Education (1929). In 1932 he helped establish the Australian Institute of Political Science (AIPS). Through this body Mackay argued for reform of the Australian Constitution. The AIPS held numerous summer schools and founded the journal Australian Quarterly. Mackay became an active figure in the Australian labour movement, and after a business trip to Britain, retained links with labour activists that he had met on his visit. He was particularly close to Sir Stafford Cripps and other figures on the Labour left. After some persuasion by Cripps, Mackay arrived in England in 1934, establishing a reputation as a practising lawyer and socialist. He was part of a thriving law firm operating under the name of Oppenheimer, Vandyk, and Mackay. He immediately involved himself in the Labour Party in the Frome division of Somerset.
His organisational ability was recognised by party notables, when he successfully managed to develop a very active and efficient Labour machine in the constituency. He was selected to fight the seat for the party in the 1935 General Election. He campaigned for a strong League of Nations and an end to conflict between states. His ambition was the creation of a world government based on the principles of the League, which would act as its protective force. He also advocated a socialist programme calling for common ownership of key-industries, land, and the productive resources of the country. The local press appealed for voters to support the government by voting for Mavis Tate, the National Conservative candidate. An editorial in the Somerset Standard, claimed that Mackay was an extremist ‘… he is the terror and despair of even the fastest shorthand writer. But that he is an extremist is proved, not only by his own political utterances, but by the fact that his political debut in England was made under Sir Stafford Cripps, of whom many members of his own party are distinctly afraid’. Yet Mackay was a critic of the Soviet Union and the British Communist Party. He came second to the Conservative who took the seat with a slender majority of 994.

In the late 1930s, Mackay became disillusioned with the timidity of the Labour Party and the electoral truce that was agreed at the outbreak of war. He remained close to Cripps who had been expelled in 1939 for advocating a Popular Front. He kept close council with others in the Labour Party through his work as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, which had been established in 1941. With the outbreak of war, Mackay was posted to a position in the Ministry of Aircraft Production. This post took him on a number of trips overseas, including the United States, where he advocated an increase in war production. This direct role in the war effort led Mackay to criticise the electoral truce and the willingness of Labour to conceal its criticisms of Government policy. He resigned from the Labour Party and searched for a left-wing alternative that could harness the popular radicalism that had been generated by concern for a more egalitarian society. Yet Mackay retained his links to the Labour party through his active membership of the Clerical and Administrative Workers’ Union. He was also busy securing his role in the world of business, taking positions on the boards of a number of large firms.

In 1942, he unsuccessfully contested the Llandaff and Barry by-election as an independent socialist spending £1200 of his own money. The vacancy followed the death of Patrick Munro and the 1941 Committee invited Mackay to stand. The 1941 Committee started as a discussion group led by J.B. Priestley. The group merged with Forward March to form the Common Wealth Party. The Llandaff and Barry Labour Party also supported Mackay. Explaining his reasons for resigning from the Labour Party to the local press, he argued that the electoral truce must be terminated in order to ensure that the war could be prosecuted more effectively. Nonetheless, there were tensions within the left relating to his candidacy. At a meeting of the Communist Party in Llandaff, Arthur Horner, the south Wales miners’ leader, attacked the role of independents in by-elections claiming that all National Government candidates must be supported. The Communists felt that unity was paramount to maintain maximum production during hostilities. The Conservatives used the press to highlight Mackay’s business concerns and distributed a number of leaflets that they hoped would deter Labour voters from supporting such an extravagant candidate.

During the campaign, Mackay espoused his ideas on a new Europe that he hoped would emerge when the war was over. In a letter to the Prime Minister, he claimed that he stood ‘not for a return to a national sovereignty, but for a federation if possible of Western Europe, as a first step towards world peace; the second step is World Federation’.” The issue of Europe was to be his main political interest throughout his career. His book Federal Europe (1941) was read widely. To Mackay, the dilution of sovereignty in a context of developing federation was an environment that could facilitate socialism. In a letter to the Manchester Guardian in August 1941, he set out his beliefs.

A federation of Europe would abolish the national economic policies of 25 states, and would make it possible to plan production and distribution, and to provide improved standards of living and social security for the European peoples …if we want peace, extend the territory of organised liberty at the end of the war, by creating … a federation of states, like the United States of America, with plenty of force to preserve.\(^5\)

In 1942, he contributed financially to Tom Driberg’s campaign in the Maldon by-election. It was in this context of emerging radicalism expressed through a variety of initiatives that the Common Wealth Party appeared. Mackay had no doubt been attracted to the 1941 Committee’s policy on a federation of
European states. Desmond Donnelly, an early supporter of Common Wealth and later a Labour MP, viewed the party retrospectively as a combination of ‘leftist militants and middle class do-gooders’. Mackay probably represented both wings; a respected intellectual, independently wealthy, with a commitment to democratic socialism. Richard Acland was the figurehead of the new organisation and it went onto to enjoy electoral success in Eddisbury, Skipton, and Chelmsford. Although Mackay had resigned from the Labour Party because of its stance on the electoral truce, he never lost his commitment to its democratic socialism. He joined Common Wealth in 1943, and as national Chairman, he transformed its chaotic organisation. On arrival, he found that the office staff was largely incompetent. He quickly developed a re-organisation plan. The task was to streamline the internal structure and transform the party from an idealistic pressure group into an efficient electoral machine. He wanted a tightly run organisation that would co-ordinate the various branches of the party to ensure that it could maximise its challenge in by-elections when they arose. Mackay advocated a coherent system of thorough door-to-door canvassing and the development of detailed records. This system provided the foundation for what would later be called the ‘Reading system’, which Mackay developed with Ian Mikardo when they were neighbouring MPs for Reading in the early 1950s.

According to Angus Calder, in his thesis on Common Wealth, Mackay had the total support of Acland, but raised the suspicion of others in the party. Acland expressed his belief in Mackay’s abilities in a diary entry in April 1943: ‘Thank God Mackay has come and I can give up worrying about organisation, and get back to my job of propaganda’. The newspapers often referred to Common Wealth’s by-election campaign as ‘Acland’s circus’, but the resources and planning that went into the party’s organisation were essentially down to Mackay. Members of the election team were nicknamed ‘Mackay’s Trained Seals’; they took their tactics from a pamphlet that he produced in 1943 titled *Common Wealth Election Handbook*. In a further publication, *Coupon or Free?: Being a Study in Electoral Reform and Representative Government* (1943), Mackay promoted his arguments for proportional representation. Throughout the book, he criticised Conservatives, Socialists, and Liberals for failing to reform the undemocratic structures British government.

Mackay might have transformed the organisation of the party, but he was causing tensions within some branches. The London Region was critical of his affluent lifestyle, and felt that he was merely a careerist, who was ultimately set on gaining a prominent position in the Labour Party after the war. This view was reinforced by Mackay’s association with Alan Good, a wealthy businessman, who, along with Acland, supplied the party with the bulk of its finances. Good was a director of numerous firms amassing a six-figure personal fortune by the age of 35. His money was almost solely responsible for bankrolling Mackay’s grand plans for the national office, although Mackay himself personally rented premises he owned in Bloomsbury to the party for a nominal sum. Sybil Wingate, a member of Common Wealth’s national committee, claims that factionalism within the party stemmed from the different directions in which individuals wanted to push the organisation. Mackay was convinced that the overtly Marxist posturing associated with Joe Thomas of the London Region, merely led to the restriction of the organisation’s popular appeal. He outlined his reservations concerning Marxism in a revised edition of *Federal Europe*.

However cogently the Marxist may argue, it is difficult to accept the proposition that a change in the economic system must come before a change in the political system. However bad he may argue capitalist democracy in Britain is, it is nevertheless a democracy which can be converted from capitalism to socialism, if the people of Britain desire to convert it.

Amongst the prominent figures in the party, Mackay was seen as the most efficient. Wingate felt that others such as Acland and Tom Wintringham were no match for his superior debating skills and powers of persuasion. Mackay saw Common Wealth as a vehicle for socialism, but as only one component of a broad coalition of progressive forces. According to Calder, the three principal figures in Common Wealth viewed the party differently. Acland felt that it was a distinct party. Wintringham saw it as an organisation of different classes working together in a popular front. Mackay felt that it provided a temporary repository for radicalism while the Labour Party adhered to the electoral truce. The policies that Mackay had promoted in Common Wealth stayed with him through his years as a Labour MP, notably proportional representation, federalism, devolution, and the abolition of the House of Lords.
The Past is Before Us

Part A: Refereed Papers

Despite the factional criticism that Mackay often faced, he was re-elected chairman in 1944. C.A. Smith, who replaced Mackay after he rejoined the Labour Party, felt that there was a certain resentment on the national committee towards Mackay’s superior organisational and intellectual ability, but remembered him as always sincere: ‘unlike Acland who was a chronic poseur … always thinking of his own image … Mackay was, in my experience frank and business like, easy to get along with. He was rich, lived well, and had some unconventional luxuries of the type that aroused envy as disapproval’.\textsuperscript{15} Attacks on Mackay were just one symptom of the developing factionalism. The party became weakened by attacks from disgruntled members. Eric Troward accused the party of being a communist organisation. Perhaps more damaging was the perception of Fascist involvement. This was difficult to substantiate, but John Beckett of the British Union of Fascists had joined one of the London branches on release from prison.\textsuperscript{16} Mackay himself came under pressure from the Christian wing of the party, which felt that he was diluting the moral streak of its programme in favour of electoral opportunism. He had already offered to resign from the chairmanship in November 1943, complaining to friends that he was receiving no loyalty or co-operation from other members of the national committee, but was dissuaded from doing so by Wintringham. It was clear to both Acland and Wintringham that Mackay was holding the party together through his organisational expertise.

The idealism that Mackay initially espoused when first joining Common Wealth, was frustrated, when it became clear that the Labour Party was unwilling to accept amalgamation. Mackay worked for a closer link with the Fabians and then the Communist Party, but discussions led to nothing. A more successful partnership was worked out with the Independent Labour Party, who themselves had tried to broker a third way between social democracy and communism since their break with Labour in 1932. The debate on closer links with the Labour Party led to Mackay gradually distancing himself from Common Wealth. In October 1944, Mackay attacked the anit-affiliationists and argued that: ‘Hugh Dalton, Herbert Morrison, Jim Griffiths and others were all better Socialists and more capable leaders than most of the people in Common Wealth’.\textsuperscript{17} In an attempt to pave the way for Common Wealth affiliation to Labour, Mackay arranged a meeting with Sir Stafford Cripps and Ellen Wilkinson in November. Mackay was told that the only option available to Common Wealth members was to join Labour as individual members. He now worked to convince the more obdurate members of Common Wealth that it was political power that mattered. He grew gradually more impatient with those on the left of the party who wanted autonomy. In the Common Wealth Review, he argued that:

> Democratic politics was a slow process. The alternative was revolution. In democracy you had to learn to suffer fools gladly … you have first to convince the country before you introduce changes … Don’t slate the Labour leaders and say they’re all a bad lot … surely our job was to bring more democracy into the Labour Party and help to make it clearly socialist.\textsuperscript{18}

Mackay argued at successive Common Wealth conferences for closer ties with Labour. On numerous occasions, he had stated that the party only existed because the Labour Party was not providing effective opposition to the Government. Nonetheless, until his resignation in 1944, he worked hard for the party in producing propaganda. He envisaged a broad coalition of left forces that would come together to ensure that the Conservative Party was seriously weakened by the end of hostilities.

> The Tories must go! And let the forces of the left, the Labour Party, the ILP, the Communists and Common Wealth, and any other socialists that there are, come together by affiliation or otherwise, and create a united socialist movement which, when the war is over will secure a socialist House of Commons.\textsuperscript{19}

The party showed no animosity towards Mackay on his departure and he left the Gower Street premises to the party free of rent for a year. All his energies were now directed in working for Labour success in the General Election of 1945. He was selected as a candidate to fight for the constituency of North West Hull, where he successfully gained the seat.

In his maiden speech to the Commons, he called for United Nations control of strategic locations such as the Suez and Panama canals. He felt that Britain had a role to play in spreading democratic ideals as opposed to territorial conquest:

> It is the contribution in political ideas which this country can make to the world which makes its greatness, and the contribution this country is making is the contribution of showing, that by powerful change, it is possible to secure a real Socialist Government.\textsuperscript{20}
Mackay was a very effective speaker in the House and used his intellectual ability and oratorical skills in defending the policies of the Government. Nonetheless, he remained a critic of the Government’s moderation. Early in 1947 he became a member of the Keep Left group. When he signed the Keep Left pamphlet in 1947, he did so from a third-way position attacking the politics of both the USA and the USSR.

Mackay was a keen advocate of the nationalisation and aligned himself with the left on economic issues. His grasp of economics and the fact that he was managing director of a business that employed 3000 workers strengthened his credibility in debate. However, he directed most of his energies in campaigning for his long-term commitment to a federal Europe. Mackay pressed his colleagues in the House to campaign for a policy of federalism to advance socialist ideals across the globe. He felt that European unity would ensure independence from the superpowers. He broke with Conservative federalists when he realised that they merely viewed such a policy as a tool to suppress the Soviet Union.

Federalists across Europe had come together in the European Union of Federalists under the leadership of Winston Churchill in 1946, a body that was superseded two years later by the European Movement. The Labour Party was not as enthusiastic about Europe as other socialists on the continent, much to the dismay of Mackay. He was elected Chairman of the Europe Group of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1947. Crossman and Foot were also members. The group contained over 80 members at its peak. Along with Mackay, John Hynd was Vice-Chairman and Christopher Shawcross was secretary. Divisions soon appeared within the group. The federal issue was difficult for British socialists, as Mackay was to find when he canvassed MPs on the left of the Labour Party. Some felt that it would weaken the Soviet Union and force Europe into a closer alliance with the United States. Others such as Tom Braddock, felt the project would merely perpetuate capitalism and were reluctant to support any initiative that was promoted by the Conservatives. Indeed the federalist movement in Britain was a cross-party group consisting of Socialists, Liberals, and Conservatives.

Mackay remained determined to promote the European ideal and the issue dominated his politics. In May 1948, he delivered a lengthy speech on the subject to the Commons.

Surely, the time has arrived for people in this country and in Europe to realise that democracy in a small area where there are a lot of democracies is an unstable form of government … A common European currency would remove all problems of foreign exchange, import licences and balance of payments.

Throughout 1948 divisions within the Labour Europe Group hardened, on amongst other things, the situation in Eastern Europe, particularly the communist coup in Czechoslovakia. The final straw was when Churchill established the Movement for a United Europe. Mackay faced the wrath of the PLP, when he attended the Interlaken and then the Hague Conference on federation; both meetings were criticised by the party leadership, who felt Churchill and the Conservatives would dominate the agendas. The Europe Group of Labour MPs dissolved, but Mackay continued to campaign for cross party support for federalism.

The Council of Europe that finally emerged was a toothless body that frustrated the federalists. Mackay wanted to create a Federalist Party to convert the assembly that had been formed by the Council into a legislative body. He again called on old friends such as Alan Good to raise funds for his European project. Mackay himself donated over £1000 and wanted some ‘private Marshall Aid’ to ensure that a federal union would stop communist expansion. He also felt that Europe needed to provide an alternative to Soviet communism and American capitalism. The battle for Mackay was between communism and social democracy. This could only be won through a formal policy of federation. He outlined his thinking in a number of speeches throughout his time in the House.

The prosperity of the United States comes not primarily from her large resources or the intelligence of her population but from her large markets. Europe has comparable resources if the 17 states receiving Marshall Aid were taken as one area and not as 17 independent states … if there were a common currency for Europe … trade in Europe would be much freer.

In 1949, Mackay was one of the British delegates to the European Consultative Assembly in Strasbourg. His commitment to the federal ideal ensured that he was the choice of chairman for the European Parliamentary Union. The weakness of the federal movement was that its aims were contested, with only Mackay having little reservation about the policy. The Conservative MP, Duncan Sandys, felt that the initiative should be primarily directed towards inhibiting the Soviet Union.
Mackay had worked closely with Sandys, and confided in him his frustration with Labour’s aversion to the European project. In one letter, he told Sandys, that ‘there was such hostility to Europe in the Labour Party that it was becoming a difficult subject to raise’. Nonetheless, he later broke with Sandys when it was clear that the Conservatives were not totally committed to the project and merely viewed it as a strategic option to ensure co-operative defence strategies amongst European states. Although Mackay was no fan of the Soviet regime, he did feel that if a federal Europe was to be successful it needed the co-operation of Communist countries. He argued that the Soviet Union should be allowed to enter a federation once the country had embraced democratic ideals.

Within the House of Commons, Mackay increasingly cut a figure concerned with one issue. The Conservative MP, Peter Macdonald referred to him as the ‘fanatical federalist’. In 1949, his aims and ambitions for Europe were given more publishing space in his book *Western Union in Crisis: Economic Anarchy or Political Union?* With the intensification of the Cold War, Mackay felt that federalism would provide the best guarantee against future wars. He held a pragmatic view that ‘the purpose of federation is to bring together people of diverse types in such a way that they can keep their diversity in matters which are not common to all the peoples, and give it up in matters which are’. He became impatient with Labour Party suspicions of federalism and argued that they would not be able to deliver socialist policies if they continued to believe that the British economy could withstand the booms and slumps of global capitalism. To Mackay, the improved standard of living that the British were beginning to enjoy could only be maintained if European states merged their resources and planned their economies.

In 1950, Mackay drafted his plan for Europe in which he envisaged a strong Assembly and Committee of Ministers. He called for a transfer of powers covering defence, foreign affairs, and currency. This to Mackay was to be the ultimate aim of federation. He formulated a similar plan for Africa, which was viewed as unworkable by both left and right, although it did gain the support of Fenner Brockway. Rita Hinden felt that the Mackay’s naivety on African matters did not bode well for his policy of federation. As she pointed out to him in a number of letters, Africa contained regions at different stages of development, with many parts of the country having no tradition of democratic politics.

For all his intellectual training, Mackay’s views on world government were seen in some quarters of the labour movement as rather simplistic, but he remained committed to the project that increasingly came to dominate his political persona.

Following the redistribution of constituencies in 1950, Mackay became the MP for North Reading, where he worked closely with Ian Mikardo. Mikardo later remembered Mackay as a ‘left-wing socialist, a technocrat, generous spender and generally a marvellous man’. Mackay contested Reading again in 1951 but was defeated.

Mackay’s allies in the labour movement felt that his political career was hindered by his preoccupation with the European issue. His position within the Labour Party was also perhaps weakened by the criticisms he attracted because of his business interests and lifestyle. In 1953, he retired from the political scene due to ill health. He continued to write articles and books and provided a state of the nation address in his pamphlet *Whither Britain*. He again saw the only solution to Britain’s economic problems as the need for federalism:

> Today there is no happy future for any small country, either politically or economically; politically because it cannot defend itself without external help – and that applies most of all to Great Britain; economically because a decent living standard means higher real wages, an increase in productivity and raw materials which we cannot provide on our own.

He eventually came to the view that the European issue was not one that should have divided the parties. Ultimately, he optimistically felt that the British people would vote for a federal Europe in a referendum.

Mackay enjoyed the good life and was a committed socialist with brilliant organisational skills. As a wealthy individual, he was not opposed to people making money, but supported high taxes to support social services. Mackay appeared prosperous and self-confident with his silvery grey hair and his intellectual ability to talk at length on many subjects. His life was largely focused on politics although he did find time for the odd game of golf and a drink in the Reform Club. He had married again on
15 August 1946, 28-year-old Doreen Mary Armstrong. A series of heart attacks eventually led to his death on 15 January 1960. Mackay left an estate valued at £7449 19s. 1d. He was survived by his wife and the son and daughter from his first marriage.

Mackay was the leading figure in the first generation of European federalists within the Labour Party. His interest in economics and his experiences in both Australia and the USA convinced him of the viability of a federal system of government that would reduce the power of the nation state and therefore avert future wars. His preoccupation with the viability of the European project was seen by some of his contemporaries as naïve, but was understandable in the context of the rise of Fascism and the conflicts between East and West in the post-war period. Through his writings and speeches Mackay emerges as a mixture of the pragmatic and the utopian. As an Australian he did not carry the baggage of some of his contemporaries on the British left concerning cross-party alliances and an impulsive anti-European mentality. His belief in European federalism was no doubt influenced by his commitment to the Australian system of government. In essence, Mackay was an Australian socialist who had to develop a position within the confines of British Labourism. He remains one of the few examples within labour history of an outsider importing a particular brand of Australian socialism into British political culture.

Endnotes

1. Material in this paper has also been used for the entry on Mackay in Keith Gildart, David Howell, and Neville Kirk (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography Volume XI, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2003.
3. Biographical material in Mackay Papers, Common Wealth Collection, University of Sussex, United Kingdom. I have so far found little material on Mackay’s involvement in Australian politics.
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The British and rubber in Malaya, c 1890–1940

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This paper aims to explain the relations between Capital and Labour on the rubber plantations in Malaya until the time of the Japanese invasion. It examines the way in which the British acquired and controlled land as a resource, and the ways in which companies raised and applied investment capital. It considers the means of recruiting an adequate supply of labour, and controlling it as a workforce; it demonstrates a close relationship between the rubber companies and the State, which was modified by the special interests of the State itself.

Land and capital

The British established a settlement on the island of Singapore at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it was not until some 50 years later that they began to take a serious interest in the Malay peninsular proper. By then British traders and adventurers had involved themselves in the affairs of the Sultanates that were later to become the Federated Malay States. On behalf of British subjects (and especially those interested in exploiting tin deposits), the Government of Great Britain interfered in disputes over succession to the Sultanates, and ‘in the 1860s and the 1870s, disputes over the succession claims in Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong were transformed from the normal short feuds to prolonged and bloody wars’. In each case, the claimant who emerged victorious paid a price to his British allies. He became a Sultan in name only, stripped of all the important powers that once went with that office; his Council retained only ceremonial powers, and both he and it were subject to the advice of a Resident, appointed by the British, who held all real legislative, executive and even judicial power.

The Residents used their powers to implement systems of landholding that were extremely generous to capitalists seeking to establish plantation estates. In devising them, the British were able to build on Malayan custom and practice. The Sultans had recognised a form of land tenure established through usufruct and had levied taxes on the land payable in kind. The Residents adapted the system to allow lease or purchase of land by means of cash. All land was vested in the Head of State, so that thousands of acres of virgin land could be sold or leased with legal title. Malays who had their customary tenure converted into ownership could also sell their land.

Leasehold tenure was particularly generous to the intending plantation owner. The principle of ‘permanent settlement’ applied: the lessees could hold land for up to 999 years without any increase in the lease fee. In this way, the Government alienated estates of some thousands of acres for peppercorn rents. Sir Frank Swettenham, then president of Selangor, but later to become High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, justified the system on the grounds that both cheap land and security of tenure were necessary to attract a sufficient number of investors.

Some of Swettenham’s fellow Residents, and officials of the Land Departments, pointed out that this system deprived the Government of a most important source of revenue. The British Colonial Office was strongly opposed to the levying of income or company taxes, and in their absence land sales and fees were potentially the single most important revenue source, especially since the value of land would rise as its exploitation proceeded. In 1898, the year after the formal establishment of the Federated Malay States, it was agreed to supersede the system of leasehold with permanent settlement, and substitute a system based on the Australian system of Torrens Title, which would confer freehold ownership on the cash purchaser, and supply the Government with revenue which it could use to build roads and railways to serve the needs of the plantation owners. But the law as drafted had many loopholes, and in practice the land offices of the Federated Malay states continued to offer some land under long-term lease.

Until early in the twentieth century, most applicants wanting large areas of land in Malaya had been seeking tin concessions, or planning to grow plantation crops like tapioca and coffee. The demand for land rose sharply when companies formed in Britain began to seek land for rubber plantations. Except in times of trade recession, demand continued until 1940, when rubber plantations in Malaya spread over 2.1 million acres.
The lure of the cash these companies were able to offer through their agents often proved irresistible to the native Malays who had acquired title to the land they had held through customary tenure. The Government of the Federated Malay States noted in 1912 that it had been caused grave anxiety and apprehension by the fact that our Malay subjects, deluded by visions of all but transitory wealth, have been divesting themselves of their homestead and family lands to anyone willing to pay in cash for them. The rulers of the Federated Malay States and their Advisers conclusively feel that unless a better judgement is exercised on their behalf, the result will be the extinction of the Malay yeoman peasantry.

The result was the Malay Reservations Act of 1913, which provided that land within a Malay reservation was not to be sold or leased to a non-Malay, as thousands of acres had already been. The official reasoning was that the rapidly increasing populations of the rubber plantations would need huge quantities of rice. It would be possible to import rice, but a home-grown supply would be cheaper, and more reliable. Officially, it was to be the role of the native Malays to supply food for the workers in the rubber plantations and tin mines.

Further acts of 1917 and 1918 supplemented the Act of 1913. These were aimed at ensuring that the Malays used the lands reserved to them to grow rice, and did not use them to set up smallholdings in rubber. Colonial policy went further than this, and aimed directly at preventing rubber cultivation by Malays in smallholdings from competing with plantation rubber. The principal means to this end was through the manipulation of land policy. By the time the Malay Reservations Act was passed in 1913, Malays had been growing rubber for some years on the land to which they had acquired tenure through custom, but also on land they had managed to buy. These smallholdings were usually family affairs, often worked only from time to time. They were, according to the Government, poorly cared for and a source of weeds and plant diseases, which would infest the plantations and involve their owners in considerable expense.

The land offices of the Federated Malay States discouraged the Malays from acquiring land for rubber production, and discriminated against them. They reserved virgin land close to railways and main roads for purchase by non-Malays, and in 1915, 1916 and 1917 refused to sell any land at all to Malays for the purpose of rubber planting.

Malayan land policy in the years of the great expansion of the rubber plantation industry, offered land to foreign investors, and especially British foreign investors, on extremely attractive terms. Besides that, for a time, the Government offered loans on very easy terms to intending British purchasers, and discriminated in their favour against native Malays in choice of sites. The policy of confining as far as possible land use by Malays to the cultivation of food crops also helped reduce the danger of over-supply of Malayan rubber for sale on the world market.

**Capital and labour**

By 1906, British capitalists were seizing the opportunity to make fortunes by investing in Malayan rubber plantations. Companies sometimes paid dividends of over 200 per cent, and agency houses amassed huge profits in the buying and selling of plantations. Apart from some ups and downs depending on the world rubber price, the area continued to expand until halted by the world depression which began in 1929. In that year, the rubber plantation companies were employing about 258,000 coolies on their estates.

Most of these men and women – about 80 per cent – came from Southern India, where Madras Presidency, like much of the rest of India, was a fertile recruiting ground. Frequent failure of the monsoon resulted in drought and famine; the system of taxation the British Raj imposed exacerbated poverty and indebtedness. The people most affected were Untouchables and of the lowest castes. Recruitment for employment in Malaya was often an alternative to starvation, both for themselves and the families they left behind.

Until 1912, most Indians were recruited under indenture. Agents for recruiting firms visited villages, offered a cash advance to men and sometimes women willing to put their thumbprint to an indenture agreement. This provided that the recruit would work for a specified employer (and no-one else) for a fixed period (usually three years) to his employer’s satisfaction, and for a fixed wage. The cash advance
was a charge against the money the coolie would earn; if he succeeded in repaying it within the period set by the indenture he was free to leave the plantation; if not he had to remain and work off his debt. If he left before he had acquitted his debt and served his time, he was subjected to criminal penalties.

By 1910, at the time when the number of rubber plantations was increasing rapidly, plantation owners were discovering that the indenture system was unsatisfactory. The Parr Inquiry of that year found that the system lent itself to corruption and fraud, which was expensive; despite the ordinance on crimping, coolies who risked criminal punishment by running away readily found employment with another estate, often at a higher wage. Moreover, the coolies were not coming in sufficient numbers, because other destinations were more attractive.  

The main purpose of the indenture system was to secure a reliable supply of labour to the plantation employers at the lowest possible wage. The Parr inquiry found it was failing to do this. Parr’s solution was to abandon recruitment by indenture and replace it with a system of mass immigration by ‘free’ labourers. The Government accepted the recommendation, and the Indian Immigration Fund, already established, would pay for the passages of ‘free’ coolies to Malayan ports. Employers contributed to the Fund according to the number of Indian coolies they employed. They hired their labourers not through professional agencies, but via Kangani – senior plantation employees who travelled to India and recruited among fellow villagers, tribe, family and caste. The recruit did not sign an indenture, and in law was free to leave his employment after giving due notice. Kangani recruitment in combination with assisted passages brought hundreds of thousands of coolies to Malaya and largely achieved the employers’ objectives. Sheer numbers reduced the wages of plantation labour to a minimum, and the social ties and obligations established by Kangani recruitment helped keep the coolies working obediently on the one plantation for long periods.

Both systems of labour were regulated by various acts and ordinances, which dated from the 1870s. Those relating to Indians were consolidated into the Labour Code of 1912, which laid down certain requirements regarding working hours, pay, housing and accommodation, which were supplemented later by other Acts. There was a Labour Department headed by a controller of Labour, who could inspect premises, and even close them down.

Administrative arrangements for the supervision of Chinese labourers were different from those applying to Indians. Since the coolies worked under a contract system, the management of the plantation was not their employer in law, and the detailed regulation of the Labour Code did not apply to Chinese plantation workers. There was instead a Protector of Chinese, with deputies in the various Federated Malay States.

The system of contract labour lent itself to serious and frequent abuse, which the overworked staff of the Protector could do little to check, but this did not deter Chinese from coming in numbers that the Government considered adequate. It was, in fact, wary of any influx of Chinese which would add to the large numbers of them already permanently residing on the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States. So Government policy tended to concentrate on augmenting the supply of Indian labourers, who also had the advantage, from the point of view of both plantation owners and the Government, of being more docile. Encouragement of ‘free’ Indian immigration resulted in an adequate surplus of arrivals over departures in almost all the years up to 1930. The manager of the Immigration Fund also used it to encourage the recruitment of women and family groups by allowing their admission and employment at a lower rate of levy on the estate owner; and in the 1930s, the Fund actually paid a bonus to the estate owners on each coolie they recruited locally, provided they paid a small fee for their registration.
The aim of these measures was to establish as quickly as possible a local plantation workforce born of Indian migrant parents. This would help solve a difficult problem for the Government: how to keep wages at something like the minimum rates the Rubber Growers’ Association and the Planters’ Association of Malaya wanted, without having to resort to the mass migration of Indians – which the Indian Government was increasingly reluctant to agree to, and in fact refused to allow from 1938.

The Planters’ Association of Malaya (PAM) was an association of rubber planters organised on the basis of local associations in Malaya. It later enlarged its membership to include planters of other crops and become the United Planters’ Association of Malaya (UPAM). The Rubber Growers’ Association had its headquarters in London, and its members were representatives of companies and agency houses. In 1927, the RGA had 87 members, whose firms had issued capital to the value of £106 million, most of it invested in the rubber plantations in Malaya.

Both Associations lobbied very actively, the RGA in London, mainly on matters to do with the supply and marketing of rubber. The [U] PAM, made up largely of their managerial employees, dealt with the Straits Settlement and Federated Malay States governments, directly on matters of industrial conditions and relations. The two colonial Governments consulted closely with the [U] PAM, and their legislatures included [U] PAM members. The guiding principles of the Association’s industrial policy were three fold: to limit the interference of the Government in what its members considered were purely matters of domestic management on their plantations, which meant a minimalist interpretation of the Labour Code; to restrict the movement of ‘free’ labour by ordinances against ‘crimping’ and by internal agreements among members; and to keep the supply of ‘free’ labour as large as possible to depress wages to a minimum. Even in 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression, the Planters’ Association attempted to slow the rate of repatriation of unemployed Indian labourers for as long as possible.

The Association’s low wage policy had brought it into direct and chronic confrontation with the Agent of the Government of India in the 1920s. Following the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1918, the Government of India became much more amenable to the pressures of the Indian National Congress. Congress members took a keen interest in the employment of Indians abroad, and especially their wages. After some negotiation, the Government of the Federated Malay States agreed to the appointment to the Indian Immigration Committee (which administered the Indian Immigration Fund) of an Agent of the Government of India. The Committee then proceeded to conduct a series of inquiries whose purpose was to set wages for certain districts in the FMS.

The Planters’ Association presented statistics to the Committee to demonstrate that the wages it proposed allowed coolies to achieve the standard of nutrition necessary to help keep them in healthy working order. The Committee accepted this minimal standard, and set wage rates accordingly. The Government encouraged the coolies to contribute to their own subsistence by requiring plantation owners to set aside very small plots (one sixteenth of an acre) on which the longer serving coolies might graze animals or grow food, a concession the estate owners were reluctant to make.

This issue assumed even greater importance in the Depression, when the price of rubber slumped to a few pence per pound, planters began to dismiss their coolies, and a massive repatriation began. The wage standards set by the Immigration Committee in 1930 became irrelevant, with the connivance of the Government, and coolies left in droves. Yet it was obviously desirable to try to retain some part of the workforce against the time when recovery could begin.

This occurred about 1934, and immigration resumed. In 1936, a Committee of Inquiry visited Malaya on behalf of the Government of India, and recommended that immigration cease unless the Planters’ Association restored wage rates and conditions to their 1928 level. It did, briefly, but then threatened to reduce them again; when it did, the Government of India prohibited State-assisted immigration to Malaya from 1938 thenceforth, planters had to rely on local residents and unassisted migrants to supply their workforce – which, as it turned out, they were able to recruit in sufficient quantity for estate owners not to have to raise wage rates significantly. A trade recession in 1938 helped them hold the line, but in September 1939, with demand for both rubber and tin booming, the UPAM petitioned the Government to use the Indian Immigration Fund to import Javanese labour.
Labour resistance and reaction

The Government had been able to curb the oversupply of Indian coolie labour in the depths of the Great Depression through manipulation of the Immigration Fund. It had no such power over Chinese immigrants, so in 1931 it enacted an Immigration Ordinance to apply to them, and followed it two years later with the Aliens Ordinance of 1933. These ordinances together set quotas and restored the number of Chinese who could arrive as deck passengers.26

The ordinances applied only to males, and one of their unintended consequences was a significant increase in the female component of the Chinese plantation workforce. It became more settled, and coolies living near the estates began to supply a much greater proportion of the local labour. This had consequences for the authority of the contractors who did not have the same control over locals as over coolies who were recruited in China, and who owed passage money. Local labour reacted more strongly against abuses like short and irregular payment. But that alone cannot explain the increase in militancy after 1936, which culminated in the General Strike among rubber workers in 1937. This was due to the increased demand for labour which came with recovery in 1934 and afterwards, and the tactical exploitation of that bargaining advantage by the Malayan Communist Party.27

A Communist Party had operated in Malaya in the 1920s, but as a branch of its Chinese parent. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was established in 1930 by decision of the Comintern and its chief industrial front, the Malayan General Labourers’ Union, a few days later. Police raids almost wiped it out at birth, but it recovered sufficiently to be able to integrate itself with various ‘red’ and ‘grey’ unions by 1934. These operated mainly in Singapore, but by 1935, the Party organisation was beginning to supply skilled cadres for the organisation of strikes among Chinese workers on rubber plantations. The MCP’s membership was almost entirely Chinese, and at this stage it had neither the means nor the ambition to reach out to Indian plantation coolies.28

In February 1937, a strike occurred among Chinese workers on a British owned estate in Kajang. The Selangor Rubber Workers’ Union called for a general strike of all rubber workers in the State, and it began on 7 March. The strikers’ main demand was for a hefty increase in wage rates, but they also made a series of other claims, including freedom to operate trade unions legally. The strike spread beyond Selangor onto estates in Penang, Malacca and Johore, and into the colliery that supplied the tin mines and the railways. The police broke up demonstrations, and shot dead two of the strikers. The Government called in a Punjabi regiment, and the police made mass arrests, but the strike continued until mid August. The terms of settlement included a substantial rise in wage rates to 75 cents per day, and stricter rules to control abuses by contractors. The Government agreed to extend the provisions of the Labour Code to cover Chinese workers, and subsequently spent much more time monitoring their operations. The terms of the settlement of the strike applied only to Chinese workers, but their victory also produced a gain for Indian coolies because it prodded the UPAM into accepting the wage recommendations of the Sastri Inquiry.29

The Government had suspended assisted Indian immigration in 1931, but resumed it in 1934. Drought and famine in Southern India assured a plentiful supply, and in 1934 and 1935, over 155,000 Indians arrived in Malaya with a willingness that rendered recruitment by kanganis unnecessary. Intervention by the Controller of Labour secured employment for the immigrants at the rates of 35 cents per day for men, and 28 cents for women in May 1934. Over the next two years of strongly improving rubber prices, the UPAM refused to restore rates of pay to pre-Depression levels. In 1936, the Government of India pressed for an inquiry into the payment and conditions of Indian labourers in Malaya. Headed by V.N. Sastri, the Inquiry recommended restoration of the pay rates to the pre-Depression levels of 50 cents and 40 cents respectively. The 1937 strike of Chinese coolies removed any doubts the members of the UPAM might have had about accepting the recommendations, and they paid the new rates from April. Even so, Indian rates were well below Chinese, and parity of payment became an issue that industrial organisation could focus on.30

But no successful industrial action was possible immediately. A fall in the demand for rubber led the UPAM to threaten to reduce the rates it had recently accepted.31 The Indian Government responded by banning the migration of Indian labourers to Malaya from May 1938.
The UPAM carried out its threat, and for a while the ban had little effect. But the threat of war and then the war itself brought huge increases in the demand for rubber, and the UPAM began to relent. At a time when rubber plantation companies were making profits of up to 250 per cent, it restored Indian wage rates to pre-Depression parity in October 1939, one month after the beginning of World War II.

These were the rates payable when the Klang District Indian Union (KDIU) was formed in mid 1940. This organisation was one of the several industrial associations which had been formed after the Chinese strike in 1937, and the visit to Malaya of Jawaharlal Nehru, who urged Indians to form trade unions and agitate for improvements in their pay and conditions. The origin of the KDIU owed nothing to the Malayan Communist Party, but certainly something to the Central Indian Association of Malaya. The CIAM was an arm of the Indian National Congress, which had declared non co-operation with the British war effort, and like its Indian parent, was composed mainly of high caste Indians now seeking the alliance and support of Indian workers.32

The KDIU aimed, among other things, at parity of payment between Indian and Chinese plantation coolies. In response to a series of small sporadic strikes, the UPAM offered a slight advance in pay rates, and when the strikes did not stop, increased its offer to 60 cents for men and 55 cents for women, per day, in April 1941. But the strikes still continued, involving over 20,000 Indian workers, and when police action failed to restore order, the Government called in volunteer reserves, and then an Indian regiment. Five strikers were shot dead, and scores wounded. After the arrest and deportation of their leaders, the strikers drifted back to work in mid-May, with no advance on the April offer.33

In the early phases of the strike, the local British resident had been very reluctant to issue arrest warrants, and the Controller of Labour had invited the CIAM to take part in negotiations. This the UPAM considered almost tantamount to treason, and when the Controller refused to offer it guarantees of support, it complained bitterly, and its complaints reached the ears of the Colonial Office. The Controller was prevailed upon to take early retirement, even though the High Commissioner went on record as believing that a good part of the blame for the strike lay with the undue concern of the plantation managers and their London Directors for company profits and shareholders dividends. The UPAM continued to assert that there was no genuine industrial basis for this strike, and blamed everything on locally born hotheads.

The Government thought otherwise, and soon after the strikes ended, the Straits Settlement and Federated Malay States Council enacted legislation that had been urged on them for some years. These Acts made the registration of trade unions compulsory, and provided for reference of disputes to an industrial tribunal. Restrictions on the membership of union executives were tight, strikes other than for strict industrial purposes were illegal, and the government had extraordinary power of appointment to the arbitral tribunals. The Acts aimed far more at restricting the influence of the Communist Party and the CIAM, than at developing a trade union movement, but the Japanese Army invaded Malaya before they were put to the test.

**Conclusion: capital, labour and the state**

To promote a prosperous rubber industry in Malaya was a continuing principle of British imperial policy in the 40 years before the beginning of World War II. Malayan rubber plantations were not only a source of considerable wealth for British companies and their shareholders; they provided the British Government with a strategically essential product in times of war, and in times of peace one which earned valuable overseas credits. The good health of Britain’s balance of payments depended in no small measure on exports of Malayan rubber.

The metropolitan British and Malayan Governments adopted policies which heavily favoured rubber estates owners. Governments in Britain and Malaya consulted closely with the RGA and [U] PAM, and appointed their representatives to statutory bodies, and the Councils of the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. These two legislatures enacted law and oversaw administration, which aimed to develop the prosperity of the rubber industry through development of the privately owned plantation companies. The Governments acquired land, and made it available cheaply, on easy terms. They provided legislation, which made it possible for companies to buy outright, land that Malays had
held by customary tenure; they discriminated in the companies’ favour in land sales, and made things difficult for competing smallholders. Land revenue funded roads and railways, and the companies paid no taxation.

Similarly, the Government enacted labour laws, which heavily favoured the estate employers. When the indenture system proved unable to provide Indian coolies in the numbers plantation owners thought desirable, the Government replaced it with a system of ‘free’ labour supplied by an immigration fund, which it could manipulate to increase or decrease the supply of labour. It tolerated the minimum wage policy of the [U]PAM and the RGA; the wages of Indian coolies did not rise above statistically calculated survival rates until 1941, and for much of the 1930s were below them. With Chinese labour, it recognised but failed to redress the abuses of the contract system until the strike of 1937 compelled some action.

This is not to say that the rubber companies got everything they wanted. After the first few years, and for the entire period of rapid growth in the number of rubber plantations, the planters did have to pay enough for their land to make a substantial contribution to the development of infrastructure. The Government enacted laws which subjected the health, housing, payment and discipline of their Indian employees to inspection, and it occasionally prosecuted managers and even closed estates down.

This reflected the view of the British Colonial Office and the Malayan Governments that the rubber plantation industry was too important to be left to the rubber companies. Their interest was in quick profit; the government was there for the long haul. One of its major considerations had to be the policy of the Government of India, increasingly concerned with the welfare and status of its subjects overseas, and virtual controller of the supply of Indian labour. Against the wishes of the [U] PAM, cheap labour had to become a fraction dearer.

But when challenge to the control of the rubber companies over their employees began to emerge in the 1930s, the bias of the Government’s policy was heavily in favour of the owners. It deliberately delayed legislation which would have helped the development of a trade union movement for employees which might have acted as a counter to the trade unionism of the employers. It used police powers to suppress the organisation of the Communist Party and the CIAM, and in the strikes of 1937 and 1941, it deployed military forces. On Government orders, Indian troops shot their coolie brothers. The Controller of Labour who had attempted to temporise in negotiations was prevailed upon to resign.

The reaction was extreme, and some of the members of the Malayan administration were not happy with it. One of these was the High Commissioner himself, who refused to accept the insistence of the RGA and the UPAM that the massive disturbance in 1941 was simply the result of agitation of some local young hot-heads and the failure of the Government to suppress it. The High Commissioner, instead, blamed the Klang strikes on the subservience of local managers to British company directors in London and their concern for maximising profits for shareholders. His words might almost have served as an epitaph for the whole system.

Endnotes

* The authors would like to thank Christine Winter, Research School of Social Services, ANU, for her valuable work in tracking down sources and digging out information.
4. Ibid., p. 13.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
7. Lim Teck Ghee, Peasants and their Agricultural Economy, p. 111.
10. Ibid., p. 235.

11. Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the conditions of Indentured Labour in the Federated Malay States, 1910; and Further Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the conditions of Indentured Labour in the Federated Malay States, 1910. The Commission’s report offers a minute examination of the relationship between companies and government in the management of labour at the administrative level. So do the Labour Reports to the FMS Federal Council in the late 1930s.


13. Ibid., p. 44.


17. For examples of the adjustment of the Fund by the Committee, see RGA *Bulletins* 1922, p. 440; 1931, p. 247; 1936, p. 137.


20. ‘Crimping’ – ‘This dishonourable outflow’ was poaching labourers recruited by another planter. See RGA *Bulletin* 1922, pp. 302, 352.


27. Ibid., p. 38.

28. Ibid., p. 40.


30. This account is based on: Tai Yuen, *Labour Unrest in Malaya*.


33. This account is based on: Wilson, *The Klang Strikes of 1941*; Tai Yuen, *Labour Unrest in Malaya*. 
‘A sort of Brigadoon’?: ALP politics and the Residents’ Advisory Committee of the Glebe Estate during the time of federal government administration, 1974-85

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The 1974 purchase of the Glebe Estate from the Anglican Church, and its proposed rehabilitation as a public housing project, was one of the great urban initiatives of the Whitlam Government. On the ground however the administration of the Estate, from 1974 until it passed to the control of the NSW Government at the beginning of 1985, was intertwined with the local politics of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). At the centre of this was the Residents’ Advisory Committee (RAC) of the Estate, dominated for the most part by tribal and conservative working class males, linked to the ALP Right. At the core of the Estate’s politics was a paradox. While the initial acquisition saved the Estate, it threatened the political control of the local Labor Right. The defeat of the Whitlam Government and the consequent threat to the existence of the Estate, enabled the Right to assert their full control, particularly through the RAC. By examining this world more closely it is hoped that this paper will enhance the understanding of the nature of those conservative elements within working class Labor politics that emerged in the turbulent decades after World War II.

Gleebooks, located on Glebe Point Road, Glebe, is one of the leading bookshops in Sydney, a temple to the literate preoccupations of the middle class professionals and semi-professionals who have come to dominate the political and social life of the inner city suburbs. Near the front door, set into the pavement, is a perspex-covered container housing a pair of bronzed boxing gloves. This memorial recognises the building’s prior use as Tom Laming’s ‘Golden Gloves Boxing Gymnasium’ and second hand goods, ‘Dealatorium’. The monument’s plaque celebrates boxing as ‘an important part of Glebe’s working class identity and pride’. However the entombed gloves also symbolise the passing of a pugilistic and conservative male politics that had once dominated the Glebe branches of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Laming’s Gym was located in the middle of the large section of rented working class housing that had become known as the Glebe Estate. Tom Laming himself had been active in the local Glebe ALP branch and a member of the Estate’s Residents’ Advisory Committee (RAC) after the Whitlam Labor Government acquisition in 1974. Until the mid 1980s, the RAC was to be the focus of power among a ruling element on the Estate with close links to the Glebe ALP branches, and the ALP Right both in Leichhardt Municipality and at the NSW State level.

Michael Hogan’s recently published history of the Labor Party in Glebe reveals that, notwithstanding its turbulent and fractious nature, Glebe Labor had, in the aftermath of World War II, become predominantly anti-communist, Catholic and conservative. As with NSW in general, this conservative element had chosen not to depart for the Democratic Labor Party in the great split of the 1950s. In his earlier 1970s work, sociologist Andrew Jakubowicz had described inner city ALP machines, such as that in Glebe, as tribal expressions of a ‘strong, defensive community tradition’ among the inner city working class. They had grown, he argued, out of the necessities of socioeconomic defence during the Great Depression and were reinforced by strongly established family links and affiliations to the Irish wing of the Catholic Church. They were ‘authoritarian and hierarchical’, purpose built to control local councils and jobs and had ‘a possessive unforgiving ideology’.

In Glebe and the other suburbs of Leichhardt Municipality during the 1970s and 1980s this ethos, and the Labor Right loyalties and power structures based around it, was challenged by an encroaching middle class Left membership in the ALP branches. This was a membership asserting new values deriving from the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Glebe, the resistance of the Right to this encroachment was also linked to the perceived threat from the Left associated with the acquisition and management of the Glebe Estate under the Whitlam Government, and the later threats to the survival of the Right constituency on the Estate from the Fraser Government. This paper will seek to examine these ALP Right power relationships, and the personalities involved, as they cohered around the RAC of the Glebe Estate, during the period of federal government administration.
If Mark Peel’s examination of the working class suburb of Elizabeth in South Australia sought to bring out the positive aspects of working class culture and the particular role of women in holding community networks together, then this paper seeks to shine a light on the dark side of a conservative and masculinist Labor community leadership, one that did not always operate in the best interests of its constituency.⁵

**From Church lands to Glebe Project**

The original Church lands from which Glebe takes its name, were broken up in 1828 with the Church retaining two sections, St Phillips and Bishopthorpe, at the South-Eastern end of Glebe (adjacent to Broadway and Sydney University). Both of these areas were developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under leases to private developers. In the aftermath of World War I and the 1930s Depression, Glebe as a whole, as with other suburbs in the municipality, had become solidly working class. The suburb and the Estate (particularly St Phillips), shared the reputation of many inner city suburbs as a ‘slum’.⁶

By the 1970s, the Church of England was landlord of over 700 houses and around 3,000 residents, an ageing population with a high per centage Australian born. Houses were structurally sound but in poor repair, most with outdoor toilets and many without running water inside the house. However rents were low and friendship and family networks, some third generation, provided mutual support. On rent-collecting visits, the Church’s agents would be asked to undertake repairs or to find a vacant house for a son or daughter, niece or nephew who was getting married, re-enforcing the Estate’s familial links.⁷

With insufficient income generated from low rents, the Church’s Glebe Administration Board sought to re-develop the site but frustrated by state and local government responses, and attracting bad publicity over its uncharitable ‘slum landlord’ role, tried to off-load it. It proposed to the 1972 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Poverty that federal, state or local government take over the Estate to provide low-cost housing. The Whitlam government eventually acquired the Estate, labelled by one journalist at the time as ‘a sort of Brigadoon’,⁸ in August 1974. The pressure for this solution had come from a number of different quarters and the debate over the origin of the idea was itself to become an issue in the politics of Glebe and the municipality.⁹

The Minister for Urban and Regional Development in the Whitlam government, Tom Uren, was the minister responsible for facilitating the acquisition. His attention was drawn to this possibility by post-Trotskyist, Leichhardt Mayor Nick Origlass. Origlass headed up a Left independents-controlled council which had replaced the Labor Right in 1971. In March 1973, Leichhardt Council bought a small number of houses from the Church as a low-income housing, pilot project, to encourage federal government interest. Glebe independent aldermen, David Young and Eric Sandblom, were also central to this initiative and were closely associated with the resident action group, the Glebe Society. Initially concerned with heritage issues and expressway threats, the Society was also to support the wider social goals of the acquisition.¹⁰

The pressure to acquire the Glebe Estate then, substantially came from outside its residents, that is, outside the constituency claimed by the local ALP Right as its own. According to Glebe ALP Branch Secretary, the late Greg Johnston, the initial reserve of the Estate’s residents related to the belief that they might eventually be offered the houses at a reasonable price by the Church. RAC Secretary Vince Nash, while asserting some activity from within the local ALP Right, nonetheless felt that this leadership was inward looking and preoccupied with ‘internal power for individuals’. As a result the people of the Estate ‘didn’t know what to do. They were quite willing to follow but not willing to lead and they were waiting for the saviour to come’.¹¹

**The Estate and the ALP branches of Glebe**

At the time of the Estate’s acquisition, there were three ALP branches in the Glebe ward of Leichhardt Municipality. The Glebe branch, covered most of the Estate. Its secretary, City Council employee Greg Johnston, held that position from the 1950s until his death in 2002. The membership of the branch was blue and white collar, working class, overwhelmingly Estate renters with a rising number of pensioners
though there were some early intrusions of students from Sydney University. Meetings were short, of small attendance and preoccupied with local issues. Forest Lodge branch, covering an area in the south of the ward was dominated by the extended family connections of Les McMahon. An official with the Plumbers Union, McMahon had strong links to the NSW ALP Right and, from 1975 to 1983, was federal member for Sydney. The branch was small and notorious for frustrating attempts by the Left-leaning middle class members joining. Though located outside the Estate, the branch was closely connected to it. McMahon typified this personal and political connection through his wife Pat whose family had come from there.

Glebe North covered the more ‘middle-classed’ area of Glebe Point. However, it included a section of the Glebe Estate and had been dominated, at the beginning of the 1970s, by medical practitioner and former Glebe alderman, Horace ‘Doc’ Foley. Foley had a turbulent history as a Langite and had built up political and social connections with the Glebe working class over a long period of time. He also was notorious in his attempts at obstructing the influx of new members. The dominant Catholicism of Glebe underpinned branch culture and inter-branch contact. For some years, the Estate-based Glebe ALP branch held its monthly meetings on Sunday morning, after mass, followed by a barbecue and as Andrew Jakubowicz has pointed out, the front steps of St James after mass on Sundays provided opportunity for discussion of Labor affairs. Also significant were the meetings of the board of the Glebe Homoeopathic Hospital on which key figures from the three branches served.

Coming under early pressure from the encroaching Left, Glebe North branch saw the most protracted struggle. The new members were mostly professionals, semi-professionals and students from Sydney University. In many cases they were active in public sector unions, in resident action groups such as the Glebe Society or in social movement politics. By the beginning of the 1980s the new members were starting to get the upper hand. The Left won control of Leichhardt Municipal Council and in 1981, Left branch recruiter Peter Baldwin defeated Les McMahon in preselections for the federal seat of Sydney. The NSW ALP Right decided to stop the rot at Glebe to protect veteran NSW Labor government minister and local member, Pat Hills. Glebe North was abolished and incorporated into Forest Lodge. In all these struggles, the Glebe Estate was crucial, its politics a key factor in making Glebe the municipality’s ‘last stand’ for the Right. Future NSW Legislative Council President, Meredith Burgmann, had moved into Glebe as a student at the end of 1968. The new Left ALP members lacked credibility in the Estate, she argued, because

...a lot of people in the Glebe Estate, certainly a lot of those involved in the Labor Party, believed that their lovely house was theirs because of Doc Foley and Les McMahon and that machine.

**ALP politics, the RAC and management of the Glebe Project**

When the Estate’s ‘saviour’ arrived in 1974 in the form of the Whitlam Government, the structures set up to manage what was now called the Glebe Project enabled the local ALP Right to develop a power base around the issues the project generated. Overseeing this novel federal initiative was a project committee of heads of key federal departments. On the ground the project was administered by a Project Manager with the assistance of a Community Development Officer, and design and rehabilitation staff. Minister Tom Uren outlined the aims of the project as to: provide housing in the inner city for low income earners; avoid displacement of the existing population and ‘disruption to existing community networks’; improve the environmental and social conditions of the residents, preserve or sympathetically rehabilitate the townscape; and to create a pilot project in urban rehabilitation.

The RAC, as the principal means of involvement of the residents of the Estate, was to be chosen from ten single-representative ‘electorates’ with anyone over 18 years-of-age and resident for three months able to vote and run as a candidate. The first elections, in early 1975, attracted a 61 per cent turnout, higher than recent, and then non-compulsory, local government elections. The membership of the committee quickly became dominated by members of the Glebe and Glebe North ALP branches. Glebe North member Tom Whitty was elected chair of the RAC with Vince Nash, of Glebe branch, as vice-chair and later, secretary. Nash had been brought up on the Estate and returned to live there. He was a senior public servant with links through the Labor Right networks and became the key public spokesperson of the RAC. Other Glebe branch members who would hold positions on the committee included Sadie King, Tom Laming, Bob Day and Ron Simmons with Bill Corbett from Glebe North.
Some power relationships in the Glebe branch and the RAC were also centred on Glebe Point Road pharmacist Peter Thom. Educated at Waverley College and Sydney University, Thom became president of the Glebe branch by the late 1970s, though he lived in the Eastern suburbs. Like Doc Foley, he built up a following among the locals through his business. He donated funds for after-branch meeting and Christmas party gatherings and assisted older members of the branch with their fees. Although not a member of the RAC, he attended its meetings and made media statements on behalf of the Estate’s residents. Thom and his associates were to constitute an important sub-faction within the local Right. Those on the RAC closest to Thom were Whitty, Corbett and Laming. According to Nash, this push had its power base in St Phillips among relatively recent arrivals from Pyrmont. As well as holding the position of chair of the RAC, Whitty was able to win and hold the key position as RAC representative on the Tenants Selection Committee. This committee included the RAC representative, the Project Manager and a representative of the Department of Social Security.17

The elements dominating the RAC and Estate politics soon demonstrated their ‘possessive and unforgiving ideology’ in relation to those ‘outside’ forces that had largely been responsible for the Estate’s acquisition: the independent dominated Leichhardt Council and the Whitlam Government (particularly the left-wing Tom Uren). Shortly after the Estate was acquired, the September 1974 municipal elections saw the independents defeated and the ALP Right return to power on Leichhardt Council. The struggle by the ALP Right to assert its position in relation to the Estate was reflected in the 1974 municipal campaign. *The Glebe* newspaper, which had supported the independents at the 1971 elections, switched to the ALP Right and remained close to the incoming council, benefiting from a disproportionate allocation of Council advertising. *The Glebe* asserted that incumbent independent councillors, Young and Sandblom had lied about their role, and that of the Origlass-led council, in the acquisition of the Estate. The credit, it argued, lay with the Glebe Labor Party branches, federal member Jim Cope, state member Pat Hills and the soon to be elected ALP Glebe ward aldermen, Ivor Cawley and George Millard. After the elections a hostile relationship developed between the council and federal minister Tom Uren, with council complaining that Uren was not consulting it. Controversial Leichhardt deputy mayor, Dan Casey, called for the project to be halted and *The Glebe* newspaper referred to the ‘mishandling’ of the project as a ‘scandal’.18

In early 1975, Uren wrote to council criticising them for their uninformed comment on the project’s costs and rents, their lack of appreciation of heritage issues and their lack of cooperation. Casey responded, declaring he was ‘dismayed, disappointed and bitterly regret[s] that Tom Uren is a member of the Australian Labor Party’. Matters worsened when two key appointments on the project were announced. Recently defeated independent alderman David Young, a qualified architect and town planner, was appointed Project Manager. Nita McCrae, a working class activist from Sydney’s Rocks area associated with the ALP Left, was appointed Community Development Officer, the position responsible for liaising with the RAC. The Glebe North Branch, in a resolution to the NSW ALP, questioned Uren’s fitness to be both a Minister and member of the ALP as a result of Young’s appointment and the unrelated appointment of NSW Builders Laborers’ Federation president, and ALP Left member, Bob Pringle to a government advisory committee.19

The first RAC was elected and met shortly after the new project appointments and any hope by the managers that they might assume a moderate ‘consultative’ role was soon dispelled. As former RAC secretary Nash explained it, ‘you cannot run an election unless it is political, particularly in an area like Glebe’ and the RAC became a vehicle for an assertion of Labor Right political power. There were however genuine issues to be taken up. Conflict between the Project Office and the RAC emerged over plans for construction of ‘infill’ housing, largely for students. This was seen as a way of increasing the project’s income and moderating rents on the Estate generally. The federal government hoped for a self-financing project with a mix of subsidised rents and market rents for commercial premises and residents who could afford it. Students, however, might also have posed a potential political threat in the branches. Confusion and discontent was also generated around rent rises and plans for rehabilitation. There were practical problems in renovation, such as rising damp, and heritage requirements. The latter would entail the dismantling of in-filled verandahs and ‘sleep-outs’; and coupled with the threat to backyards by ‘infill’ housing, caused concern among residents. There was also the problem of leaving
houses empty for temporary relocation of residents during rehabilitation. The RAC also sought to assert itself through the Tenant Selection Committee in order to control new applicants and ensure that the Estate was a place for ‘friends neighbours and the people we love’.20

After Whitlam: reclaiming the RAC constituency and defending the Estate

The election that saw the defeat of the Whitlam government saw Jim Cope retire and Les McMahon replace him as federal member. With the threat to the future of the Estate, McMahon emerged as one of its key champions along with local Right aldermen and the RAC, particularly Nash. However there was tension between McMahon and the grouping around Thom. With his own political ambitions, Thom had been an unsuccessful candidate against McMahon in the 1975 federal preselections. Thom’s support group was located among what Nash described as ‘Whitty and Co’, the patriarchal ‘Irish Mafia’ that dominated the RAC. Nonetheless, the forces mobilising the Estate were able to be effective, particularly in its defence during the years of the Fraser federal government.21

There were two major periods of threat to the Estate from sale by the federal government. The first was immediately after the defeat of the Whitlam government. Later, at the beginning of the 1980s, there was the threat from the federal government’s expenditure review ‘razor gang’. In between these times, the fear of sale remained in the background with the main focus on the lack of funds for rehabilitation and attempts to raise rents. These were argued through a succession of project managers and responsible federal departments and ministers. At different times large public meetings were called in Glebe Town Hall, usually on Sunday mornings after mass, and attendance ranged from 300 to 600. Nash, Thom, McMahon and Glebe Ward alderman Ivor Cawley were the principal speakers and the meetings achieved good publicity. Meetings were often preceded by, or followed up with, deputations to Canberra.22

Secure in the local ALP Right’s control of the issue, Nash was willing to canvass wider support for the Estate. He joined with Alderman Ivor Cawley and the editor of The Leichhardt Local, Peter Manning, in writing to the Sydney Morning Herald in defence of the Estate in February 1976. The Local had originated in 1975 among elements of the inner city Left keen to establish an alternative to The Glebe. The paper campaigned strongly on behalf of the Estate residents during its 18 month life. Nash also praised Uren’s ‘original vision’ for the Estate and enlisted his support. Nonetheless there appeared to be concern that the issue might slip from the tribal control of the ALP Right elements. Ivor Cawley, addressing one meeting, warned of other action groups that might try to ‘get in on the act’ arguing that there were ‘people, not necessarily in this hall, who are trying to take over this struggle’. Just who he was referring to is a moot point but the comment is indicative of the possessive culture surrounding the RAC and the campaign to save the Estate.23

The RAC and Elsie

The ‘right wing laborites obsession to “own the game”’24 and the masculinist nature of their politics was manifested in the relationship between key personalities in the male-dominated RAC and the initiatives of the Elsie women’s refuge and the Estate’s Women’s group. Elsie, a house on the Estate squatted in early 1974 as a refuge for women and children escaping domestic violence, was eventually funded by the federal government and moved into another, newly renovated house on the Estate. According to Nash the issue of the refuge eventually settled down and became accepted but initially people reacted ‘fairly badly’ and it ‘frightened’ them. This was linked to concern about other ‘incursions’ such as squatters and the prisoner’s half-way house, the fact that Elsie was given one of the earlier renovated houses while others on the Estate couldn’t get maintenance done, and fears of violence and disturbance from violent husbands. There was also the ‘self-help’ tradition of the Estate’s masculinist culture which contrasted with the approach of the refuge. Glebe branch president, the late Bob Allnut, recalled an incident in which he and his wife had taken in a local woman who had been beaten by her husband. When the husband came around and abused them from the street, one of the local SP bookmaker’s collectors was called on to deal with the problem.25
Meredith Burgmann, who moved from Dhargan Street to one of the small number of private houses in the middle of St Phillips, where she still lives, argued that while many on the Estate were ‘shocked [by Elsie] because it was not nice’, mostly they were ‘live-and-let-live’, particularly if initiatives like this were ‘not politically operating’. However Carole Renwick, one of the two women on the first RAC, while expressing her support for ‘a place for women to go who get bashed by their husbands’, was concerned at the need for proper ‘policing’ of the refuge. She further argued that ‘there’s lesbians who get in there now and it’s not good for small children who come into contact with that kind of thing’. Renwick’s comments had been made to *The Leichhardt Local* in August 1975 after an incident where a partner of one of the women in the refuge shot and wounded a nearby resident when approaching the wrong house. The man who sustained the minor wound expressed support for Elsie, only suggesting the placing of a security guard. However the same edition of the *Local* carried a story of a fire that had been deliberately lit at the rear of the refuge, one of a number of harassing incidents. In October 1975, *The Glebe* newspaper carried scandalous coverage of the refuge implying that it was in a filthy state and characterising it as a haven for pot-smoking lesbians. A representative of the Elsie collective, invited by the Project manager to address the RAC, was grilled intensively over these issues. In 1976 the Elsie collective wrote to the RAC complaining about an unauthorised inspection by RAC Chairman Whitty and Alderman Cawley. Whitty was drunk. In the presence of women, children and a visiting NSW Health Department officer (and to the embarrassment of Cawley), he urinated in the back toilet with the door open and declared that his intention was to get the refuge and its occupants out. He also announced that he had once managed brothels in Western Australia. The Film Australia footage of the RAC meeting at which the Elsie letter was raised makes for interesting viewing. Whitty, in the chair, blistered and threatened to sue. Members of the committee tried to deflect the criticism by pointing out that the Elsie Collective letter was unsigned (addressed from ‘the collective’) and re-kindled the earlier RAC debate concerning the nature of the refuge’s residents. Nash, visibly uneasy but unwilling to breach tribal loyalties supported this deflection by emphasising that Whitty’s visit was on an individual basis and that the committee had already discussed Elsie before. He proposed that no further visits take place without first being raised in the committee. The only RAC member to defend Elsie at these meetings was the remarkable Bessie Guthrie, Glebe branch member and feminist, who lived on the Estate and participated in the establishment of Elsie.

Later, in early 1978, an urban intern working with the Glebe Project, Debbie Peterson, commented that the attitude of ‘not a local girl in there, all lesbians’ was prevalent among RAC members. There was also, she argued, a specific hostility from some of the males of the dominant RAC group hostile to the formation of the Glebe Estate Women’s Group, which was started around activities of ‘housie’ and organising a paper drive and playgroup. According to Peterson this group, in which Nita McCrae played a role, was referred to as ‘Nita’s clowns’. She commented that ‘the political tensions caused by a group of women forming in this “right wing” Labor community are extremely difficult to deal with’. A number of women appeared to have made a concerted attempt to contest the May 1976 RAC elections. However, the committee was to remain dominated by ‘Whitty and Co’. Only two women were elected, both unopposed. One was Sadie King, associated with the ALP Right. The other was Bessie Guthrie who was to remain on the ‘outer’ of the dominant RAC group until her death in 1977. The refuge now bears her name.

**An entrenched but fading power**

The 1978 RAC elections were held under a new format aimed at containing the political influence of its dominant group. There were to be nine representatives, five elected at large from St Phillips, three from Bishopthorpe, and a chair elected from the Estate as a whole. Further elections were then delayed till early 1981, and then scheduled for every two years. These changes made little impact. Whitty was able to continue to hold the position of chair and had contested the 1978 election against one of the previous year’s women candidates, Mrs A James. He presented himself, as previous RAC candidates had often done, as the ‘official Labor ticket’. NSW ALP General Secretary Graeme Richardson was forced to send Whitty a telegram demanding that he cease representing himself as such.

As mentioned above, the Right was under pressure in the Glebe branches by the beginning of the 1980s. Nonetheless, federal member Les McMahon’s efforts in defending the Estate almost saved him. His defeat by Peter Baldwin in the 1981 preselection had been a narrow one (seven votes).
While there had been a building up of the Glebe branch under Thom in the late 1970s, it is probable that a stronger effort and a more competent leadership on the Estate might have seen McMahon survive. Tension between Thom and his ‘Whitty and Co’ support base, and McMahon, was probably a factor here. McMahon continued to represent the Estate’s interests until his parliamentary term ended with the election of the Hawke Government in 1983. The RAC continued to be dominated by the same personalities into the mid 1980s and the turnout of voters in its elections fell. The Fraser Government offered the Estate to the NSW Labor government in 1979 and there were protracted negotiations. With the election of the Hawke Government, the threat of possible sale eased and negotiations revitalised. The core issue had been the degree of federal and state financial input into the transfer. The Estate was finally transferred to NSW at the beginning of 1985. This occurred as the power of the ALP Right within the Glebe ALP branches was being marginalised. The expanded Forest Lodge branch finally fell to the Left in 1984 after sustained recruiting by future state member and Minister in the Carr Government, Sandra Nori and her then partner and future Labor Senate Leader, John Faulkner. When Pat Hills retired at the state elections of 1988, Nori replaced him as member for the state seat, becoming the key electoral representative of the (now state-administered) Estate’s interests.

Conclusion

At the heart of the RAC and Glebe ALP Right’s efforts to maintain leadership on the Glebe Estate was a paradox. The acquisition of the Estate by the Whitlam Government saved the Right’s constituency but threatened its political influence. This threat came through its federal administration under Left minister Uren, the possibility of students being accommodated, the pre-1974 role of the independent-dominated Leichhardt Council, the heritage ‘watchdog’ role of the Glebe Society and the involvement in the Project of Left-leaning administrators like Young and McCrae. The defeat of the Whitlam government reversed the paradox. The constituency of the Estate came under threat in the Fraser era but these circumstances enabled the Right to reassert leadership through the RAC, the local aldermen and the federal member. However the social and political changes in the municipality and its ALP branches, ultimately favoured the ALP Left. The subsuming of the Estate-based ALP Right’s power was to be aided in the long-run by old age and the dilution of the Estate’s character within the public housing policy and administration of the NSW Department of Housing.

This brief history of the politics of the Glebe Estate Resident’s Advisory Committee during the time of federal government management provides a window into that essentially masculinist ‘possessive unforgiving ideology’ that characterised many of the ALP Right wing political machines in Australia’s inner-cities in the decades after World War II and the way in which they sought to defend themselves from economic, social and political change. In Glebe, the ALP machine’s defence of the Estate between 1974 and 1985 revealed a complex mix of assertive, community solidarity and benighted, patriarchal self-interest.

Endnotes

1. Dennis Minogue, ‘For $17.5 million the Commonwealth Government has bought a sort of Brigadoon’, The Age, Saturday Review, 13 April 1974, p. 9.

8. Dennis Minogue, ‘For $17.5 million the Commonwealth Government has bought a sort of Brigadoon’.


15. *Glebe Project*, passim; *Glebe Project* Committee records, Glebe Project Correspondence Files (hereafter GPCF) C886, GP 009 (CA 8480 Australian Department of Finance and Administration), National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA).

16. *Glebe Project*, ch. 7, *The Glebe and Leichhardt Local*, passim for this period; *Glebe Project* Committee records GPCF C886, GP009, NAA; Glebe Project Community Development records, GPCF, C886, GP026, NAA; Videotapes, VideoCassettes and Sound Cassettes relating to Glebe Estate Office Activities (hereafter GPVS), C5062 (CA 8480 Australian Department of Finance and Administration), NAA.

17. *Glebe Project Information Bulletins* 1975-76; Glebe branch minutes; ‘Thom and Hoy join Sydney race’, *The Glebe*, 21 August 1975, p. 2; Peter Thom, Channel Ten News interview, 28 February 1978, GPVS, C5062, Item 1, NAA.


23. Peter Manning, Ivor Cawley and Vince Nash, ‘Why sell off the Glebe lands now?’, *SMH*, 10 February 1976, p. 7; *The Leichhardt Local* passim.


29. Graeme Richardson’s papers, MLMSS, 5095/29; Debbie Peterson; *Glebe Project*; Glebe Project Committee records, GPCF, C886, GP 009, NAA; Community Development records, GPCF, C886, GP 026, NAA.

Exporting animals, exporting jobs:
30 years of campaigning against live export

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The live meat export industry has posed a challenge to the established meat processing and export industry that has given rise to a number of unusual alliances. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees’ Union has worked with animal rights groups and also the Australian Meat Processor Corporation and its company members to campaign against live animal export. These alliances, even if temporary, show that a trade union may achieve greater success working with other groups than simply relying on an industrial campaign.

Since its growth in the early 1970s, the live animal export sector has developed from the initial trade of ad hoc exports to a co-ordinated trade of regular sheep exports to the Middle East and live cattle export to South East Asia, North Africa, and China.¹ During this same period, over 30 export abattoirs and even more domestic abattoirs closed around Australia with the direct loss of almost 20,000 jobs in the meat processing industry, usually in rural and regional areas.² Throughout this period, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees’ Union (AMIEU) has been campaigning across Australia to stop the live export trade to save jobs and to prevent the associated cruelty of shipping animals overseas.

To date, research on live animal export has come from two main sources. Animal welfare groups and veterinarians have produced extensive reports and other publications on animal rights and welfare; while Federal and State Governments in Australia and the livestock producers have also commissioned various reports.³ The main gap in the literature is the absence of any research on the three decade long campaign waged by the AMIEU to protect the Australian meat processing industry and its members’ jobs. This paper therefore examines the ongoing campaign begun by the union in 1973 when it imposed a ban on live sheep exports which resulted in a Federal Government inquiry into live export practices. In doing so, the paper examines the alliances formed by the AMIEU with animal rights groups and how these groups became influential industrial relations actors in their own right. These alliances are discussed briefly using social movement theory and an assessment of the three decade campaign is presented.

The key argument of this paper is that lobby alliance partners seek to elicit member support and contributions to campaigns in exchange for specific benefits so that the alliances may not be permanent but rather short term.⁴ The benefits sought may not be the same for each lobby partner and the alliances will be driven by convenience and the circumstances at a particular time.

Background to the campaign

During the 1970s, employment in the meat industry was subject to extreme fluctuations as a result of changing demand for wool. This saw a series of peaks and troughs in the Australian wool industry and accompanying alterations in the numbers of sheep: when wool demand is low, sheep slaughter is higher and vice versa. The situation was compounded by seasonal weather conditions and the simultaneous growth in the export of live sheep from 1974 to 1978. Sheep that had previously been culled by woolgrowers (that is five to six year old sheep) were exported live to countries that reduced the tariff on live animals imports to be as little as one to three per cent.⁵ These countries were not new markets but rather existing ones in the Middle East and South East Asia. The AMIEU focused on the culling as unnecessarily compounding the difficulties faced by meatworkers because ‘the continued export of live sheep [had] a big impact on members in Victoria, NSW, South Australia and Queensland’.⁶ As former AMIEU (Vic) State Secretary, Wally Curran, said:

The impact of live sheep did not close plants but rather live sheep were a factor; for example, at Portland. The plants closed because of a combination of factors but live sheep means no local sheep to be killed in numbers in small sheds and no jobs for the members.⁷

Fred Hall, former AMIEU Federal Secretary, had also identified live animal exports as the major reason for the problems the meat processing industry faced in the 1970s:
Both the national sheep and cattle herds have substantially dropped and I don’t see any glut of meat on the Australian market any more [because the excess animals are exported live]. We have lost a lot of members over the last four months (9,000 were laid off between March to May 1979).8

The vertically integrated companies which operated initially as meat processors and chilled and frozen meat exporters were able to move into live export. These companies became the target of the AMIEU campaign against live exports because they were the direct employers of the union’s members but were simultaneously reducing the amount of available livestock for processing by exporting live animals. This effectively reduced the number of days of work available to meatworkers from five to as few as two and it also reduced the slaughter season by as much as two months per year.9 By 1979, at least 4,000 AMIEU (Vic) members were working less than five days a week without any redundancy scheme or severance pay.10 A combination of industrial relations changes and poor economic conditions had reduced the union’s bargaining position and forced it to consider new strategies such as political lobbying and forming alliances with groups outside of the industrial relations arena.

Initiating the campaign

The early phase of the campaign (1973-77) was directed at the vertically integrated companies on a state by state basis and was not a co-ordinated strategy under the auspices of the Federal branch of the AMIEU.11 However, it still resulted in a Federal Labor Government inquiry into livestock exports from which the outcome was twofold: there was a weight restriction placed on the type of sheep which could be exported live and a ratio of live sheep to mutton carcasses was introduced. The ratio did not extend to beef so the union retained the extension of the ratio to this section of the industry as a key objective of its campaign.12

During the mid 1970s, the Western Australian branch of the union had initiated a series of pickets of ports combined with lobbying of the State Government and the various employer groups. This action was successful in part because it ensured that livestock producers adhered more strictly to the ratios than did those in other states. Companies such as Metro Meats and Elders were the main targets of the AMIEU action because they also employed meatworkers in their abattoirs. Producers ignoring the ratios were identified by the State branches of the union and targeted for industrial action across Australia.

As more livestock producers became involved in live exporting, a split in the ranks of employer and producer representatives occurred.13 In 1977, the Australian Meat Exporters’ Association supported the AMIEU’s position and voiced concerns about the availability and quality of livestock for slaughter, throughput, and employment. The newly formed Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation (AMLC) and the Australian Wool and Meat Producers’ Federation both took an equivocal position which involved offering qualified support for live animal export.14 In comparison, the Australian Woolgrowers’ and Graziers’ Council was totally opposed to any restrictions being placed on live animal exports and lobbied the Federal Liberal Government for this objective.15 This organisation provided the main opposition to the AMIEU campaign during the 1970s. In 1977, secondary boycott provisions (s45D & E) were inserted into the amended Trade Practices Act (Commonwealth) by the Federal Liberal Government, possibly with a view to preventing future blockades of livestock on Australian wharves.16 Also, 1977 saw the Federal branch of the AMIEU take over the co-ordination of the campaign against live animal export because problems were occurring with the ratio system in most States. Although Fred Hall was Federal Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Jack O’Toole, took much of the responsibility for the campaign.

The union announced that all live sheep exports from Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania would be banned and stock movements from New South Wales and Queensland into South Australia would blocked. This was followed by a further announcement that it was giving the livestock industry until 1 March 1978 to implement and adhere to an effective ratio system if national industrial action was to be avoided. Industry talks broke down as the AMIEU refused to move from its position on ratios and farmers and their representatives demanded unrestricted trade.

Using traditional industrial tactics

During March 1978, the AMIEU federal executive began planning for picket lines at various ports around Australia from which live sheep transport vessels departed. On Sunday 19 March, a picket was
set up at the Cavan sheep yards near Adelaide to prevent the loading of 30,000 Elders-owned sheep for export to the Middle East. Pickets were also established at Bunbury, Albany, Esperance, Fremantle, and Geraldton in Western Australia. The Federal branch was also planning pickets at several other ports around Australia; however, it did not gain the support of other unions prior to the industrial action. While the picket lasted four weeks, it was unsuccessful and the sheep were loaded in Western Australia by members of the Waterside Workers Federation. In South Australia, members of the Australian Workers Union actually supported farmers in their rally against the AMIEU’s blockade because these shearers were employed to shear the sheep prior to their export. Livestock exporters were able to play the unions off against each other by threatening job loss if sheep were not loaded. Further, when the pickets had been breached, the Government, the Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU), and the Australian Woolgrowers’ and Graziers’ Council met to reach an agreement on how to resolve the situation. In doing so, the ACTU under the leadership of Bob Hawke, reinforced the division between the AMIEU and the other unions.

In 1978, the AMIEU had neither union movement nor community support. The South Australian public supported the farmers who, in Adelaide, had organised a public rally and ‘drive slow’ through the city. In Western Australia, the situation was similar. The media provided favourable coverage for the farmers and their representatives and not for the union which was portrayed as engaging in disruptive and threatening industrial action that would serve only their members.

The first broader support for AMIEU action against live animal export occurred at Portland in western Victoria in 1984. The AMIEU organised a series of strikes to draw attention to the under utilisation of Victoria’s largest meatworks. This campaign was co-ordinated by Victorian Secretary, Wally Curran, who designated day-to-day responsibility to local officials at Portland because they knew the member and the local community. Secretary Curran developed rules for picketing, including how to deal with the police presence on the wharf. He also determined that the picket needed to last at least a week to show that the union was serious, as well as handling media inquiries. Contamination of livestock food and water with porcine blood was carried out to make the sheep which consumed it unsuitable for Moslem consumption. When the union’s officials saw that freshly shorn export sheep were being held in bare, muddy paddocks without shelter in extremely cold conditions, they called the RSPCA. This action gained community support in and beyond Portland through extensive media coverage and the first of the alliances between the AMIEU and animal groups was developed.

Building alliances

For almost the first decade of the campaign, the AMIEU had obtained little community support for its cause and no positive media coverage. The first sign that sentiment was changing had appeared during the Portland dispute. The opportunity to build alliances with parties outside of the industry and outside of the industrial relations arena was also demonstrated at Portland when animal welfare activists became involved in the dispute and supported the union’s position.

It appeared that the way forward for the union was to deliberately build alliances with these groups and to gain positive media coverage for their campaign through these groups. These groups were no longer automatically considered extremist and their ideas found support in philosophy and ethics. The writings of the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, did much to promote the issue of animal welfare. His book, Animal Liberation, served as a major formative influence on the animal rights movement because in it he argued that all species capable of suffering were held to have rights. From this he concluded that using animals for food was unjustifiable because it caused unnecessary suffering. Thus, vegetarianism and veganism gained a moral underpinning that removed these approaches to eating from simply being diet fads.

The risk of being identified with so-called extremists did not bother the union’s officials, particularly as the AMIEU was often regarded as extreme both within and outside of the union movement. The rise in the number of animal welfare groups and in the membership of such groups reflected a change in societal attitude towards animal rights and indicated that a change in Government policy to stop live exports may not be impossible. For example, an extensive body of research contends that consumers across the world have increasingly high levels of concern about the welfare of farm animals.
In Europe, the concerns have given rise to private sector responses from producers and to legislative responses; however, in Australia and the USA, formal responses have been much slower.

To provide factual support for its campaign, the AMIEU began collecting data on the impact of live animal export on the meat processing industry in Australia. This data proved the union’s position that the live export industry was a threat to meatworkers’ jobs and to regional communities: one direct job loss could result in as many as seven indirect job losses.

The closure of Smorgon’s Townsville abattoir in 1995 in the face of increasing live cattle export to Asia and the Middle East (from 147,000 head in 1993 to 290,000 head in 1994) reinforced the union’s policy of building alliances with animal welfare groups and of distributing information on live animal exports to the wider public. The union asked for assistance from Animal Liberation in its struggle. This request set the trend for future relationships with other such groups. For example, AMIEU (Qld) northern district organiser, Russell Carr, worked with the vice president of Animal Liberation, Tony Clunies-Ross, to call public meetings to raise awareness about live animal exports and its affects on the animals, on meatworkers’ jobs, and on the local community. A committee of four meatworkers and two animal welfare member was formed with Tony Clunies-Ross as secretary. The new group, Committee Against Live Export (CALE), co-ordinated meetings and protests against live export as well as engaging in lobbying of Federal and State Members of Parliament.

The AMIEU also began working with the Western Australian group, People Against Cruelty in Animal Transport (PACAT) to organise rallies and meetings. PACAT is an organisation independent from the AMIEU (WA) and has as its mission the replacement of export of live animals for slaughter overseas with the lucrative chilled and frozen meat trade. This mission aligns closely with the objectives of the AMIEU to save jobs in the industry. The Western Australian branch of the union has worked with PACAT to present to the public both sides of the argument in respect to the cruelty of the live shipping trade, which is also destroying jobs in the meat processing industry. The AMIEU (WA) has successfully lobbied other trade unions to pass a resolution at the 2004 ALP State Conference to form a Meat Industry Task Force under the responsibility of the State Minister for Primary Industry, Kim Chance. The AMIEU is optimistic about the outcome of this task force, although other such inquiries have not produced real change.

Industry inquiries

A number of inquiries related directly to the live animal export industry have been held as well as some only indirectly related. Direct inquiries have included the 1985 Senate Inquiry into the live sheep trade which concluded that if a decision was to be made on the future of the trade purely on animal welfare grounds, then there was adequate evidence to stop the trade. Mortality figures from 1981 to 2002 showing an average during this period of approximately two per cent continue to support this position. Indirect examples include the 1992 House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry called unsuccessfully on the Australian Government to bring international pressure to bear on flag of convenience ships that did not carry out their international responsibilities. A number of these ships operated and continued to operate in the live animal export industry. In 1997, 85 sheep ships and 466 cattle export vessels, many of which were flag of convenience, transported 700,000 live cattle and 5,500,000 sheep out of Australian ports. Some of the vessels were hardly sea worthy and crews were paid poorly – if at all – and experience dreadful working conditions. The Philippines registered flag of convenience ship, MS Palawan, continued transporting Australian cattle to Japan in contravention of an Australian maritime safety dry dock detention order relating to extensive corrosion of the underdeck. Transport ships have even sunk, killing all livestock and causing damage to the marine environment.

In 2003, 57,000 sheep aboard the MV Cormo Express were turned away from Saudi Arabia because six per cent of sheep were infected with contagious pustular dermatitis. After two months, the animals were finally accepted by Eritrea after independent veterinary reports confirmed them fit for human consumption. The mortality rate of sheep on board was 9.82 per cent compared with the average annual mortality rate of approximately two per cent.

The Cormo Express incident attracted general public attention to the live sheep export industry with the media covering the story on an almost daily basis between 22 August and 24 October 2003 when it
docked in Eritrea. The incident was also a factor in the announcement by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry of another review of the livestock export industry. As with previous public inquiries, little action has yet been taken with regard to the subsequent Keniry Report’s recommendations and it appears unlikely that the trade will cease unless further pressure is placed upon Federal and State Governments by the public, lobby groups, and the main parties within the meat processing industry. This is despite the support for a cessation of the trade from the Minister, Warren Truss. With this in mind, an alliance between the AMIEU and the Australian Meat Processors Corporation may become a significant factor in future campaigns to stop the trade because it will show unity across the meat processing industry which is the direct competitor of the live animal export industry. While the live animal trade will not end yet, the anti-export campaigners believe the situation is optimistic and that ongoing lobbying and the current Ministerial support will definitely result in a cessation of the exports.

More odd alliances?

The Australian Meat Processors Corporation has moved to support the AMIEU’s long term argument that live animal export not only threatens the supply of livestock available for processing in Australia, but actually competes directly with chilled and frozen meat for market share, particularly in the Middle East. The Keniry Report warned that the red meat [processing and] export industry, in both absolute and value-added terms, is significantly larger than livestock exports and that adverse incidents in the livestock export industry may have serious consequences for it.

The body of counter-evidence to the Hassall Report that was commissioned by Meat and Livestock Australia, and which claimed that the live export industry created 9,000 jobs, is growing. It is possible that an alliance will be formed between the AMIEU and the Australian Meat Processors Corporation as a result in order to protect their respective industry interests. Such an alliance would have greater chance of influencing the Federal Liberal Government’s position than does the AMIEU alone. The difficulty remains with the Meat and Livestock Corporation, the National Farmers’ Federation, and the National Party who draw strong constituencies from the farmers who supply the live exports. The combined influence of these three groups on the Federal Government position remains strong and counters the optimism of the anti-export campaigners.

An assessment of the industrial campaign and subsequent alliances

The industrial campaign fought by the AMIEU across Australia was unsuccessful because it was largely fought in isolation. Meatworkers engaged in traditional collective action to protect their own interests but these interests did not align with those of other trade unionists whose jobs were at least partly dependent upon the live animal export industry. The industrial campaign fought in 1978 also failed because the livestock producers were able to gain public support for their position through rallies and the media. The union was also in a strategically weak position because of the seasonal and industry fluctuations during the 1970s. These external factors caused the union to turn to forming broad coalitions or alliances with non-union organisations to protect their jobs in the traditional meat processing industry. The risk with the AMIEU forming alliances with animal welfare groups was that the meatworkers could have found that their interests were subsumed in a campaign concerned solely with animal rights, not with stopping live animal exports. The alliance that appears to reflect a higher degree of commonality of interest is that between the AMIEU and PACAT.

The new alliances between animal welfare groups and the AMIEU fit within the traditional approach to the study of social movements in that they focus on achieving reform of the live animal export industry which necessitates legislative reform at both Federal and State levels. A common goal – stopping all live animal exports – unites diverse parties and allows centrally planned co-operation and deliberate resource allocation to occur within each organisation. The alliances cut across class boundaries with middle class and working class animal rights activists, allied with members of a militant, left wing, blue collar union. Further, a lifestyle and moral choice of veganism temporarily aligns with the economic need to keep a job in the meat processing industry.
However, despite the recent optimism shown by the animal welfare groups, alliances do not guarantee success. Those alliances between parties representing different perspectives within an industry but who are united on a policy issue – for example, the AMIEU and the Australian Meat Processors Corporation and its company members – may be more successful in affecting institutional decision-making because of the increased strength of the strategic influence of the alliance members. Such an alliance would give the AMIEU more influence because the union comes to be regarded as part of the meat processing and export industry; an industry that contributes a yearly average to the Australian economy of $5 billion compared with the less than $1 billion contributed by the live animal export industry. The domestic meat processing industry is also affected by the export of live animals which reduce the quality and supply of available livestock for domestic consumption. Australian Bureau of Statistic figures showing meat production and slaughter figures compared with figures for live animal export show that from 1998 to 2004, beef slaughtered was just over 2,006,600 tonnes, veal just on 35,000 tonnes, mutton 296,000 tonnes and lamb just over 340,000 tonnes. The majority of beef exported was labour-intensive bone-out but the majority of mutton and lamb was bone-in.

In terms of actual numbers, slaughter of cattle and calves averaged 8.8 million head and sheep and lambs 31.5 million head. The figures for live animal export show an average of 869,600 tonnes gross weight for sheep exports, with the largest export figures being in 2001-02 and 2003-04. Live cattle exports averaged 290,000 tonnes gross weight for cattle exports. While the live animal figures have fluctuated between 1998 and 2004, they demonstrate the capacity for growth in this section of the industry. The markets for live animal exports overlap with those for processed meat and the growth in the former is of concern to the domestic employers in the meat processing industry because it will erode herd numbers for domestic slaughter. The AMIEU has a sound argument that an increase in live cattle exports will undermine jobs in the beef processing industry because the majority of export beef is bone-out which is the more labour intensive version of the product.

According to research by Potter, alliances which offer potential for collective action problems are less likely to bring success. To date, it could be said that the alliance between the AMIEU and PACAT in Western Australia has brought the most success in the campaign against live animal exports, even though on the surface it appears as unlikely to succeed as the alliance between the union and the meat processing industry employer body. The success comes from the high public profile the group has achieved with its presence on the Fremantle wharf. However, it is recognised that a State Government inquiry is not much of an outcome but it is one that is attributable to the alliance between the AMIEU and an animal rights group.

The alliance between the AMIEU and CALE in north Queensland is of a different nature because it consists of a combination of meatworkers and animal rights activists working together to stop live animal exports. This cross membership of meatworkers promotes closer cohesion between the AMIEU and CALE. Further, the formality of the CALE structure resembles that of a trade union so that there is a reporting mechanism apparent within the organisation and a person, the secretary (Tony Clunies-Ross), on whom responsibility falls. Both CALE and PACAT are fairly small organisations that are able to unite their respective members behind a specific objective which, according to Potter, means that any change in the favour of each group will have a significant impact for group members. This argument may also hold true for the AMIEU (WA) which is one of the smallest branches of the AMIEU and for regional groupings of meatworkers from a particular geographic location, such as Townsville or Portland.

Australian animal welfare groups are becoming new actors in industrial relations, with the potential to influence the live animal export industry and the meat processing industry to in turn affect employment and perhaps wages and conditions. If the Australian groups continue with their campaigns and if pressure is brought to bear on the Australian live animal export industry from international animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) with the combined consumer purchasing power to damage Australia’s agri-business contributions to the national economy, then live animal exports will cease. The challenge will be for the meat processing industry to then ensure that the platforms of groups such as PETA do not alter the meat eating habits of the consumers in those countries to which Australia exports processed meat.
Conclusions

The 30 years of AMIEU campaigning against live animal exports in order to protect meatworkers’ jobs has had relatively little success in terms of stopping the trade. Specifically, industrial tactics were shown to have no long term success. Instead, new strategies such as increased lobbying of all political parties and the forming of alliances outside of the trade union movement have been developed.

These alliances between the union and animal welfare groups have so far demonstrated to the media, the Australian public, and Federal and State Governments that the issue of live animal exports is not just a narrow one of concern to a few thousand meatworkers and their union. Instead, it is of wider concern to different people within the community. This carries with it the potential of increased voting power and is more likely to result in the successful application of political pressure to Governments, irrespective of political party in power. This is illustrated in the 2004 Western Australian example of the successful lobbying of the ALP for a Meat Industry Task Force.

Despite the comparative success of the alliances as opposed to industrial campaigns to date, the AMIEU must keep its focus on its members’ interests and its own strategies. Retaining the equilibrium between the interests of the animal rights groups and the AMIEU and meatworkers remains the challenge if the union is not to be ultimately defeated by its current allies or by the continuation of live animal exports.

Endnotes

5. The Live Export Trade, p. 5.
6. Wally Curran, State Secretary, AMIEU (Vic), in an interview with Pat Huntley in Inside Australia’s Top 100 Unions, 1979, Ian Huntley, Middle Cove, NSW, p. 137.
7. Interview with Wally Curran, former State Secretary, AMIEU (Vic), 26 November 2003. Also see The Live Export Trade, p. 5.
8. Fred Hall, Federal Secretary, AMIEU, in an interview with Pat Huntley in Inside Australia’s Top 100 Unions, Ian Huntley, Middle Cove, NSW, 1979, p. 136.
11. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 13.

23. Tom Hannan, Media Release.


27. Figures compiled by Animals Australia from Department of Transport records and since 1989, from Western Australian Department of Agriculture Summary Information.


30. ‘Ships of Shame’.


38. Keniry Report, p. 3.


41. As advocated by Singer as the result of his moral philosophical deductions in Animal Liberation.

42. This was shown to be the case in the American fisheries industry. See ‘Predatory Politics’, pp. 75-77.

43. Keniry Report, figures drawn from Table 1, p. 14; ABS, 2005, Cat. 1301.

44. ABS, Livestock Products, Australia, Catalogue 7215.0.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.


49. Ibid., p. 77.

Shopping around: extended retail trading hours and the Retail Trade Industrial Tribunal in New South Wales in the 1980s

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Saturday afternoon retail trading commenced in New South Wales in 1984. At the same time a specialist industrial tribunal was established to deal with the retail industry. The main issue of dispute associated with extended trading concerned the penalty rate payable to retail employees. An allied issue concerned the protection of full-time and permanent work opportunities over the employment of casual and junior staff. The dispute is noticeable for the willingness of some retail employers to ‘shop around’ for an industrial arbitration outcome that met their liking. The dispute is also noticeable for repeated legislative action of the government to circumvent this forum shopping by employers. The analysis identifies reasons for the inability of the specialist tribunal to settle the issue of penalty rates. Commercial, industrial, political and personal interests all played a part.

Despite changes of name during the twentieth century the principal industrial tribunal in New South Wales (NSW) is the oldest continuing standing industrial tribunal in the world. Since its creation the parliament has sought to protect its decisions from interference by civil courts by inserting a ‘private’ or ouster clause in the NSW industrial statute. The current legislation still contains such a clause. However, there is still an ongoing debate about the merits of such clauses.1 The private clause in the Industrial Relations Act 1996 was justified on the basis that ‘The Government is of the view that where a specialist court or tribunal is established to deal with a particular area of the law, then that is the forum where the particular body of law ordinarly should be determined’.2 But on the other hand private clauses are questioned because the lack of ‘appellate review’ can result in ‘fundamentally different approaches to the construction of statutes or industrial determinations’.3 Nevertheless, the NSW industrial tribunal (the ‘Industrial Commission’) has a history of limiting appellate review of decisions of the Commission. In 1959, for example, legislative amendments made the decisions of a single judge final, and appeals to a ‘full bench’ of the Commission could only relate to issues of jurisdiction.4 The effect of private clauses is an ongoing conflict between the Supreme Court of NSW and NSW industrial tribunals.5

The issue of the status of the decisions of NSW industrial tribunals was a key feature of the industrial arbitration in the retail industry during the mid-1980s. This paper examines the events surrounding the introduction of extended retail trading between 1983 and 1988. Despite opposition form employers and unions, the government was able to reach an agreement with the parties over the employment conditions for retail workers that permitted Saturday afternoon trading to proceed. However, a dispute arose over the appropriate penalty rate applicable for staff. Notwithstanding the establishment of a specialist tribunal to deal with industrial relations in the retail industry the dispute continued for over two years. The analysis of these events suggests the reason for the continuation of the dispute was due to the conduct of the retail employers, particularly their propensity to engage in ‘forum shopping’ in order to find a tribunal decision which matched their specific commercial and industrial interests. Forum shopping between the NSW and federal arbitration systems in order for a party to achieve a more favourable result has been a common feature of the Australian industrial relations system.6 In this case, the forum shopping was concerned with efforts by employers to sidestep the specialist tribunal and seek a remedy from either the Commission or the Supreme Court. In response, the government made repeated efforts to curtail the forum shopping by the employers with direct statutory intervention. Background information was obtained from interviews with key personnel associated with the principal union in industry, the principal employer association, and the NSW industrial arbitration system. A condition attached to these interviews was that the views expressed would not be attributed to their original source. In this way the interview participants were more forthcoming with their reflections and perceptions then would have been the case if their comments were subject to attribution and identification. The interview data is supplemented by contemporaneous remarks and assessments found in newspaper reports, tribunal decisions and court judgments, and parliamentary debates. Primary documents are also used.
According to Marshall retail trading hours is a contentious issue as it entails ‘irresolvable conflicting interests – between big retail chains, small retailers, unions representing shop workers, consumers and so on – always mak[ing] this a difficult issue for governments to resolve’. For instance, Saturday afternoon trading was introduced in Tasmania largely due to lobbying from the large retailers. Baker argues that extended retail trading hours favours large retail chains, shopping centre operators and consumers with high disposable incomes, and disadvantages small retailers, low income consumers, and women employed in the industry. The issue of extended retail shop trading hours has attracted opposition from trade unions and the small business sector because it is often seen as ‘a threat to their continued viability’. While the gender composition of the retail workforce is a convenient explanation for the relative weakness of retail staff trade unions, Roberts suggests that an equally compelling explanation is the very nature of the retail industry. Despite the industry’s high concentration of female and part-time employment, Earle contends that retail employers are some of the least ‘friendly’ to their workforce in Australia. In this context, trading hours and conditions of employment are interrelated. For example, during an attempt by the South Australian government in 1990s to introduce extended trading by a scheme of ministerial exemptions from the legislative limitations, the High Court of Australia noted in a judgment ‘…any alteration in those hours necessarily affects the terms and conditions of [retail workers’] employment. Legislation regulating shop trading hours in South Australia arose from the need to protect employees from being required to work for excessively long periods’. 

Retail trading in NSW

Justice Street’s royal commission recommendations of 1909 were that Saturday and evening retail trading should be retained for ‘the public’s convenience and comfort’. However, the NSW government amended the Early Closing Act to provide a ‘half-holiday’ for staff by introducing a compulsory closing time of 1.00pm for stores on Saturday in Sydney. Stores were required to close at 12.30pm on Saturday due to a further legislative amendment in 1956. However, a distinction was made between ‘general’ and ‘small’ shops, with the latter been able to be exempt from the trading hours restrictions. In the early 1970s general shops were allowed to trade till 9.00pm one night a week, and retail employees were awarded a 40 hour week. Importantly, the peak employer association – the Retail Traders’ Association (RTA) – and the major industry trade union – the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’Association (SDA) – agreed that the penalty rate payable to staff working evenings and Saturday’s hours should be time-and-a-quarter.

In December 1982 Justice Macken of the NSW Industrial Commission commenced an inquiry, pursuant to section 35 (1) (o) of the Industrial Arbitration Act 1940, on the desirability of extending retail trading hours. The NSW government was under considerable public and industry pressure to relax the trading hours regulations as some ‘large’ retailers were seeking to circumvent the regulations by claiming to be a conglomeration of ‘small’ shops. The terms of reference of the inquiry paid considerable attention to conditions of employment in the industry, and any adverse impact extended trading would have on staff and small shop operators. Most employer submissions to the inquiry argued for no change to the trading hours regime, and the RTA argued against Sunday trading and ‘De-regulation’. Some employers argued extended trading was only viable if staff penalty rates were abolished. The only submissions to fully embrace extended trading came from the major grocery supermarket chains. Unions, predominately the SDA, submitted that extended trading would result in more casual staff and a decline in full-time and permanent employment. Indeed the NSW secretary of the SDA stated publicly the union did not favour Saturday afternoon trading. Justice Macken’s report of October 1983 recommended that general shops be allowed an additional evening’s trading and to open till 4.00pm on Saturdays. The report also called for an inquiry into staff employment conditions and hours of work. The report was seen by the SDA as ‘a great victory for retail workers’ because of Macken’s proposal to favour permanent jobs over casual employment, and for a 35 hour week for retail staff. Not surprisingly, the former proposal was opposed by the general manager of McDonald’s Systems, who suggested the ‘logic of it defeats me’. Despite this, the government accepted the recommendations. Legislation giving effect to the Macken recommendations
was introduced into parliament in November 1983, together with legislation establishing a ‘specialist tribunal’ to determine disputes in the retail industry.

**Retail Trade Industrial Tribunal**

The specialist tribunal established was the Retail Trade Industrial Tribunal (‘the Tribunal’), the membership of which consisted of a chair and a deputy chair (both members of the Industrial Commission), and two ‘assessors’ to advise the chair or deputy. The Labor Council and the RTA were to each nominate one assessor, while Justice Macken and Commissioner Mawbey were appointed as the chair and deputy, respectively. The 1983 amending legislation instructed the Tribunal to review all retail industry industrial awards to ‘guarantee the rights of current full-time weekly employees’.

In early 1984 the Tribunal commenced its review of the retail awards. The main issue of dispute between employer and union submissions concerned the penalty rate for Saturday work. The unions argued it should increase to time-and-a-half consistent with the State wide standard established by the Shiftworkers case of 1972, and the Tribunal concurred stating: ‘The general rule is that a standard, once set, should not lightly be departed from, and I [Justice Macken] do not propose to depart from it’. The new penalty rate was to apply to all staff, otherwise a strict application of section 38v (2) (b) would favour casual over full-time employment because of their cheaper wage costs.

With their strong desire to have extended trading the major retailers came to an accord with the government and the retail unions to vary the conditions of employment, and this was formalised with the certification of industrial agreements. The main agreement, Shop Employees’ (Major Retailers) Agreement, made significant changes to retail employment, including: a 38 hour week for full-time staff; a minimum of 16 hours and a maximum of 30 hours for part-time staff per week; a pegging of casual employment to 15 per cent of total hours worked; a penalty rate of time-and-a-half for Saturdays for both permanent and casual staff; and proportions clauses limiting the number of junior and part-time staff. Myer Stores Limited had a separate industrial agreement with similar terms.

In the process of certifying the two agreements, the ‘full bench’ of the Commission (Industrial Commission in Court Session) commented ‘no one has appeared before us to oppose the certification of the agreements’. The lack of objectors to the certification of the agreements reflects the understanding between the government, major retailers, and RTA that the terms of the agreements would eventually apply to all employees in the industry as the quid pro quo for the unions’ acceptance of extended trading hours.

In August 1984 the Tribunal created a new award to apply to all employees in stores of 15 or more staff, except for those retailers party to the industrial agreements. In essence, the new award was very similar to the terms contained in the agreements. The RTA – at the urging of McDonald’s it seems – appealed to the Commission over the penalty rate, the proportions clause, and also sought a 20 per cent reduction in junior staff pay. The Commission decision of August 1985 created a single award for retail shops, reduced the penalty rate to time-and-a-quarter, and abolished penalty rates for casuals working on Saturday afternoons. The Commission asserted that any dangers of increased casualisation of the retail industry workforce could be dealt with in a flexible ‘self-regulatory way’ as an ‘experiment’. The Commission noted that there was a public interest in having Saturday afternoon trading, yet concluded – based on employer submissions – that Saturday morning trading was now ‘less busy’ and thus was not willing to ‘impose a further cost burden’ on employers.

The Commission’s decision was applauded by the RTA’s executive director as ‘a step towards the eventual removal of all penalty rates’. The unions, on the other hand, claimed it was ‘one of the worst [decisions] inflicted upon the union movement in this State’, as it was contrary the understanding that the terms of the industrial agreements would also be the award standard. A meeting of the Labor Council resolved the decision treated retail workers as ‘second class citizens’, was an attack on penalty rates, and was a breach of the terms by which extended trading was to be introduced. The Labor party premier, N.K. Wran, criticised the decision for reducing the pay for ‘150,000 shop assistants’, and the SDA called on the government as a ‘last hope’ to reverse the decision. The government’s response was swift: the minister for industrial relations, P. Hills, announced in late August it would overturn the penalty rate decision by legislation in order to ‘reintroduce uniformity into the rates of pay’.
According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, this was the first occasion that a judgment of the Commission was to be overturned by statute. While the RTA was ‘disgusted’ by the announcement, the unions welcomed the action because there had ‘never been a Full Bench decision as bad as this’.  

The legislation was introduced in November 1985, and it allowed the minister to make regulations fixing a penalty rate for Saturday afternoon work by permanent and casual employees at time-and-a-half. The minister justified the amendment on the basis it would ‘ensure that shop employees receive the benefits agreed to prior to the introduction of Saturday afternoon trading’, and by the fact that retail staff covered by the award had been paid time-and-a-half for the previous 12 months. The regulation of December 1985 reinstated the penalty rates of the Tribunal’s mid-1984 award.

The opposition parties criticised the government’s action because it was ‘throwing out the umpire’s decision’. However, the same could be said of the retail employers’ proclivity to by-pass the Tribunal and seek relief from the Commission. Indeed, Justice Macken noted ‘whichever way a decision goes before the Retail Trade Industrial Tribunal, an appeal will be brought to the Commission in Court Session’. To overcome this practice, the government inserted a ‘privative’ clause into the Industrial Arbitration Act 1940 giving the determinations of the Tribunal the same status as the full bench of the Commission and proscribing appeals to the Commission over any ‘order, award, ruling or decision of the Tribunal’. The clause was justified on the basis to ‘maintain industrial harmony and confidence in the decisions of the tribunal [sic]’, and to ensure it remains ‘the final arbiter’ on industrial issues for the industry.

Despite the privative clause the retail employers continued the practice of ‘forum shopping’ by appealing to the Commission on interpretative and jurisdictional grounds. In November 1986 the Tribunal made a new award to cover the larger retailers, the Shop Employees (Major General Shops) (State) Award. With appeals to the Commission limited, the employers appealed to the NSW Court of Appeal on the grounds that the new award was void because at the time the award was established the Tribunal was not properly constituted because one of its ‘assessors’ was not present during the Tribunal’s hearings and determinations. Amazingly, the absent assessor was the nominee of the RTA, and the RTA’s advocate before the Tribunal’s hearings made no objection at the time to his absence as this had been a common practice with the Tribunal’s proceedings since 1984. In granting the appeal the Supreme Court quashed the new award, and also called into question the status of all the Tribunal’s determinations since its formation. To overcome the possibility of retail employees in NSW being ‘award free’ the Tribunal – duly constituted – created an interim award in December largely reflecting the terms of the industrial agreements because they ‘reflected the consensus views of both parties’ and thus would not be an ‘injustice to either the union or the employers’. The uncertainty created by the Court of Appeal’s judgment over the status of the Tribunal’s determinations resulted in the government enacting further legislation in mid-1987 to validate all its rulings made in the absence of the assessors.

The Tribunal remained the principal arbitral forum for the retail industry until its abolition in late 1988. In 1987 the two retail awards were merged into a single award, and the terms of the industrial agreements were converted into a new award in April 1988 when the life of the agreements came to an end. The Tribunal was formally abolished by the newly elected Coalition government on the grounds that industrial matters within the retail industry should return to ‘the accepted conciliation and arbitration system’. The Labor party opposition concurred with the government, with its spokesperson noting that both employers and unions found strong weakness with the workings of the Tribunal.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The dispute over penalty rates associated with the extension of retail trading hours in NSW can be analysed in a variety of ways, and a rage of – potentially contradictory – conclusions can be drawn from the events. Carmody, for instance, suggests that the dispute demonstrates a ‘pecking order’ then operating in the NSW industrial relations system, with employers (small and large) having a lesser status than either the Commission or the State government. He further implies that the Wran government’s action of reinstating the penalty rate of the Tribunal’s mid-1984 award with legislation in November 1985 demonstrated that the Commission had a ‘subservient’ position in the pecking order, and that it challenged the Commission’s ‘impartiality and credibility’. He also suggests that the introduction of the privative clause to protect the impartiality and credibility of the Tribunal was part of a process ‘to ensure enshrinement in awards of a particular view (or, more accurately, the asserted undesirability)
of casual employment in the retail industry'. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is argued here that these events, if they demonstrate anything, show an unattractive characteristic of employers, and employer associations such as the RTA.

**Retail Traders Association**

As the submissions to the Macken inquiry of 1983 show, at the time most employers in NSW did not favour an extension to trading hours. The main – if not only – industry supporters of extended trade were the major stores and supermarket chains. About 90 per cent of the RTA’s then membership consisted of small retailers – employing less than 20 staff – who were already exempt from the trading hours restrictions. Yet membership of its council was dominated by representatives of the larger retailers. Moreover, a survey of RTA members conducted in October 1984 – about the same time extended trading commenced – found only 17 per cent indicating rates of pay to be an impediment to longer trading hours. Almost as many RTA members (12 per cent) considered lack of ‘efficient’ staff to be an obstacle to extending their trading. Therefore, pay and penalty rates in particular were not the issues for the membership that the RTA latter claimed them to be.

The RTA’s crystallising opposition to the issue of penalty rates might be explained by the changes to its governing body – the council – during this period. In 1983-84 the president was the State director of G.J. Coles, G. Tate, a supermarket chain and variety store chain operator, and a party to the 1984 industrial agreement with the SDA. Thus, the supporting stance of the RTA to the accord reached between the government, unions and other retailers over employment conditions – largely those contained in the Macken report – can be explained by the leadership and direction given to the RTA by its then president. Yet, this changed when the managing director of the ‘up market’ department store chain operator David Jones, B.L. Walsh, became RTA president, as Walsh had publicly expressed his objections to the employment terms contained in the industrial agreements. It should also be noted that executives from McDonald’s were also becoming prominent in the RTA.

**Forum shopping**

Forum shopping occurs when a party ‘shops around’ for a court or tribunal which will best serve their commercial or legal interests. An obvious assessment of the parties’ conduct during the period of the Tribunal’s operation is that they – and the employers specifically – were engaged in forum shopping. The problem with forum shopping for the most desirable tribunal is, according to Whincop, legal rights and obligations become less certain. This was clearly the case here as neither employers nor employees could state with any degree of certainty what the award employment conditions were likely to be in the short and medium terms, and the penalty rate regime in particular. The employers appealed to the Commission against the Tribunal’s 1984 award because its terms did not suit their commercial interests. The unions then appealed to the State government to reverse the Commission’s penalty rate decision. At the time the executive director of the RTA queried if Commission judgments are to be overturned, then ‘why have an arbitration system all?’ However, the RTA was more than willing to appeal many decisions of the Tribunal and in many instances seek to by-pass it altogether. Moreover, it is not uncommon – particularly in more recent times – for employer associations to request, if not demand, Coalition governments to overturn industrial tribunal decisions when they disagreed with the outcome. The privative clause of 1987 sought to overcome the problem of forum shopping, particularly from retail employers. Due to the unique circumstances of industrial relations tribunals in Australia, privative clauses are justifiable, both in terms of the special nature of the employment relationship and the need to develop a body of jurisprudence reflecting employment’s distinctive characteristics. Indeed, the NSW Coalition government elected in early 1988 retained a private clause in its industrial relations legislation. With the avenue of appeal to the Commission restricted, the employers turned to the Court of Appeal. It was suggested in those proceeding that the principal reason for the appeal was that the award made by the Tribunal was against the employer plaintiffs’ interests, as their representative – particularly their solicitor advocate – was a party to the workings of the Tribunal called into question. Given the choice of conceding the ‘appeal’ was due to forum shopping or some other reason, in a surprising move for a legal practitioner specifically one claiming expertise in industrial law and the retail industry, the RTA advocate admitted he did not fully understand the NSW industrial statute that created the Tribunal.
The Tribunal

A possible conclusion about the events surrounding the introduction of extended trading in NSW in the mid-1980 is that the experiment of a specialist industrial tribunal for the retail industry was a relative failure. Specialist tribunals are a not uncommon feature of the history of Australian industrial law and employment regulation. However, most of these forums are created to deal only with individual matters and not collective employment relations issues. In other words, most function to administer ‘industrial justice’ (administrative appeals, anti-discrimination and the like) but only a few of these specialist tribunals deal with matters concerned with ‘industrial peace’ and collective disputes.72 There is still considerable debate about the desirability of specialist forums in contrast to tribunals which deal with all matters and issues within the relevant jurisdiction. One concern is of duplication and ‘overlapping’ roles, functions and processes between the specialist and generalist tribunals resulting in jurisdictional conflict and uncertainty.73

Personal interests, relationships and different perspectives about the role of employment regulation were also a factor in the events. Justice Macken had been appointed to the Commission in 1975. When in 1981 a new president of the Commission was to be appointed there was strong support for Macken to be elevated to the position from the minister for industrial relations. However, Premier Wran appointed Justice Fisher of the Supreme Court. In 1983 President Fisher noted that a major characteristic of the NSW industrial relations system is its ‘pronounced devolution of power’. Yet in practice his administration of the Commission was highly centralised with appeal benches being restricted to a ‘Holy Trinity’ of three judges (one being Fisher himself) on order to maintain ‘consistency’. This centralised control of the Commission’s decisions had a number of adverse consequences, including a corrosion of relations between Justice Fisher and Minister Hills, and a policy rift with Justice Macken. Moreover, it was a strongly held view by some participants in the NSW industrial relations during the mid-1980s that Justice Fisher had an uncritical position towards employer applications for workplace change.74

While during the debate over the privative clause the opposition described the bill as ‘fascist legislation’,75 the minister defended the measure on the basis that the Tribunal could remain ‘the most expert body’ for retail industry industrial relations and so that in future ‘the word or the tribunal [sic]’ could not be ‘broken by a decision in another place’. Moreover at the time NSW was the only State with Saturday afternoon trading and dealing with the industrial issues this generated justified a specialist arbiter for the industry.76 Yet the reasons for the abolition of the Tribunal in 1988 were mostly administrative and not due to some failed experiment in industrial specialisation, as the new minister conceded: “…given the substantial number of matters before the tribunal [sic], its limited resources and the urgency and complexity of some of the issues involved, many of the matters before the tribunal have had to be formally referred to the Industrial Commission in Court Session for ultimate processing”.77

Endnotes

* The author publicly expresses his deep appreciation for the assistance supplied by those individuals and organisations connected with the events discussed in the paper for providing both documentary material and background interviews. Any errors or omissions are due to the author.


5. See, for example, Mitchforce Pty Ltd v Industrial Relations Commission of NSW (2003) 124 IR 79.


17. Factorys and Shop Act 1912.


19. The ‘Joyce Mayne’ chain of stores is one example: see *Houssein v Under Secretary of Industrial Relations and Technology (NSW)*, (1982) 148 CLR 88.


25. P. Hartcher, ‘McDonald’s casuals prepared to fight on’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October 1983, p. 1


27. Factorys, Shops and Industries (Retail Trade) Amendment Act 1983.


29. Section 38v (2) (b) *Industrial Arbitration Act 1940*.


33. *Industrial Arbitration Act 1940*.

34. The employer parties were: G.J. Coles and Coy Limited, Grace Bros Holdings Limited, Target Australia Pty Ltd, Australian Safeways Propriety Limited, Woolworths Limited, and Jack Butler and Staff Propriety Limited.


38. J. Taylor, ‘Extended shopping hours have been delayed again’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1984, p. 3.

39. Shop Employees (General Shops)-Interim (State) Award.


47. *Shops (Premium Rates of Pay) Regulation 1985*.


55. *Industrial Arbitration (Tribunals and Delegations) Amendment Act 1987*.

56. *Industrial Arbitration (Retail Trade) Amendment Act 1988*.


63. Shop, Distributive and Allied Employee's Association, New South Wales Branch, file no. R73.
64. J. Taylor, ‘Extended shopping hours have been delayed again’, Sydney Morning Herald, 3 August 1984, p. 3.
70. Section 301 Industrial Relations Act 1991; for a discussion of the workings of the privative clause, see Supreme Court of New South Wales Court of Appeal (Kirby p, Meagher and Sheller JJA), Walker v Industrial Court of New South Wales, (1994) 53 IR 121.
71. (1986) 17 IR 134 at 144.
75. Hansard, Debates of the NSW Legislative Assembly 24 April 1986, p. 2785.
77. Hansard, Debates of the NSW Legislative Assembly 13 October 1988, p. 2270.
When wages were clothes: dressing down Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory

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Prior to the introduction of equal wages in the 1960s, it was not unusual for Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory to be paid in kind; in basic food, clothing and tobacco. Some workers received a few shillings a week, but even this wage could be withheld. In keeping with the protectionist ethos, clothing was encouraged as a substitute for cash wages, but in practice employers rarely equated clothing with wages. This paper explores the perspectives of pastoralists, employers of domestic servants, and the Army, considering how clothing primarily catered for the employers’ needs.

The policy of paying Aboriginal workers in kind rather than in cash is raised in most historical studies of Aboriginal labour, particularly those centred on the pastoral industry. Tim Rowse discusses the politics of rationing in Central Australia in White Flour, White Power, while Mary Anne Jebb writes on Aboriginal employment conditions on the Kimberley pastoral stations in Blood Sweat and Welfare.

In considering this policy, there tends to be an underlying assumption that clothes were regarded as a form of payment in kind. In this paper, I argue that employers in the Northern Territory rarely regarded clothes as substitute wages, despite the rhetoric. Clothes were provided either to satisfy the employers’ cultural notions of an appropriate dress code for their employees, or to ensure that workers had practical clothing to facilitate work. Even when special items of clothing were given as a reward for good work, employers were often reluctant to see these items taken away by employees. In so far as employers sought to retain ownership or control over clothing, it cannot be said that this clothing was truly ‘paid’ to Aboriginal workers as a wage.

Why clothes instead of cash?

When the Commonwealth Government took over the administration of the Northern Territory in 1911, steps were taken to regulate the employment of Aboriginal workers. The Aboriginals Ordinance 1911 outlined a system in which the Chief Protector of Aboriginals would have control over Aboriginal employment by means of licences sold to employers. The majority of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory worked for pastoralists, employing Aboriginal stock workers, and private households, employing Aboriginal domestic servants. In the 1930s and 1940s the Army became another major employer of Aboriginal labour. All three groups adhered to the standard wage scale outlined in the 1928 Bleakley report. This report had been written by the Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals at the request of the Federal government. It was hailed as the first thorough investigation of Aboriginal employment conditions in the Northern Territory. In a system which discouraged the payment of cash wages, Bleakley focused on employment conditions such as accommodation, food and clothing. He confirmed the basic remuneration for Aboriginal workers as being a wage of five shillings per week, two of which were banked in a Trust Account, and a supply of food and clothing. He argued that where the ‘supply of food and clothing is fairly fulfilled, the wage of 5s. per week may be regarded as reasonable remuneration’.

The practice of paying minimal or no cash wages was not particular to employers of Aboriginal labour. In early colonial Western Australia the truck system similarly paid workers in goods. The use of this system for Aboriginal employees in the twentieth century was primarily due to pastoralists who were eager to ensure maximum profits, and were influential in shaping government policy. Pastoralists were careful to couch their objections to cash wages in the humanitarian language of the time. They argued that wages would have a detrimental and demoralising effect on Aboriginal workers. In 1932, the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees’ Association stated that:

A large proportion of the money given to aboriginals in the present stage of their development is apt to be spent on liquor and opium. Thus the money the pastoralists can ill-afford is used to degrade the remnants of the aboriginal race.
They argued that the ‘aboriginal race’ was incapable of resisting the corrupting influence of European culture, employing Social Darwinist theory which claimed that extinction was inevitable if Aboriginal people were not protected. This stance was perfectly in keeping with the paternalist protection policy endorsed by the government.

At the 1929 Conference on Aboriginal labour, one pastoralist, H.E. Thonemann, an absentee landlord from Melbourne, conveyed his paternalistic concern for Aboriginal welfare. He stated:

> We pastoralists say that the black should be properly clothed and fed, and given tobacco and luxuries, such as in certain cases he deserves … The average black does not know the value of coin, and to give him coin is going to lower his status and not raise it.

But Thonemann’s definition of ‘properly clothed and fed’ was far more generous than the larger companies such as Vesteys, which scarcely paid lip service to the ethos of protectionism. According to the North Australia Workers’ Union (NAWU) organiser, Owen Rowe, the food and conditions on the eastern stations of the Northern Territory, including Thonemann’s station, were ‘as high above Vesteys as the stars are above the earth’. In the west the three main companies were the Durack family and the British-owned Bovril Australian Estates and the Australian Investment Agency, known as Vesteys.

‘Properly’ clothed?

NAWU Secretary, Robert Toupein, was highly critical of working conditions for Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations. He wrote in the *Pan-Pacific Worker* in 1930:

> On these great cattle stations, owned chiefly by absentee capitalists, the aborigines are worked by them as stockmen, drovers and general rouseabouts. They are paid no monetary wages, and are given the roughest and poorest of food, principally damper and beef … and they are given the scantiest of clothing and a small amount of stick tobacco of the worst kind.

The NAWU organiser, Owen Rowe suggested that the clothing was only supplied to Aboriginal workers was the absolute minimum:

> The clothes supplied to blacks working under country licences are only sufficient to cover their nakedness, and in most instances is supplied from this viewpoint only. The boys on the cattle stations are given a pair of dungaree trousers and a shirt. The lubras are given a dress of the cheapest material, calico and a piece of nagra, nagra is the native name for turkey red twill, it is worn as a loin cloth with the dress over it, just sufficient to cover the nakedness. The empty flour bags are given to the lubras to make dresses.

Conditions in the township of Darwin were somewhat better, but still far from adequate. In 1911, there were 125 Aboriginal workers employed in Darwin, according to the report of J.T. Beckett, Inspector of Aboriginals. Their work included gardening, chopping-wood, shopping, and housework such as sweeping, and washing and hanging out clothes. Beckett described the Aboriginal workers as:

> a docile submissive people, who, in spite the many aspersions cast upon them by detractors in other States render excellent service in return for the pittance doled out to them.

The clothing issued to domestic servants varied widely from house to house. Conigrave, one of Darwin’s ‘silvertails’, commented on 1930s practice:

> If during the week you have given your black boy your discarded sun helmet, or an old pair of shoes, trousers, singlets or some other garment, irrespective of whether they are several sizes too large for him, it is a foregone conclusion that he will appear in them at the picture show and ‘swank’ over other boys who have not been quite so generously treated by their employers.

The practice of clothing Aboriginal servants in over-sized, cast-off clothing was not unusual. In an oral history interview, Con Scott, who was born in Darwin in 1921, recalled their Aboriginal servant was given his father’s hand-me-down trousers which he pulled in at the waist with a piece of rope. Rowe described the quality of clothing as being usually of the poorest material. Even so, Rowe, who had travelled throughout most of the Territory in his capacity as union organiser,
concluded that: ‘Generally speaking, the blacks around the towns are well fed, clothed, and treated as compared with their brethren in the bush’.

**Clothing to suit the employer**

There is ample evidence to suggest that where Aboriginal workers were given clothes it was merely to satisfy the needs of the employers. In the case of pastoralists, it is clear that they could not employ an Aboriginal stockworker without providing adequate protective clothing suitable for riding, such as boots and trousers. According to the Berndts the nature of stock work was such that any clothes wore out. The Berndts noted that ‘an issue of trousers, shirt, and boots every two months was the minimum necessary for these Aborigines, who work put a heavy strain on their clothing’. Clothes in this context were not so much remuneration as they were a part of the necessary equipment to undertake work. Keith Willey’s biography of Matt Savage, manager of Montejinnie Station, an outstation of Victoria River Downs, from 1924 to 1934 describes the process of giving out clothes as part of the necessary preparation for starting work:

> [T]he black stockmen would be coming in from their annual walkabout, when they wandered over the country living in the manner of their ancestors. Back at the station we would throw each man a pair of boots, a shirt and trousers; and set them to shoe the horses and check ropes and hobbles.

In the case of private employers of domestic servants, clothes served three main purposes. Clothes were initially given to cover nakedness and protect the European sense of modesty. An adequate supply of clothes and also laundry facilities were also necessary to ensure that servants presented themselves for work in state of cleanliness. Finally, some clothing, particularly items such as white aprons, were intended to transform Aboriginal workers into the employer’s ideal notion of the domestic servant. Creating this image was essential for those employers who regarded servants as a means to ensure their social status.

The discourse of cleanliness or ‘the fetish of domestic purity’ was paramount for white women in Northern Territory households, both in the town and in the country. Hazel Mackey, whose husband was head of the Bureau of Meteorology from 1937, recalled in an interview that their Aboriginal servant had been a stockman ‘out in the bush somewhere’. Typically, her first concern on meeting him was to solve the problem of dirt. She recalled:

> But when he turned up – my goodness me was he a disreputable looking fellow – matted hair and dirty clothes. Oh dear! I looked at him and I said: ‘What’s your name?’ And he said: ‘Willie Dyall’. So I said to him: ‘You’re plenty dirty fellow’. and he said: ‘No more missus, no more’. And I said: ‘You’re plenty dirty fellow’. So, I got him a bucket of water and a face washer, and I asked him if he would take himself down to the house and wash himself all over … So anyhow he went and washed himself all over. He looked better, but his clothes were still filthy, so I got my husband to buy him some new clothes’.

In this context the purchase of clothes was serving her purpose, her need for cleanliness and not his. There was no sense that clothing was part of his remuneration for work.

But even in circumstances where Aboriginal people wanted to have clean clothes this luxury was only available to those who directly served the employers. In their survey of cattle stations, the Berndts noted that Aboriginal women struggled to keep their clothes clean with only small supplies of muddy water for washing. The exception was the women who were employed in the dining room. They were required to keep their frocks particularly clean and the clothes ‘they wore while waiting on the table were washed or boiled and sometimes ironed in the station laundry’.

Ellen Johnston was a station manager’s wife who came to live on Alexandria Station in 1925. She took control of the homestead, creating her place as ‘mistress’ to her Aboriginal servants according to the expectations of Territory society. She painstakingly transformed the Aboriginal women in her service into maids, buying them uniforms and ‘little white caps’. In doing so she sought to enhance her own prestige in pastoral society. Inara Walden in her study of NSW domestic workers similarly noted that where employers supplied ‘full servant’s attire’ it was ‘a matter of their own status’.

The novelist, Xavier Herbert, who lived in Darwin in the late 1920s, was scathing in his criticism of those white administrative staff in Darwin who liked to imagine themselves as British colonial masters.
His novel *Capricornia* follows the lives of the Shillingsworth brothers who came to Darwin to work as clerical staff. On the subject of servants he wrote:

Oscar took a smelly native from the Compound and converted him into a piece of bright furniture ... and called him the Punkah Wallah. This Wallah fellow also waited at table and did odd jobs; and his lubra worked as housemaid. The services of this pair cost the Shillingsworths five shillings a week in cash and scraps of food, and added inestimably to the value they now set upon themselves.24

In depicting the employers’ representation of the servant as a ‘piece of bright furniture’ Herbert amply demonstrates why Aboriginal labour retained overtones of slavery well into the twentieth century. As long as workers were viewed as possessions, any clothing was simply a means to enhance the value of the employer’s possession.

Writing in 1914 whilst staying at the Administrator’s house, Elsie Masson describes this particular understanding of the relationship between the employer and employee. In a fictional account based on her observation of Darwin life, she relates the story of an employer, here called the ‘Missis’ and an Aboriginal servant:

George suddenly seems to be becoming more brisk and diligent in his work. For a few days he is so good that the Missis decides he is really worth keeping, and, if worth keeping, deserving of more respectable clothing. So she buys him a pair of dungarees, a leather belt, two khaki shirts, and a red handkerchief. ‘I give you these because you good boy’, she explains graciously. ‘Orright, Missis’, he answers tersely. Next morning he presents himself in all his new grandeur and says, without any preliminaries, ‘Missis, me go out bush to-morra’. ‘What, George?’ exclaims a startled Missis. ‘Go back longa my country to-morra’, he repeats. ‘How you go?’ asks the Missis weakly. ‘Canoe’. There is nothing more to be said.25

The new clothes were bought with the express intention of transforming George into a more ‘respectable’ servant. It was inconceivable that he should take these new clothes as his reward for services and leave.

**Paid in kind – clothes to keep?**

If clothes were given to workers in lieu of wages by way of reward for labour, then the clothes should have become the possession of the worker. By possession, I mean that the clothes should have been theirs to keep, to sell, to trade, to give to family or to others to satisfy customary exchange. But despite official policy, clothes were rarely given as wages, and it was common for clothes to remain the property of the employer.

On cattle stations, Aboriginal stockworkers were given clothes suitable for riding and working, but these were clothes on loan rather than clothes to keep. In 1932 Owen Rowe, commented that:

One big station firm indulged in the Christian practice of compelling the stockboys, after the mustering of the cattle was finished, which is just a seasonal work, to hand back the clothes, issued them to work in, and then sending them naked into the bush to fend for themselves ... The scarcity of clothing among these unfortunates compels them to wear the clothes until they are absolutely filthy or until they fall to pieces on them.26

The *Aboriginals Ordinance, 1918-1943* stated that employers were to ‘keep each aboriginal employed by him in food and clothing’ but it was not clear that the clothing was to be kept.27 Nevertheless, according to the 1928 Bleakley Report, the practice of having workers return their clothes to the store was not part of the contract. Bleakley argued that as ‘these clothes are part of the working native’s remuneration it seems like a breach of contract to make him return them as they are actually his own property’.28 Despite this, the practice continued on most stations. During the 1947 conference on Aboriginal employment Mr Brodie, representing the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees’ Association, noted that no clothes were supplied to Aboriginal stockworkers during walkabout. This meant that clothes were given when there was work to be done, and no clothes were given when the workers went on holidays.29

In rare cases employers did give out special clothes as a form of bonus for good work, as in the story of Matt Savage. In this instance Savage was apparently not concerned that the clothes in question would be given away:
You might give a blackfellow an extra-bright cowboy shirt and one of his mates would want it. At first the reply would be: ‘Oh, I’m not used to it yet. Can’t give-um yet’. But in a few days the shirt would change hands. This particular shirt clearly had value to the worker and can be more properly viewed as a substitute for cash wages.

In Darwin, a similar ethos existed, but here it was more difficult to control the exchange of clothing, given that most workers were in daily contact with their kin and community. In 1911 the Inspector of Aborigines, J.T. Beckett wrote:

Owing to the strange, but in many ways estimable system of socialism existing among them, employers often have great difficulty in keeping their black boys clothed at all and frequently a boy who has been given a new shirt and trousers one day will arrive at his work next morning divested of either or both garments and ask for more, he having given his clothes to his ‘uncle’, his ‘half-father’, his brother or other relative who was in need of them.

The most blatant case of employers’ retaining clothes can be seen in the records of the Army stationed in Darwin in 1933. Aboriginal men employed by the Army were paid at the standard rate of five shillings per week of which two shillings were deducted and paid into the trust fund. Under the Aboriginal Ordinance it was assumed that food and clothing would make up the rest of the payment. The Army provided Aboriginal workers with food; documented as being a ‘half-ration of meat, bread and vegetables … supplemented on occasions by kitchen scraps’. They were also issued with clothes, in the form of a uniform consisting of six white singlets, 4 blue shirts, 3 khaki shorts and one hat, per annum. But while the Army was content to pay the minimum wage of five shillings, they refused to consider giving Aboriginal workers clothes to keep. The kit issued to Aboriginal workers was regarded as a sort of Army uniform and it remained the property of the Army.

To ensure that no clothes went missing, the Army insisted that each Aboriginal worker maintain a two-pound credit in their trust fund to cover any loss of clothing. This bond of two pounds was the equivalent of eight weeks wages. The Army Major argued that the clothing they provided was on a ‘special scale differing from that provided in random fashion by the average employer in Darwin’. The officer noted, however, that it was ‘a debatable point whether it is in accordance with the aboriginal regulations by which the clothing issued becomes the unrestricted property of the native’.

Assimilation policy – the emperor’s new clothes

During the 1930s some Aboriginal workers spoke out against the protectionist system arguing that they should have access to cash wages and greater autonomy. Jack Sullivan, a so-called ‘half-caste’ stockworker, demanded cash wages in 1933. He recalled that young Reg Durack supported him, telling his pastoralist father: ‘Dad, why don’t you take notice of what Jack’s tellin you? Man enough to handle his own business. Why you don’t givim the money?’ Similarly, David Cahill, owner of Seven Emus station, in the north-east, believed that Aboriginal stockworkers should have access to cash. He wrote in defence of four drovers, jailed for cattle-killing in 1933, stating:

These boys left here on the 6th of November 1932, to try and get their wages. All they got was ten shillings each for which they had to walk 69 miles in and the same back … They left here again on November 27th to try to get some more of their wages from the Protector … I wonder how a salaried official like Dr Cook, drawing £10, or more, per week would like to walk a distance of 138 miles for the sake of collecting ten shillings he had earned five or six months previously. These boys had enough money held by the Protector to keep them until they were employed again, and now instead of getting their wages they are serving a term of imprisonment.

By the late 1930s, Aboriginal workers in Darwin were also demanding cash wages. In 1936, a representative of the Darwin Larrakia people protested in the Northern Standard newspaper that he was working and drawing three shillings a week. He asked: ‘How can we buy clothes for ourselves and keep our families on 3/-?’ The value of three shillings at that time was little more than pocket money. One shilling would buy a ticket for the cinema, while a loaf of bread was eight pence.

But when the Commonwealth government finally responded to this lobby it was to introduce the assimilation policy and this policy was not what the protesters had had in mind. In 1938, Jack McEwen, Minister for the Interior, introduced the new policy which aimed:
The assimilation policy was based on the curious assumption that the barrier to equal rights and citizenship for Aboriginal people was not the fundamental inequality of the law, but the inadequacy of the Aboriginal people themselves. It was assumed that an innate inferiority existed which might, with suitable training and guidance, be gradually overcome. The question of clothing and cash wages was an important part of the new policy.

In 1948 Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations in the Northern Territory were granted ‘cash’ wages. I use the term ‘cash’ hesitantly, because in reality a system of accounting was put in place whereby wages were recorded and clothing and other personal items were deducted, with the resulting credit being accrued in a trust fund. The report which instigated this system was written by V.G. Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs, who reported on ‘the conditions of native employment’, having visited the Barkly Tablelands and Victoria River districts in the Northern Territory in 1945. He found that most stations were not paying any wages, having been exempt on the grounds that they were maintaining relatives and dependants of workers. Station managers were simply providing food, clothing and tobacco.

Carrington was opposed to this practice on the grounds that it did nothing to further the government’s policy of assimilation. He claimed that:

\[\text{The fact that they get clothing, tobacco and such things as razors and mirrors at regular intervals, provides no incentive to improve, or to care for possessions, both of which are important if natives are to advance in the social scale.}\]

Carrington’s recommendations were that Aboriginal workers be paid wages at a scale that would allow them to buy their own clothes:

- **Males:**
  - under 16 years: 15/- per week
  - 16-18 years: £1. per week
  - 18-21 years: £1.5.0 per week
  - over 21 years: £2.5.0 per week
- **Drovers:**
  - with cattle: £3 per week
  - with plant only: £2 per week
- **Females:**
  - 10/- per week

In addition to these wages, employers were to provide accommodation, a laundry, firewood, and medical benefits. The male wage was intended to allow a married worker to support his wife and one child. Additional children would be supposed through the Child Endowment scheme, while old and infirm people on stations would become the responsibility of the Department of Native Affairs.

Carrington indicated what he believed to be a reasonable issue of clothing and other necessities to workers per annum. His scale for male workers was 6 shirts, 6 trousers, 4 pairs of boots, 2 hats, 1 sweater, 1 overcoat, 2 blankets, 4 handkerchiefs, 4 towels, 1 mosquito net, 1 camp sheet, 2 razors, 2 mirrors, 4 combs and 4 pipes. These items were estimated to cost £22.9 per annum. Women workers were to be given 6 dresses, 6 yards of calico, 1 sweater, 4 towels, 4 handkerchiefs, 4 combs, 2 mirrors, 1 pair of scissors, 1 blanket, 1 swag cover, 1 mosquito net and needles and thread. Women who were not working would receive the same amount, but only four dresses instead of six. While the Carrington report was seen as a step forward, in reality there had merely been a simple exchange of clothing for wages. Whereas before, wages were withheld and clothing supplied, now wages were supplied and clothing withheld. While wages were only sufficient to buy basic clothes very little had been achieved. According to Mary Anne Jebb, the Carrington system, along with aspects of the New Guinea system were incorporated into Western Australian regulations in 1950 and applied to Kimberley cattle stations. Dave Pullen, then Welfare Officer in the Kimberleys, similarly noted that £1 would not cover the cost of clothing for a man and his family.
The idea of paying for clothes might have been a step forward if the Aboriginal workers had gained some autonomy in their ability to choose, purchase and if necessary dispose of their clothes. But in fact, this type of autonomy was precisely what Carrington intended to avoid. He suggested that a Patrol Officer be given the authority to see that issues of clothing were ‘made only as required and that money was spent wisely’. Clothing was still issued at regular intervals through the station-run stores, no doubt offering the same quality of clothing as had previously been supplied. In addition, there was to be no opportunity for Aboriginal workers to give their clothes away. The Patrol Officer was to explain ‘that if clothes were ill-treated or items lost, gambled or given away, they would have to go without other things to replace them’.  

A second problem raised by the introduction of wages to pay for clothes was that the price of clothes remained in the control of the employer. The Patrol Officer was supposed to prevent station managers from charging exorbitant prices for clothes, but at least one previous case suggests that this policy was less than foolproof. Castle and Hagan discuss an incident which occurred in Queensland in the 1930s where the local Protector was allegedly making a profit from Aboriginal clothing purchases.

Once the Carrington Report was put into practice, and Aboriginal stock-workers were paid wages sufficient to buy clothes there is little evidence of any dramatic change in practice. In 1950, the station records for Victoria River Downs record the purchases of ‘stockboys’. The typical male worker was paid £1 per week plus food and tobacco and was required to purchase his own clothes, other small necessary items, and dresses for his wife. The price of these goods accounted for a substantial portion of wages. Perhaps most significant was that the workers only purchased goods when they were actively working, with a complete set of clothing being purchased each October at the beginning of the working season. None of the workers bought clothes up the amounts suggested by the Carrington Report. During an average of six months per annum no purchases were made and the accounts indicate that during these months the workers were on holidays. Thus it appears that the original practice of not providing clothes for ‘walkabout’ had continued into the assimilation era.

Conclusion

It is a well known historical fact that Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory were expected to work for little more than food, clothes and tobacco. In this paper I have suggested that we should hesitate before including clothing in that list. There were very few employers who believed that Aboriginal workers were entitled to clothing on a permanent basis. Most regarded clothing merely as a means to ensure that their workers were able to complete their work in a satisfactory manner. Wages may have been sacrificed in favour of clothes, but clothes were not regarded as wages.

Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the helpful advice of the anonymous referees.
3. Aboriginals Ordinance 1911, No. 16 of 1911, Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 2, Melbourne, 8 January 1912.
6. Cited by Carrodus in 27 April 1932, A1 1933/269 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), ACT.
7. Durack also argued that wages would demoralise Aboriginal people. See 1930 Darwin Conference notes, Telegram, M.P. Durack to Grant, 21 Apr. 1930, A1/1 38/329, NAA ACT. See also MP’s Diary, 1916 cited in M. Durack, Sons in the Saddle, p. 325.
10. R. Toupein, ‘Exploitation of Aboriginals in Northern Australia’ in Pan-Pacific Worker, 1 September 1929, p. 12, AWU Deposit, P52/12, NBAC, ANU.
12. J.T. Beckett to Dr H. Basedow, Chief Protector and Chief Medical Inspector. 29 July 1911, A1/1 1912/ 10964, NAA ACT.
14. Transcript of Interview with Thomas O’Connor (Con) Scott, 1990, by Margaret Kowald, NTRS 226, TS616, p. 14, Tape 1, Northern Territory Archives Service (hereafter NTAS), Darwin.
15. Transcript of interview with Bernadette Wing, 1990, NTRS226, TS611, Tape 1, p. 13, NTAS.
20. Criena Fitzgerald, Transcript of Interview with Hazel Mackey, NTRS 226, TS 625, 1990, p. 5, Tape 2, NTAS.
22. CAY and Ellen Johnston Interview, p. 56, NTAS; McGrath, Ellen Johnston Interview
29. Brodie, p. 13, 42/14, Bovril deposit, VRD papers, NBAC, ANU.
33. Sec. Military Board, Army Headquarters, Melbourne, from Major, Staff Corps, Troops, Darwin, 12 October 1933, MP508/1, 82/710/2, NAA, VIC.
37. Rowe, ‘Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory’.
39. V.G. Carrington, Report to Administrator, Northern Territory, 10 October, 1945, VRD, Bovril Deposit, 42/14 NBAC, ANU.
40. Carrington Report, p. 3.
42. Carrington Report, p. 5.
Shades of the Cold War: the role of communist workers at the Midland Railway Workshops

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Although a small minority among the 2500-strong workforce at the Midland Railway Workshops in the 1950s, the Communists were an active group, whose physical focal point was a section of the Machine Shop in Block 3, known as ‘Red Square’, where Jack Marks, a fitter and turner who was an active CPA member, operated a lathe. This paper argues that the activities of Marks and fellow CPA members went far beyond political proselytising and that herein lay their success as union activists. The paper explores the growth of Communism among the workforce at the Midland Workshops; the role of agitators and activists such as Marks in achieving better working conditions, their political and industrial influence upon other unionists, and the response of management. It concludes that the extent of the Communists’ acceptance and popularity among their fellow workers lay in their commitment to every day issues, rather than in their ideological understanding of world events.

In 1950 – the year that the Federal Government passed legislation to ban the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) – Rod Quinn entered his training as apprentice Car and Wagon Builder at the Western Australian Government Railway (WAGR) Workshops at Midland. According to Quinn, ‘on the face of it, international events barely affected life in the Workshops [and] life there also barely affected international events’, yet he described his six years at Midland as ‘the birth of my activism’. Among the work force, he met men from all over the world, including a former Red Army soldier and prisoner of war, who taught him a few words of Russian. This man – exiled from his homeland by Stalinist policies – must have seen a grim irony in Quinn chalking in Russian the words ‘Stalin the Teacher’ and ‘other absurdities’ on the sides of wagons.

Although a small minority among the 2500-strong workforce at Midland in the 1950s, the Communists were an active group, whose physical focal point was a section of the Machine Shop in Block 3, known rather grandly as ‘Red Square’ or less grandly but perhaps more accurately as ‘Red Alley’. Here, within easy sight of the Machine Shop Foreman’s office, stood two rows of 14 lathes. Jack Marks, a fitter and turner who was an active CPA member, operated one of the heavy Dean and Grace lathes. In the lunch break, he would ‘proselytise’ his fellow workers, but (as this paper will argue) Marks was also an active unionist whose popularity among the wider workforce was despite – rather than because of – his communist beliefs.

This paper explores the growth of Communism among the workforce at the Midland Workshops; the role of agitators and activists such as Marks in achieving better working conditions, their political and industrial influence upon other unionists, and the response of management. It concludes that the extent of the Communists’ acceptance and popularity among their fellow workers lay in their commitment to every day issues, rather than their ideological understanding of world events.

Firstly, to contextualise, Midland was the last of the major railway workshops to be built around Australia in the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain whether Communists were significantly active in all of these factories during the inter-war and ‘Cold War’ periods; however, Lucy Taksa’s research has revealed the emphasis placed by Stan Jones, communist shop committee and ARU member, on the Eveleigh Railway Workshops’ importance in 1939 to the political and industrial development of the NSW labour movement. This has echoes at Midland – although, prior to World War II, Communists played an insignificant role in that development. Furthermore, the Left/Right factional struggles that gripped the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) from the 1940s to the 1960s no doubt also impacted upon every workplace where that union had significant representation – as it did at Midland, where the AEU was one of the four most numerically powerful unions and perhaps the most militant. Sheridan’s is just one of a number of studies of the labour movement, which depict the 1950s as an ideological battleground at national, state and regional level.
Secondly, as will be discussed in more detail shortly, even in the Depression and post-World War II eras, when communists were massively impacting upon Eastern States labour movements, in Western Australia, conservative views dominated. The moderate Parliamentary Labor Party was in government for all but three years of the 1924-47 period. Conversely, the CPA, founded in 1920, struggled to maintain even a minute membership. There was no independent Trades and Labor Council; therefore, no forum existed for unions or unionists who were not affiliated with the ALP, which consisted of a political and an industrial wing united in one body, to which the great majority of the State’s unions and unionists were affiliated with the ALP. The AWU dominated this body until after World War II. Affiliates had to swear allegiance to the ALP, and union officials who belonged to other political parties were not permitted to attend meetings of the ALP’s District Councils, thus seriously disadvantaging the unions they represented. After World War II, the increase in numbers and influence of several militant unions (for example, the AEU, the Collie Miners Union and the Waterside Workers’ Federation); the decline of the conservative AWU, and the State ALP’s loss of government in 1947 were significant factors leading to the eventual formation of an independent TLC in 1963. In this hostile context, therefore, the achievements of a ‘small cell’ of communist workers within the State’s largest industrial workplace may be vested with a greater significance than would otherwise be the case.

**Communist activity in the 1930s and 40s**

True to the moderate nature of the Western Australian labour movement, Kathy Bell’s interwar study of the Midland Railway Workshops reveals a politically and industrially conservative workforce, with a significant proportion of British tradesmen. The WA Amalgamated Society of Railway Employees (WAASRE), the dominant union, was moderate, although Bell indicates that the Midland Junction Branch was ‘on the radical wing’. The AEU and the Boilermakers, on the other hand, were militant unions, with the AEU State branch being possibly ‘the most militant in Australia’. According to Bell, ‘oral evidence supports the view that there was a degree of leftist influence in the workshops’, with one of the workers whom she interviewed recalling that, although they were only a small minority, ‘there was a definite “Communist crowd”’. At the beginning of World War II, there were only about 300 CPA members in Western Australia. The Federal Government’s national ban of Party members in June 1940 resulted in police raids, arrests and the imprisonment of several leaders. After the Curtin Labor Government lifted the ban in 1942, and while Russia enjoyed the status of wartime ally, the CPA’s membership increased to an estimated 25,000 nation-wide, with 1,500 in Western Australia. Despite the Party’s insignificant presence in the State, Western Australians voted in favour of a ban on the CPA in the 1951 referendum. As the Cold War descended upon the post-war world, the union movement in Australia divided into warring ‘Communist’ and ‘anti-Communist’ camps –which, as Sheridan has shown, sometimes fractured individual unions – and the ALP dissociated itself from the CPA in a series of resolutions, ultimately permitting the passage through the Senate of legislation to again ban the Party.

The Communists also suffered from their association with several bitter and ultimately unsuccessful post-war industrial disputes. One such dispute erupted after the October 1951 national decision by Commonwealth Conciliation Commissioner J.M. Galvin not to increase metal workers’ margins. According to Jan Archer:

> The Galvin decision did not directly affect metal trades workers in Western Australia as they came under a separate State award, already higher than the Federal Award [but] … the Galvin decision was used by union activists, particularly those affiliated with the Communist Party, as the catalyst for the longest-running strike in Western Australian industrial history.

Archer’s emphasis on the role played by Marks, Jack Coleman and other CPA members at the Workshops during the six months strike, is confirmed by oral and other sources. Communist-linked groups, such as the Modern Women’s Club organised lunches and sewing bees for the strikers’ families. But the communist presence was also a disadvantage, which apparently was instrumental in the strike’s failure. With the right-wing unions – in particular the giant WAASRE with 900 Midland members – refusing to join in, the smaller AEU and the Boilermakers had little hope of success. Some union secretaries warned their members against attending meetings in connection with the ‘Double the Margins’ campaign – as it became known – because they believed it was Communist-inspired. Consequently, despite widespread
community support, nothing was achieved by the strike and, according to some ex-employees, not only did many Midland workers become even more hostile to the Communist members in their midst, they also became disillusioned about the promises made by unions. As the factory was a closed shop, each worker had to belong to a union, but many played no role in union activities. How then did active communist unionists such as Coleman and Marks make an impact on this largely sceptical workforce?

**The role of Communist agitators at the Midland Workshops**

The dedicated Communists appear to have impressed because they were excellent tradesmen and committed unionists who, as shop stewards, worked hard to obtain better pay and conditions for their fellow workers, and in some cases, they had considerable personal skills of oratory, persuasion and humour. According to Jack Coleman, ‘wherever there were communists in industry they were never criticised for their work. They were not loafers and were very honest people in that regard’. Thus, although few workers at Midland embraced the Communist philosophy, the Communists began to exert a significant influence in the workplace. Owen Salmon, who often visited the Workshops in his role as State Organiser for the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), commented that there was ‘virtually a communist cell’ at Midland; its members were veterans of the 1952 strike who continued to work for improvements in this ‘Dickensian’ workplace, despite the failure of the ‘Double the Margins Campaign’ and their subsequent unpopularity.

The activities of Red Square were closely linked with the public space around the flagpole in front of Block 1 (the Carriage Shop and Wood Mill). Originally built in 1916 as a memorial to Workshops employees who died on active service in World War I, the flagpole was relocated to its site outside Block 1 in 1924, prior to the erection of the Peace Memorial. It soon became a focus for workers’ gatherings when there were grievances to discuss, as well as a forum for parliamentarians, political candidates and other public figures wishing to address the assembled workforce. It was the perfect platform for an orator. Marks was popular as a flagpole speaker. According to Coleman:

> There would be a flagpole meeting on … and people would ask if Marksy was speaking. He would come back from deputations over at the main office, which he called ‘bullshit castle’, and say things like: ‘Well apart from an aching anus, I got nothing!’ It appealed to the blokes.

The Workshops was a very territorial place; in referring to the Chief Mechanical Engineer’s (CME) office as ‘bullshit castle’, Marks was cleverly playing on the class divisions between white and blue-collar workers. Although many workers passed from trades to clerical, after studying to become engineers or draftsmen –three men worked their way up from being junior workers to CME of the Workshops – the site itself was demarcated into ‘blue’ and ‘white-collar’ territory, and within that into the territory of the individual trades. For example, foundry worker Fred Cadwallader described the intense rivalry between workers in the Foundry and the Boiler Shop. During the period of this paper, the only ‘female gendered spaces’ were the canteen and the CME’s office; even the Casualty Room Sister had been replaced by a male Casualty Room Attendant in 1950. Then there were appropriated spaces such as the flagpole, the origins of which were described above. ‘Red Alley’ was another space with two uses: the industrial purpose for which the lathes had been placed there, and the socio-political purpose invested by the communists who worked the lathes and used the space between them as a gathering point in lunch hours. ‘Red Alley’ gained its own mythology, so that employees who joined the Workshops long after Marks had left ‘recall’ what went on there.

Since the closure of the Workshops in 1994, and the subsequent redevelopment and reinterpretation of the site, ‘Red Alley’ has featured on heritage walks, with ex-employee guides delighting in pointing out the proximity of the ‘alley’ to the foreman’s office. But in traversing the empty, open spaces of the disused workshop today, it is difficult to construe the power struggles that made this spot so significant, and easy to lose the real meaning of ‘Red Square’. Yet, increasingly, heritage practitioners are becoming aware of the significance of power relations in the creation and adaptation of physical sites. In her study of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, Cathy Brigden discusses the power invested in that site, acquired in the 1850s as a ‘place’ for the unions, and later, in the imposing Trades Hall building that became a ‘dominant landmark. The idea that a ‘place on the map is also a place in history’ underscores the spatial and temporal significance of the [Melbourne] Trades Hall. In the vicinity of Red Square, the structure that most represented managerial power was the elevated foreman’s office.
Furthermore, its occupant, the foreman, was ‘one of us’ who had become ‘one of them’. In order
to understand the full significance of the Communists’ bravado, it is necessary to appreciate the
attitudes of shop floor workers to the foremen, their superiors and fellow tradesmen, whom they
regarded as ‘policemen’ and objects of suspicion. According to Dave Hicks, a fitter and turner, who
worked in the ‘Red Square’ area during the 1970s:

The senior foreman’s office …would be elevated and he could see right down each end of the
[Machine] shop; he could stand in his window and watch what’s happening. And the clerk would
always be up there. So if you wanted to get out of the joint, if you needed to go to the doctor or you
were feeling sick, you would have to go up to the clerk and ask for a pass, a leave pass. It was like
a jail. The control they exercised in that place was absolute.  

Irrespective of their personal political beliefs, most of workers in the Machine Shop would have relished
verbal battles between Marks and Leo McNamara, Foreman Fitter during the latter part of the 1950s, who
was known to be a strict Catholic and who may have belonged to the Democratic Labor Party (DLP).

Many past employees had fond memories of Marks. Phillip Bristow Stagg, a turner and iron machinist,
recalled that Marks had got him ‘involved’ in the AEU. He felt that if Marks had joined the ALP,
instead of the CPA, he would have become a Member of Parliament because ‘he could talk people into
anything’.  

Patrick Gayton, a pattern maker, also said that Marks was ‘a great orator’ who ‘could talk
us into anything really. He was funny, he used to [say]… “have you seen the daily sausage wrapper
today?” [meaning] … the West Australian, of course’.  

Even Ron Wadham, (Works Manager, 1978-89) regarded Marks as:

a remarkable character … a fine controller of men and a persuasive speaker. He would stand at
Flagpole meetings and point towards the Management buildings and decry the exploitation of the
workers and pronounce the ineptitude of the Manager’.  

Wadham was well aware of the power relationships in the Workshops, which he described as being ‘a
natural battleground’. His memoirs are replete with phrases such as ‘the troops [were] marching on the
office’ and ‘the excitement of marching en masse to frighten me in my office soon lost its attraction’. He
referred to Marks as ‘a great guy and always good-natured outside the battle zone’.  

Reading Wadham’s recollections, however, one feels that he regarded the ‘battle’ as a cynical game and that he thought the
union officials did likewise.

Irrespective of whether many workers shared Wadham’s cynicism, however, the communist shop
stewards appear to have been popular because they worked to improve conditions for the employees.
Many of those interviewed referred to ‘Dickensian’ conditions on the factory floor: inadequate washing
and lunch time facilities, no safety gear, and noise, smoke and dirt (like Dante’s inferno – as one worker
described it), which made dangerous working conditions even worse. Despite years of agitation by
the unions, many of these conditions prevailed until the passing of Occupational Health and Safety
legislation in the 1980s forced management to adopt practices more appropriate to the late twentieth
century – including provision of safety glasses, heavy boots, helmets, overalls and ear plugs, and the
investigation of all incidents in which workers were injured.  

Shop stewards Coleman (WAASRE), and Marks (AEU) operated in the unreformed atmosphere of the
1950s, when there were many causes for complaint. Coleman looked after the ‘day to day’ needs of ‘the
blokes’, such as ensuring that they got disability money for those working in confined spaces, or ‘dirt
money’ for people employed on particularly dirty jobs, and other pay claims. According to Coleman,
Midland was the first government workshops to get an ‘industry allowance’ to compensate for workers
being on award pay when private factories paid higher rates for the same skills. He would discuss
claims with the relevant foreman. ‘Most foremen were good. I wouldn’t argue or anything. They respect
you if you recognise their position’.  

It was this reasonable attitude – far from popular contemporary images of ‘fanatical’ communists – which no doubt won the respect of the foremen. Mutual respect extended beyond individual relationships. The Joint Railways Union Committee (JRUC) on which communist and non-communist union officials co-operated to achieve improvements in the work place, was frequently praised by the Workshops’ own communist publication, Unity. In 1962, for example, Unity congratulated the JRUC for the ‘job they’ve done on behalf of workers in these Shops’ and stated that the Committee had been ‘savaged by the DLP, the Employers’ Federation and the monopoly press urging a return to unions going their separate ways’. 
It would be incorrect, however, to impute that communists did not encounter prejudice and injustice because of their activities. The Workshops Rules could be applied quite selectively, as when communist activist Norm Lacey, who had been employed for six months as a labourer, was dismissed on 11 May 1949 for ‘breach of Workshops Rule 61, posting of unauthorised pamphlets in Workshops’. There were also sinister aspects to the way the communists operated. Edward King, a turner and iron machinist at the Workshops during the 1950s, regarded Marks as ‘a genuine communist’ – although not elaborating on what being ‘a genuine communist’ might mean to him – but despised ‘the “red raggers” who trotted around in Jack’s wake … [who] would not know a communist if they fell over one’. King once complained to Marks because one of the ‘red raggers’ had demanded money for the wharfies and, when King refused to contribute, started a rumour that he was ‘scabbing on supporting the wharfies’. King claimed that he told Marks, ‘I do not like people demanding money from me. If you want something from me, ask. Don’t send your bully-boys over to demand it’. Apparently Marks agreed with him, and reprimanded the worker in question. Research has not yet revealed whether this was an isolated case or a common practice.

Some ex-employees also spoke of ‘inter-union’ fighting or of power struggles within unions, involving communists, ALP and DLP members. Although there were DLP members among the Workshops employees, and some may have held roles in the executives of more conservative unions, such as the Moulders, the ASE or the WAASRE, the DLP in Western Australia never developed a union base. Indeed, Unity rarely mentioned the DLP or ‘groupers’, although an article in the March 1955 issue attacked ‘Industrial Groups’, declaring that it was not a ‘sectarian’ issue but rather that employers used the groups to weaken and pacify the labour movement. Perhaps the DLP presence at Midland was insufficient to warrant further mention. If so, this would contrast with Sheridan’s finding that, as early as 1938, the anti-communist movement found strong support among unionists in Victoria’s railway workshops. Certainly, some workers at Midland expressed strong anti-Communist views.

But perhaps the most revealing indicator of how workers regarded the Communists in their midst may be the results of elections. Marks was elected repeatedly to the AEU executive and was Branch President in the early 1960s. He was shop stewards’ convenor at Midland Workshops, represented staff on the Punishments Appeal Board, and was the Metal Trades Federal delegate. But, it would appear, people were less willing to have him represent them in Parliament. Marks and other prominent communists such as Joan Williams and John Rivo Gandini, stood for the House of Representatives and the Senate during various election campaigns in the 1950s and ’60s but none came close to victory. According to Unity, the Communist vote increased in the Federal electorate of Swan from 493 in 1959 to 801 in 1962 which, if accurate, would suggest a considerable increase in support – but which sections of the electorate voted for communists is unknown. The residences of the Workshops workforce were widely scattered and it would be impossible to ascertain their impact on the vote.

The response of management

Workshops management appeared to have an ambivalent attitude to the activities of activists on the site. Anecdotal evidence suggests that known Communist activists were not employed at the Workshops. Marks, in fact, claimed that he was certain he would not get a job there even though he was qualified in his trade. On the day of his interview, the Works Manager was conducting a visitor around the Workshops and left the interview to his clerk, who did not know Marks. By the time management realised ‘that they had let this dangerous red into the place it was too late because they were employing trainees and so they couldn’t sack a tradesman’. Thus Marks claimed to owe his position partly to luck and partly to the political and economic conditions prevailing after the war. Whether the circumstances of his interview are correct is unknown, but foremen’s reports from the era attest to the extreme shortage of skilled tradesmen.

On entering employment at Midland, each employee was required to sign – and abide by – a set of Workshops Rules, which were under by-Law 84 of the Government Railways Act. Copies of the Workshops Rules were posted upon walls in the various Workshops. Rule 61 prohibited ‘canvassing’, and Rule 62 forbade workers to hold meetings, take up collections, post notices or advertisements, or distribute literature of any kind, without the permission of the Works Manager. Yet the CPA newsletter, Unity, was distributed throughout the Workshops during the 1950s and 1960s.
The fact that *Unity* clearly stated that it was published by the ‘Workshops Branch of the Communist Party of Australia’ and sometimes contained details of flagpole meetings to be held that same day indicates that it was handed out to workers as they arrived in the morning. This activity quite possibly occurred outside the main gate of the premises, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that workers regularly flouted the Rules, most notably in the area of making ‘foreigners’ – items crafted in Workshops time and with Workshops materials for private use, or profit, in some cases. With regard to management response to political activity, apart from the above-mentioned sacking of Lacey, Dennis Day, a fellow Communist and contemporary of Marks, who worked as a turner and iron machinist at the Workshops for 24 years, stated that he was sacked three times. On one occasion, his sacking was connected with an accusation that he had copied of a banned book, *Portnoy's Complaint*, hidden at his house. CPA members had objected to the ban and sold copies of the book in the Pioneer Bookshop. In the other cases, Day appears to have been reinstated by union might and the threat of the strike weapon.

Day also recalled an occasion where the Works Manager, Lucas Pitsikas, supported him against the Machine Shop Foreman, Leo McNamara. McNamara had refused to recognise Day as union shop steward. Day claimed that McNamara, a devout Catholic who ‘hated Coms’, was forced by Pitsikas to recognise Day in his union role, despite his communist principles. This transaction took place on the shop floor in front of the tradesmen and probably undermined McNamara’s authority.

Although all flagpole meetings had to receive the Works Manager’s prior permission, management even permitted the use of a loud speaker and allowed an electrical tradesman employed at the Workshops to set up the platform and amplification system in work time. By sanctioning properly organised flagpole meetings, management provided the workers with a means of ‘letting off steam’ and airing legitimate industrial grievances, but they also provided a platform for Communists. A survey of *Unity* issues from the 1950s and '60s indicates that Communist candidates for State and Federal elections – as well as those representing the major political parties – spoke on a number of occasions at flagpole meetings. Examples include Jack Marks and Paddy Troy, candidates for the Senate, addressing workers on 5 December 1961, and a meeting for ‘Communist candidates’ on 11 February 1965. In June 1958, however, Jim Healy, CPA member and Federal Secretary of the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF) spoke at a lunch time ‘gate meeting’ – which indicates that he was not permitted on the premises. Better known is the refusal by the Works Manager, Bill Britter, to permit American singer, Paul Robeson, to give a concert on the premises during his visit to Western Australia in December 1960. To the delight of hundreds of workers, Robeson defied the ban by performing on the back of a truck parked outside the perimeter fence. He then proceeded to a civic reception, hosted by the Mayor of Midland – thus making the Workshops management look rather petty. According to Coleman, during the 1940s or 1950s, management banned flagpole meetings and, after the intervention of the then Minister for Railways in the Labor administration, Bert Styants, revoked the ban, except to stipulate that candidates speaking on behalf of political parties could only address the workers at election time. This may have been why Healy and Robeson were not permitted on the premises, whereas Troy – in capacity of a Senate candidate – was.

Despite its large and fairly militant workforce, the Midland Railway Workshops was relatively free of industrial disputes. Research has not yet been completed to enable comparisons to be made between Midland and similar workplaces, regarding the loss of man hours over industrial disputes, but in the site’s 90 year history, only three strikes are commonly referred to: a dispute in 1912, the 1952 metal workers strike and a stoppage during the 1970s over the issue of working with asbestos. Apparently, the union stewards’ diligence in fighting for important issues; their access to management – irrespective of how negatively they represented these delegations at flagpole meetings – and these meetings themselves, were sufficient to defuse many potential strikes.

**Conclusion**

Why then did Marks, Coleman, Day and other communists enjoy such popularity at the Workshops? Thousands of workers, of many political persuasions, were committed to bettering their own conditions and those of their fellow workers long before, and after, communism became a recognised ideology in Australia. It has been suggested that Marks could have had a long career in the Parliamentary Labor Party, rather than belatedly joining the ALP in old age, after his resignation from the CPA. Ultimately, Marks’ political career was limited to local government; he served as inaugural mayor of the Town of Vincent (1995-98).
Yet Marks influenced the lives of thousands of workers. He and the other communist shop stewards played prominent roles at Midland and in the Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia, and later became State organisers for their unions. Through their membership of the Joint Unions Council, they also influenced many other non-communist union officials and members — men such as Colin Hollett, Frank Bastow and Gordon Grenfell — some of whom also became State organisers. According to Jack Coleman, although his union, the WAASRE, barred him from its leadership because he was a communist, the men on the shop floor simply did not care about his politics as long as he achieved victories for them. He spoke of men coming up and congratulating him on making a stand against management, and saying that his adherence to communism would not make any difference to them.51

This is not to say, however, that the communist ‘cell’ at Midland was not concerned with international events, for they often filled as much as half of Unity with articles on happenings overseas. In the mid 1960s, for example, issues featured articles on the war in Vietnam (February 1966), and the political situation in Czechoslovakia (August 1968), as well as the frequent discussion of significant national issues such as poverty, military conscription and amount of salary paid to Federal politicians, and an accusation that most of the Australia’s wealth was accumulated by 60 families, including Baillieu, Symes and Coles (December 1961). Furthermore, it was the political and industrial conditions generated by the Second World that largely created a climate in which activists flourished for the decades of the 1950s and ‘60s. As the CPA membership waxed and waned, however, it is evident that pragmatic Australian workers in the Midland Workshops, as elsewhere, were prepared to accept the industrial benefits fought for by communist shop stewards, and to respect them as individuals, while emphatically rejecting their political ideology.

Endnote

2. Ibid., p. 63.
3. For example, J. Read, Marksy. The life of Jack Marks, Read Media, South Fremantle, 1998, p. 61.
9. K. Bell, ‘The Midland Junction Railway Workshops, 1920-1939’ in J. Gregory (ed.), Western Australia between the Wars 1919-1939: Studies in Western Australian History XI, June 1990, p. 34. For ALP attitudes to the CPA, see Oliver, Unity is Strength, p. 158.
16. Flyer drawn by Ray Montgomery, a tradesman and amateur cartoonist at the Workshops. Midland Railway Workshops History Project Collection [henceforth MRWHPC]. J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History, as yet unaccessioned.
18. Frank Bastow, interviewed by B. Oliver, 8 November 2000, Midland Railway Workshops History Project Oral History collection, Battye Library.
22. Fred Cadwallader, interviewed by Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002; Dave Hicks, interviewed by Katina Devril, 14 September, 2003, MRWHPC.
23. The author was present at a number of these occasions between 1999 and 2004.
27. Patrick Gayton, interviewed by Kendall Clarke, 20 March 2003, MRWHPC.
29. Ron Wadham, ‘Supplement 2: Industrial Relations’ in *ibid*. My emphasis.
30. Don Manning, Safety Officer, interviewed by D. Yap, n.d., MRWHPC.
32. Unity, 18 April 1962, in A. & D Cameron Papers, Battye Library Accession No. 4765A (MN 1504), Box 18, item 20.
34. E.Y.V. King, ‘I’ve been working on the railroad’, unpublished memoirs donated to MRWHPC.
35. See, for example, Neil McDougall, interviewed by Bonnie Mitchell, 12 March 2003.
39. The author has sighted one anti-Communist leaflet circulated in the Workshops. Signed by ‘F. Hrubos’, it accused the Communists of being ‘cripplers of the prosperity of Australia’ who did not have ‘the interests of Australia at heart, so they should take the “A” out of CPA’, n.d., possibly 1959, in Cameron Papers, Box 18, item 20.
41. See Annual Reports of Foreman Fitter, 1951; Foreman Boilermaker 1951, 1953, 1956; Foreman Paint Shop, 1944/45, in WAGR Papers, SROWA CONS 5267, WAS 1405, item 66/2841, various volume numbers.
43. Dennis Day, letter to Ric McCracken, n.d., MRWHPC.
44. *ibid*.
45. Troy was a well-known Communist and militant union official of the Coastal Dock, Rivers and Harbour Workers Union and its successors, the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union and the Maritime Workers Union of WA.
46. See Macintyre, *Militant*.
47. *Unity* Special Edition, nd, June 1958?
49. The full story of Robeson’s concert may be accessed at: wwwradio.Murdoch.edu.au
Ultimate ambition: Eileen Powell’s contribution to equal pay activism in Australia, 1929-69

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Despite her impressive industrial, feminist and political legacy, Eileen Powell’s contribution to improving the wages of working women has not been comprehensively addressed by Australian labour and feminist history accounts. Yet, Powell’s insights and experiences provide new levels of understanding about the differences in approach to equal pay activism by feminists, organised labour and governments in the post-World War II period. In addition, analysis of gendered discourse reveals linkages and tensions between personal values, beliefs and public activism, as well as the development of strategies to negotiate relations of power inherent in political and trade union institutions.

Traditionally, the practice and protection of human rights has not been gender neutral, with some issues, reflecting masculine, class and cultural biases, prioritised before others. As an advocate for better working conditions for women, Eileen Powell (1913-97) was a pioneer in many respects. Representing railway refreshment room workers in 1938, she was the first woman to present a case before the NSW State Arbitration Court. From 1944 to 1951 Powell presented a unique two-hour women’s program on the Labor Party owned radio station 2KY, when very few women were announcers, and talk back sessions were almost unheard of. Powell’s industrial relations expertise was acknowledged when she was selected to represent Australia on the International Labour Organisation’s Correspondence Committee on Women’s Work in 1948, a role she held for 12 years. In 1949, she was the first person appointed as an Australian government adviser to attend a meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and 20 years later, represented the Australian League of Women Voters before the Commonwealth Arbitration Court’s hearing of the claim for equal pay. This paper demonstrates that responses to resolutions and legislation drafted at domestic and international forums during the 1940s and early 1950s provides an insight into the ways in which equal pay activism is subject to re-interpretation and adaptation by individuals and groups with different interests and priorities.

Powell stresses that the development of her political and feminist consciousness can be traced back to attending meetings as a young child with her mother, Mrs Margaret Powell. Born in the inner west working-class suburb of Petersham, Sydney, on 3 August 1913, Eileen Powell was the second oldest of four children, three sisters and a brother, with another child, the first, stillborn. Able to ‘spread her wings’ after divorce and attempting to cope with the unexpected death of her oldest daughter at the age of 16, Powell’s mother began attending debating clubs and meetings of historical genealogical and feminist societies, advertised in the local newspaper, often taking her young daughters. Leading feminists Jessie Street, later Australian delegate to the founding conference of the UN, and Linda Littlejohn, also an international campaigner for equal rights, attended some of these meetings, planting the seed for Powell’s future activism.

The feminist perspective, emphasising women’s unique perspective and values developed as a result of responsibility for the household and care of others, stressed the need for a new type of nation state, which would actively promote the welfare of all citizens. For instance, formed in 1921, the non-party and non-sectarian Australian Federation of Women Voters immediately affiliated with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. The Federation’s platform and objectives included ‘to take steps towards the establishment of equal rights of citizenship for both men and women’, and ‘to educate women on moral, social and economic questions’. Powell was the Assistant Secretary for the organisation between 1945 and 1948, and continued to serve on various standing committees for another 20 years or so. In 1947 she was praised for preparing an ‘excellent’ survey entitled ‘The Legal Status and Treatment of Women under Public Law in Australia’ which was ‘subsequently commended’ by both the International Alliance of Women and the UN. In 1951 Powell represented a report to the Perth conference on Equal Economic Rights, and in 1963 was referred to as one of a special group of women who had drafted comprehensive reports that were eventually submitted to the UN.
As a consequence of the lower wages, status and authority generally assigned to those occupations designated as women’s work, female-headed households were more vulnerable to a downturn in the economy. Labour historiography has traditionally emphasised the importance of the Harvester or ‘family wage’ judgement of 1907, as the consecration of beliefs and attitudes towards male and female employment in Australia. Established by a Federal Act in 1904, the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, hereafter the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, stressed the desirability for a basic, minimum or living wage, enough to support the ‘domestic needs’ of an unskilled male, his wife, and three children.\(^6\)

From 1919 until World War II, work generally performed by women in Australia was valued at approximately 54 per cent of the adult male basic wage, with an added margin for skill. In 1928, statistics forwarded to the ILO from awards, determinations and collective agreements under Commonwealth and State Acts, referred to the prescribed minimum wage rates. Wages were described as increasing steadily for males from 1924 to 1928, with increases to women’s wages euphemistically summarised as ‘more regular’. The Australian workforce was highly segregated. While men were listed as working in 14 separate industries, women were listed in five; food, drink and related industries; clothing and boots; other manufacturing; domestic and hotel; and shop assistants and clerks.\(^7\)

Powell was to soon learn that personal relationships and networks developed as a result of her mother’s activism would be important when jobs were becoming scarce. Powell’s mother had joined the local branch of the Labor Party in 1919 and attended its general meetings in the Trade Hall. Powell recalls handing out leaflets when she was still a child. At 14 years-of-age, Powell worked for a short period as a shop assistant at Grace Brothers, Broadway. Her brother had already left school at 13 years-of-age to find work and help support the family. Powell recalls that her mother then ‘struggled very hard’ to make sure that she benefited from three months training in shorthand and typing. Powell held several temporary jobs in small businesses, before starting work with the Labor Daily newspaper – her mother knew the secretary and asked whether there was a job available for her daughter. At 15 years-of-age, Powell joined the Labor Party’s Stanmore branch, and a year later was appointed Assistant Secretary.\(^8\)

By 1929 unemployment in Australia was escalating; and problems associated with the management of finance, commerce, industry and production were becoming increasingly complex. In November that year, Powell joined the staff of the Australian Labor Party at Room 32, Trades Hall, Sydney. Powell developed a critical mind, engaging in vigorous discussions about current political strategies. She fondly remembers attending Labor Party conferences on Easter weekends in the country with the three other office girls, observing and participating in fiery debates about the method by which socialisation would be introduced, and meeting Jack Lang, the Labor Premier of NSW, who she considered at the time too conservative. Fifty years later, Powell could afford to be more generous, recalling: ‘A lot of people had gratitude for what he did for women’. The Lang government introduced child endowment, widows’ pensions and a moratorium on mortgage interest during the unprecedented and catastrophic world-wide economic depression. The latter allowed Powell’s mother to keep the family home.\(^9\)

Powell recalls that the Labor Party was divided by internal conflict and an acrimonious tussle for power and patronage within the New South Wales branch, and this friction continued throughout the decade. At a conference held between state premiers and the federal minister in Melbourne from 25 May to 10 June 1931, it was agreed that government expenditure would be reduced by 20 per cent, taxation increased, bank interest reduced, relief provided for those responsible for private mortgages, and ‘conversion’ of the government’s internal debts. Many members of the Federal Labor Caucus expressed their vehement opposition to any reductions in wages, pensions, and social service payments. The Federal Labor Caucus approved the Prime Minister’s motion, accepting the Premiers Conference Plan, 26 votes to 13. Edward (Jack) Holloway and Charles Culley, leading officials of Melbourne and Tasmania Trade Hall Councils respectively, were opposed and resigned their positions as Ministers as a result.\(^10\)

Fed up with the bitter faction fighting, Powell left the Australian Labor Party office in 1937 for a job as a stenographer with the Australian Railways Union. Her sister, who worked there as a filing clerk,
suggested she apply. A year later Powell had progressed to writing articles and book reviews for the eight page union journal *The Railroad*, when State Secretary and editor, Lloyd Ross, was away. Powell was also given the task of recruiting and organising young women who working in about 30 Railway Refreshment Rooms around the state of New South Wales. Most of the young women worked broken shifts, including a considerable amount of night work, for a meagre wage, which was docked by a compulsory board and lodging payment. There were no extra payments for overtime, and sick-leave was unpaid.\(^{11}\)

Campaigns emphasised that these were the future mothers of Australian children and that poor working conditions was stealing their youth. The term ‘girls’ was used to emphasise the worker’s vulnerability and need for protection – employment was usually terminated when employees reached 21 years-of-age. In 1938, Powell successfully represented the Railway Refreshment Room ‘girls’ before the full bench of the NSW Industrial Commission. Its judgement cut the spread of hours, made provisions for overtime, increased wages and allowed employees to live at home without still having to pay board and lodging to an employer.\(^{12}\) At this time, no woman had ever appeared before the Arbitration Court, and the very few female lawyers mostly dealt with divorce. A solicitor later offered to help Powell to do law through the Admission Board, but she refused, because this would have meant giving up her union and political activities.\(^{13}\)

Described by a journalist as a ‘slim, attractive girl of twenty-six’, Powell afterwards commented to the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, that if she had an ultimate ambition, it would be to contribute to improving conditions for women workers. Reporting the results of Powell’s address to the Arbitration Court, the article suggested that ‘much organising ability and much knowledge of cold, hard statistics are tucked away behind the dimples and soft brown eyes of this Australian’.\(^{14}\) The *Railroad* continued to address subjects such as the formation of the Council of Action for Equal Pay in May 1937 and its campaign for ‘the rate for the job’, (Powell was a foundation member), and the dismissal of married women from paid employment. The union also published and distributed pamphlets, reviewed books such as Joan Beauchamp’s *Women Who Work*, urged its readers to contact the media and politicians, and utilised free air-time on Labor’s radio station, 2KY, to inform and influence the general public and government.\(^{15}\)

In her unpublished autobiography Powell stressed that we need to remember the thinking of the day. For instance, people could not imagine being served by a female teller in a bank. In conversations Powell found that many women were ignorant about what equal pay for equal work actually meant for industry and commerce, the retort might be ‘but how could you give a doctor and a waitress the same wage’. Industrial action, she concluded, would have been unsuccessful, because women feared losing their jobs, the unions were controlled and manned by males, even the largely female unions, and successive governments were rarely prepared to act ahead of public opinion.\(^{16}\)

Nevertheless, there were some dramatic shifts. During the early 1940s, the demands of war and military service led to shortages of men in some industries and renewed interest in the employment of women, particularly in the armed forces, munitions and armament industries, and other services considered essential for the preservation of national security. The Commonwealth Statistician estimated that the number of female wage and salary earners increased from 417,600 in 1939 to 546,000 in 1943. Trade union membership also increased dramatically, from 32.8 per cent of the total number of female workers in 1939 to 49.2 per cent in 1943.\(^{17}\)

The Australian Federal and State governments’ objectives during the war, non-Labor and Labor alike, were to organise the nation’s workforce effectively, to construct the infrastructure necessary to promote the war effort, and to sustain food production. On 29 January 1942, a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii and the entry of the United States of America into the war, the Labor Curtin government announced the formation of a Manpower Directorate, with extensive powers over the armed forces, war and civilian industries. Australia’s commitment to the war shifted from support for allied forces in Europe to one based on national defence. A series of National Security Regulations were drafted, and the Women’s Employment Board was established in March, despite sustained and ongoing resistance by employer organisations. The Board had the authority to determine rates of pay for women working at jobs traditionally performed by men that had not been subject to rulings by the Arbitration Court. Rates of pay were based on the notion of equal pay for equal work, rather than on the traditional basis of ‘needs’. Decisions varied from 60 per cent to 100 per cent of the male rate.\(^{18}\)
Up until 1943, as convenor of the Council for Action Pay’s Organisation Commission, Powell worked closely with Muriel Heagney, secretary from 1939 until the Council’s demise in 1948, to help educate the public – members issued pamphlets, promoted the formation of Equal Pay Committees in various unions, and wrote to governments, local, state and Federal. Powell accompanied Jack Ferguson, the Secretary of the Australian Railroad Union, to the Federal Conference of Unions, called by the ACTU in 1942, and was elected to be part of the ACTU delegation to the Federal Cabinet. Powell recalls that Heagney, who had a strong personality, was ‘dedicated to equal pay in a way nobody else before or since’, similar to the way in which Pankhurst pursued voting rights for women. Heagney, who was nominated but not elected, was absolutely furious that the ACTU accepted the compromise which Dr H.V. Evatt, then Deputy Prime Minister, proposed to the ACTU, while Jessie Street believed that equal pay could and would be introduced gradually, a five per cent increase each time the commission made a wage decision. Powell obviously impressed government representatives with her knowledge of women’s working conditions and her willingness to compromise. In 1943, she was seconded to the newly established Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service for a year, to work on problems associated with women beginning work in particular industries, and to lecture trainee Industrial Welfare Officers.

Women’s employment was still considered a controversial subject. The Government decided that nearly all trades and industries were crucial to the war effort, and wages for most of the traditionally female work areas, like textiles, were increased to 75 per cent of the male rate. After the National Security Act was terminated in 1946, the Commonwealth continued to impose economic controls by introducing the Defence (Transitional Provisions) bill, which expired at the end of 1947. The Female Minimum Rates Regulation was amended ‘to provide for the payment of 75 per cent of the corresponding minimum male rate fixed by award, determination or agreement for vital industries, including Manufacturing Grocery, Clothing and Roofing Tile and Pottery’. But the validity of the government’s decision was challenged by employers’ organisations in the High Court, and not settled until the Basic Wage Case of 1949-50.

Ever innovative, Powell promoted feminist and political agendas during this period by reading and responding on-air to the letters of leading activists, known to her and to each other. Topics discussed included Australian Labor Party policy, women in parliament, the development of community centres, standards of living and the role of the UN. Correspondents disguised their identity to the broader public through the use of a non-de-plume. Powell had left the Australian Railroad Union to take up a broadcasting position in December 1944 after the President of the Australian Railroad Union, Les Austin, and member of the Labor Council’s radio committee for 2KY, had advised her that the current presenter of a daily two-hour women’s session in the morning was leaving, and the radio station was looking for someone to replace her. While Powell regretted leaving her employment with the union, this career shift allowed her to care for her mother who was ill with multiple sclerosis.

Powell’s nomination as the Australian representative on the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Correspondence Committee for Women’s Work in 1948 was an acknowledgment of her extensive experience and expertise in industrial relations and the trade union movement, and her willingness to negotiate if it would assist in achieving desired objectives. Formed in 1932, the Committee usually operated through correspondence between members, although occasionally a few met to discuss issues of particular importance. Members were selected on the basis that they had detailed knowledge ‘of the economic and social problems of women’s work’. As a representative, Powell would be responsible for forwarding information about ‘conditions’ in Australia, and ‘general observations and suggestions in regard to questions of general interest’ to the ILO.

However, the ILO’s jurisdiction over issues affecting women’s labour was being challenged as a result of decisions made by the first session of the UN General Assembly, which in 1946 established a Sub Commission on the Status of Women, responsible to the Commission of Human Rights, despite opposition from the United Kingdom, United States and Cuba. Several months later, the UN Economic and Social Council assumed responsibility for the Status of Women, establishing a Commission as a body in its own right, and giving it a comprehensive mandate to address and internationally coordinate all issues affecting women’s equality. The Commission for the Status of Women first met in February 1947, with Jessie Street, president of the predominantly middle class United Associations of Women, representing Australia for the first two sessions.
As the Australian Minister for External Affairs and Attorney-General between 1941 and 1949, former High Court judge, H.V. Evatt, consistently supported cooperation with UN organisations, including the ILO. Evatt believed that the League had been dissolved, not because the organisation had failed in its attempts to ensure peace through the imposition of collective security measures, but because member countries, partners and other important nations had not adequately supported or committed themselves to its activities. In 1949, the Australian government chose Mrs Elsie F. Byth, President of the National Council of Women of Queensland, to attend the third session to be held in Beirut, Lebanon, from 21 March to 4 April. She was selected from a ‘panel of names’ submitted by the Australian National Committee of the UN. Eileen Powell, who was a member of this organisation and described as ‘active in industrial matters affecting women’, was selected by the Government to attend as an adviser. As specialised agencies, the ILO and UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation were invited to attend and participate in the Commission’s discussions. A number of non-governmental organisations were also invited, including the World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Federation of UN Associations, the Catholic International Union of Social Service, and the World Young Women’s Christian Association.

At the Status of Women Commission’s meeting, the USSR representative, referring to the significant number of women in paid employment in her country, informed delegates that Australian women received only 50 per cent of men’s wages. As the Australian spokesperson at this Commission, Elsie Byth, President of the National Council of Women of Queensland, attempted to divert criticism of Australian government policy by stressing that the differences between men’s and women’s wages in Australia had declined during the past ten years. She advised delegates that an appropriately assessed ‘family wage’ would prevent the need for married women to search for work in order to ‘supplement the family income’. Nevertheless, the majority of Status of Women delegates agreed to a resolution supporting equal pay. Following instructions Byth abstained from voting. This was consistent with the Labor government’s position that the ILO was the appropriate body to discuss ‘rates of pay, hours and conditions of work for both sexes’.

Byth’s confidential report to the Australian government after her attendance at the Status of Women Commission indicates that she followed the Department of External Affairs’ instructions to counter Communist accusations directed towards Australia’s industrial relations system, and that of other British Commonwealth countries. It seems highly probable that Powell, as a former employee of the Department of Labour and National Service, was entrusted with the task of ensuring that Byth supported the Australian Government’s position. The increasing influence of Communism in parts of South East Asia was of major concern to western democracies. Declaring his party’s opposition to Communism and its intention to outlaw the Communist Party in Australia, Robert Menzies, leader of the Liberal-Country Party Coalition, convincingly won the Federal elections held in December 1949, and remained Prime Minister until retirement in 1966. In 1950, the Menzies Government began an intensive campaign to ban the Communist Party, claiming that Communists in industry and the public service were a threat to national security. The Chifley Labor Government had already advised Powell that she would attend the next Commission on the Status of Women meeting in 1950 as its government adviser, but her nomination was withdrawn after the election, supposedly because it was now considered too expensive to send two delegates.

There was more to this decision, however. Another factor, no doubt taken into consideration, was a government security file on Powell, created in August 1937, which stated that she was a suspected Communist. Based on innuendo and supposition, the file recorded that Powell, as a previous employee of the Australian Labor Party, was well placed to pass information from a female associate to the Communist Party. It included several articles that recorded her achievements for the Railway Restroom Workers. By March 1940, Powell was labelled as a ‘Very Active member of the Communist Party’ [sic], making reference to her speech on International Women’s Day that year, employment with the Australian Railways Union and ‘close’ association with Lloyd Ross, her employer, described as previously ‘a State Committee member of the Party’.

Paterson: Ultimate ambition: Eileen Powell’s contribution to equal pay activism in Australia, 1929-69
From 1951, the file indicated that Powell was listed as a possible political speaker for a meeting of North Shore citizens opposed to Japanese rearmament, that Mr Coleman-Browne, an industrial and political journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Powell’s husband since 1949, was opposed to Communism, and that the Australian Association for the UN, of which Powell was an Executive member from 1952-53, had been infiltrated by Communists, although it was not known how much influence they had within the organisation. Copies of this file were sent to several government departments. Powell remembers feeling like a public servant working with the Department of Labour and National Service ‘hated my guts’ when she visited the Melbourne office and requested some documentation for a meeting of the ILO Correspondence Committee held in 1951.34

It is extremely doubtful that Powell ever directly supported the Communist Party. In the election held in 1951, Powell was the only woman to secure Labor endorsement to contest a Federal seat anywhere in Australia, defeating four male opponents for North Sydney. However, she was unsuccessful in winning the seat. When asked about her commitment to socialism in 1979, Powell stressed that she was not talking about Communism as such. Her beliefs were developed through arguing and bouncing ideas off others at meetings of the Fabian Society held in the early 1930s, led by Bill McNamara, a half-brother of NSW Premier J.T. Lang. Now days, she stated, people were too quick to attach labels to people. It would be more accurate, for instance, she declared, to describe Jessie Street as pro-soviet, rather than a Marxist.35

During the 1950s, Powell continued to contribute to international negotiations to improve women’s working conditions through her membership of the ILO’s Correspondence Committee for Women’s Work and as a correspondent for the International Alliance of Women. In December 1951 she attended a special meeting of the Correspondence Committee, held at the ILO’s headquarters in Geneva. The brief forwarded to Australian government representatives before the International Labour Conference that year was unequivocal in its instructions. Delegates were not to support the adoption of an Equal Remuneration Convention. Most telling was a reminder that organisations which had been promoting equal pay for a considerable period would be taking a great deal of interest in comments made by Australian representatives.36 Male public servants provided most of the administrative and strategic advice to governments, and implementation of policy usually reflected masculine priorities and concerns.37 The brief warned that if the Commonwealth placed pressure on the States to implement ILO instruments, then they might make demands on Treasury. In addition, women’s organisations paid close attention to instructions given to Australian government delegates, and would no doubt be very interested in comments made at this Conference.38

Powell’s knowledge of the industrial relations system in Australia would have influenced several of the Correspondence Committee’s recommendations following the International Labour Conference, including the suggestion that the ILO should seek information from countries that had ‘legally established or recognised machinery for wage determination’ to assess their progress towards meeting its Equal Remuneration Convention, drafted earlier that year. Another was that:

> When legislation provided for progressive application of the principle of equal remuneration … adequate safeguards should be provided so that this reduction was recognised as a first step … Such safeguards might, for example, take the form of specifications in the legal provisions as to time limits for further reductions in the differentials between men’s and women’s rates.39

The Committee of Experts also recognised that unless objective appraisals were made of jobs based on a description, necessary qualifications and acceptable level of performance, ‘completely independent of the person who was to occupy the job’, then work generally performed by women would continue to be undervalued.40

At the Commonwealth Arbitration Court’s hearing of the claim for equal pay in 1969 by the Administrative and Clerical Officers’ Association of the Commonwealth public service and the Meat Employees’ Union, Powell, representing the Australian League of Women Voters, distributed a 16-page submission related to ILO and UN instruments, including Conventions and Recommendations. She then drew on her experiences and detailed knowledge to speak on the subject of equal remuneration for two hours. The ACTU, eight public service unions, and a number of women’s organisations including the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, Union of Australian Women and the Australian National Council of Women also presented arguments in support of the removal of the 25 per cent differential between the male and female wage in all awards. The Commonwealth Liberal
Coalition Government, ‘intervening’ in the public interest, had a much narrower definition, supporting ‘equal pay for equal work’ on a gradual basis only, stressing that ‘The work performed by females must be the same or substantially the same as that performed by males under the same award’. As a result of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission’s judgement on 19 June 1969, equal pay was phased in, on a strictly limited basis, to Commonwealth margins through annual increments, until the full 100 per cent rate was reached in 1972. However, differences between male and female basic wage rates remained until the Commission adopted a single adult minimum wage in 1974.

Despite several probing questions from the Parliamentary Opposition, the Liberal Coalition government refused to publicly acknowledge that it was not prepared to accept the full implications of the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, that is, that women doing jobs not usually performed by men should have their skills recognised and paid according to similar awards based on male rates of pay. Yet, Powell recalls that the Australian Federation of Women Voters rejoiced when they heard the 1969 equal pay decision, as this was the first time the Court did not refer to the concept of ‘needs’ when making their decision. However, she believed that the true heroines of this story are the women who rebelled against receiving only 54 per cent of the male wage during the war, when others entering the workforce received up to 100 per cent. This set the pattern for the Federal Arbitration Court ultimately having to legalise equal pay.

As Portelli explains, memory is subjective, ‘It involves not only “what” people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’. Gendered discourse reveals linkages and tensions between personal values, beliefs and public activism, as well as the development of strategies to negotiate relations of power inherent in political and trade union institutions. Eileen Powell’s ‘ultimate ambition’ was to negotiate and overcome obstacles in the pursuit of social justice for working women. This paper provides an overview of some of her achievements and significant contribution to the rise of post-war feminism.

Endnotes

6. 2 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports 4 (CAR) ex parte H.V. McKay.
8. Tape 1, NLA Oral TRC837.
13. Tape 1, NLA Oral TRC837.
23. Tape 1, NLA Oral TRC837.
26. For Labor’s expressions of support for the ILO, see Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD), 169 (26 & 27 Nov 1941), 978; CPD 176 (14 Oct 1943), 571-2; 170 (8 Sept 1944), 606; 186 (13 Mar 1946), 199; Senate 196 (29 April 1948), 1204-5; Current Notes, vol. 19 no. 4, 1948, pp. 191-2.
35. NLA Oral TRC837; Eileen Powell Papers 1912-1997, MLMSS 6646.
43. Eileen Powell Papers, 1912-1997, MLMSS 6646.
Labourism in action: Jack Baddeley, the Trade Union Secretaries Association and the New South Wales Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Bill 1931

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The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Bill 1931 was the most coherent expression of the ideology of those NSW trade unionists that allied themselves with Jack Lang in the 1920s. The drafting of the Bill demonstrated the central position of the Trade Union Secretaries Association (TUSA), and of Jack Baddeley, Minister for Labour and Industry and former president of the Miners’ Federation, in forming the legislative programs of Lang’s second government. This paper examines the preparation of the Bill and its content as an example of labourism in practice.

The crisis of industrial and political labour in Australia and the record of the federal ALP in power from 1983 to 1996 encouraged renewed analysis of ‘labourism’ by Australian historians. To some the policies of the ALP in office were a rejection of Labor traditions. Others, such as Neil Massey, defined labourism in terms of a process: the ‘special relationship’ between the ALP and the unions. Massey argued that on this definition labourism had survived after 1983 despite the ALP’s reversal of many traditional policies. Terry Irving took a middle ground, he drew on the work of Geoffrey Foote, to argue that there had to be ‘certain common ideas, policies and practices that distinguished the [Labor] party’. In this paper I examine an example of labourism through a focus on the policies and practices of Labor in government. The case I chose is the preparation and content of the NSW Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Bill 1931. In the words of Bede Nairn, the bill ‘was a virtual summary of all that New South Wales unions demanded of state and society’ and a Comintern analyst identified it as a key component of Lang’s political strategy.¹

The preparation of the Bill and its content provide an example of labourism in practice, and sheds light on the individuals and organisations that made labourism possible, such as trade union officials and Labor ministers. The individual I focus on is Jack Baddeley, first national president of the Miners Federation and a NSW Labor MP 1922-49. Baddeley served as deputy Labor leader 1927-49 and as Minister for Mines 1925-27, 1930-32 and 1941-49 and as Minister for Labour and Industry 1925-27 and 1930-32. These portfolios made Baddeley a central figure in the legislative programs of successive Labor governments, but he has received little attention from historians compared to his more idealistic colleague Albert Willis. Unlike Willis, who had been his colleague as first national secretary of the Miners’ Federation, Baddeley faithfully followed the ruling group in the NSW ALP during his career. In 1933 he campaigned against his former friend and close ally Willis in the Bulli by-election, when Willis nominated for election against the Lang-endorsed candidate. Like many miner MPs Baddeley was keen to avoid a return to the pit. However Baddeley made a significant contribution to Lang’s legislative programs in the areas of coal industry policy and industrial relations. Lang was disinterested in these areas and left the legislative running in this area to Baddeley. The institution I focus on is the Trade Union Secretaries and Organisers Association (TUSA). About 1913 union officials formed TUSA to facilitate work within the arbitration system. Associations of trade union office bearers existed in Victoria, as the Trades Hall Council Salaried Officers’ Association, and there was a local association in Newcastle. Unfortunately no records survive for TUSA unlike its Victorian equivalent. This may account for its neglect by historians.²

In the early 1920s the influence and profile of TUSA was bolstered by the leftward shift of the Labor Council after the appointment of Jock Garden as secretary in 1917. Although the Council continued to provide advice on arbitration, despite the revolutionary commitment of Garden, many pro-arbitration unionists were disenchanted with the Council. To a degree in the early 1920s TUSA functioned as a rival body to the Labor Council. In the factional struggles that racked the ALP TUSA aligned unions together with a majority of Labor MPs and the Miners’ Federation were on one side against the alliance of the Labor Council leadership and the AWU. Lang’s first term as Premier from 1925 to 1927 plunged the ALP into upheaval but also brought about a realignment of trade union opinion.
Lang’s energetic program of industrial reform was welcomed by moderate unionists as showing that an appropriately led Labor government could deliver for the workers. Meanwhile Garden and his allies had jumped on Lang’s bandwagon. Oscar Schreiber, an officer of the Furnishing Trades Society and secretary of TUSA, took a leading role in rallying union opinion behind Lang.\(^3\)

Despite their political congruence TUSA and the Labor Council continued to function separately after 1927. This perhaps reflected a distrust of Garden, both his Communist past and his personal style. Certainly the self-effacing Schreiber, whose style was summed up by his injunction to Labor conferences delegates not to ‘vapourise’, was very different from the flamboyant Garden. TUSA and the Labor Council refused an invitation from Nationalist Premier Bavin to discuss unemployment in 1930, but at least TUSA gave the courtesy of a formal refusal. TUSA had a wider range of members than the Labor Council; such as the Railway and Tramway Officers’ Association.\(^4\)

**Political context and industrial context**

The 1925-27 NSW Labor government had been wracked by bitter conflict between supporters and opponents of party leader and Premier Jack Lang. In his struggle to retain the party leadership Lang had relied heavily on trade union support. Unionists that had formerly been in opposing camps came together to support Lang, including former Communists such as Labor Council secretary Jock Garden, and moderate pro-arbitration unionists such as Schreiber. Lang’s opponents complained that ‘industrialists’ had taken over the party. Later historians were more sceptical. Miriam Dixson argued that although Lang had wooed unions with his legislative program during 1926 from about December 1926 the government’s reformist enthusiasm ebbed as Lang sought to appease swinging voters and conciliate rebellious Labor MPs. She argued that by 1927 former radicals such as Garden had so tied their political fortunes to Lang, that despite their dominance in the party organisation they were now ‘fairly innocuous as power factors within the ALP’.\(^5\) In 1930 Lang came to power with a secure majority and the legislative record of the government provides a test of political effectiveness of Lang’s industrialist allies. I will argue it demonstrated Lang’s continued receptiveness to trade union opinion.

In 1926 Lang’s first government, with Baddeley as responsible minister, implemented a major reform of the state industrial relations system. It established a two tier system of Conciliation Committees and an Industrial Commission. The Industrial Commission was constituted by a Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner. In session the Commissioner sat with employer and employee representatives selected from a panel. Beneath the Industrial Commission were about 300 Conciliation Committees. In 1927 six of the eight Conciliation Committee chairs came from a union background. The Industrial Commission set the state basic or ‘living’ wage and heard appeal from the Committees. The Committees were responsible for promulgating awards and in particular margins above the living wage. Committee chairs had a casting vote if the two sides were unable to reach agreement. Employers complained that the chairs were biased towards the workers’ side and contributed towards uncompetitive wage levels in NSW.\(^6\)

Employers grumbled about the Committee chairs but the centre of debate was Industrial Commissioner Albert Piddington. Lang had wanted George Beeby, a former Labor and Nationalist minister. The unions however insisted on Albert Piddington, barrister and former Interstate Commission, who was viewed with deep suspicion by employers and conservative politicians as biased. As Industrial Commissioner Piddington opposed wage reductions and defended the sanctity of the living wage.\(^7\)

In 1927 the Bavin government restructured the Industrial Commission to comprise three legally qualified members. Piddington remained President, but was frequently outvoted by the two new appointees. The government also removed the casting vote of conciliation committee chairs. In 1929 rural employees were removed from the jurisdiction of the system and in 1930 the government legislated to increase the standard working week for state award employees from 44 to 48. Statements by government ministers suggested a further reform of the state industrial relations system on the lines of the Victorian wages board system. At the 1930 state election Lang pledged to ‘restore arbitration’.\(^8\)

The Coalition’s legislative offensive took place against the backdrop of a rapidly worsening labour market position. Unemployment in NSW rose from 11.8 per cent in the first quarter of 1928 to 26.3 per cent in the last quarter of 1930 and the per centage of wage disputes across Australia resolved in workers’ favour
fell from 96 per cent in 1927 to zero in 1930.\(^9\) The Coalition’s policies cemented the alliance between the ALP and the Labor Council leadership and impelled Jock Garden into a leading role in the ALP.

**Preparation of the legislation**

In anticipation of a Labor victory union activists had already begun to discuss industrial legislation before Lang’s election victory in October 1930. Baddeley advised union deputations shortly after taking office that he intended to recast all industrial legislation and he proposed the formation of a committee representing the Labor Council, ALP executive and TUSA to formulate industrial legislation. Baddeley declared that suggestions by employers would be considered, but complained that unlike the workers employers had not had to struggle for the good things in life.\(^10\)

It was a group of TUSA members that took emerged as the government’s interlocutors on industrial relations reform. Nationalist leader Bavin claimed the group was convened by Schreiber and that other members were Oscar Bryant, Emil Voight, Jack Hooke and Garden. Hooke later claimed that Colin Tannock, from the Ironworkers’ Association, and Schreiber had prepared the bill with the assistance of parliamentary draftsmen. Schreiber reported to his own union on the progress of the bill whilst Garden reported to the Labor Council. TUSA and in particular Schreiber personally was the main conduit between the unions and the government. Unions left TUSA to handle general discussions on the bill but continued to make representations on particular issues of concern. Some union representations were also conveyed via Charles Bellemore, manager of the State Labor Exchange and also via the Industrial Register. The Crown Employees Protection Committee operated independently of TUSA, but found Baddeley unsympathetic.\(^11\)

At the same time that TUSA worked on the arbitration bill it was also assisting the government to secure union acquiescence to an increase in the unemployment relief tax. The opposition claimed that TUSA was given free hand on Bill in exchange for consent to the increase in the unemployment relief tax.\(^12\)

Despite the overlap between the office bearers of the Labor Council and TUSA the principle of separation was maintained. In April 1931 Hooke refused to report from TUSA to the Labor Council as he considered TUSA to be a separate body from Council. In October 1931 the Labor Council, following complaints from the Clerks’ Union (whose secretary was a supporter of Federal Labor), resolved that TUSA should not be involved in industrial matters that came within the scope of the Council, that officers of the Council should not sit in Conference with officials of unions not affiliated to the Council, that Council should establish a committee to deal with industrial legislation and the Council refute via the press that any officer of Council was a member of TUSA.\(^13\)

In this period Lang’s opponents within the labour movement were Communists or supporters of the pro-Scullin Federal Labor Party. Between them these two groups were a minority of the Labor Council and this suggests broader concerns about TUSA among delegates who would otherwise count as supporters of the Garden leadership. However the campaign against TUSA was not supported by unions. Only three of 44 unions supported the resolutions. Union support for TUSA was influenced not only by Lang’s industrial legislation but also the success of the government in preventing reductions in the state living wage.\(^14\)

The status of TUSA rose throughout 1930-32. A visit to TUSA was an early assignment for the new Under-Secretary of Labour and Industry in April 1932. Unions not previously involved joined. The press and Lang’s critics also condemned its role. Employers considered it the controlling group at Trades Hall.\(^15\)

The Lang government moved quickly to implement TUSA’s agenda. By late January 1931 although TUSA had not finalised its proposals the parliamentary draftsmen had begun work on preparation of the Bill. Cabinet discussed the Bill in late January and early February and requested that Baddeley meet with TUSA to clarify some aspects of their proposals. On 16 February 1931 it was approved for submission to caucus. There is no record that it encountered any difficulties in caucus.\(^16\)

The Bill entered parliament in March 1931. It passed the Assembly without difficulty but received a more hostile response in the Council. In the immediate aftermath of Lang’s election victory the Council had accepted the repeal of much of Bavin’s 1929-30 reforms to industrial arbitration on the grounds of Labor’s mandate.
The Past is Before Us

But by March Council gave no credence to Labor’s argument that the Bill merely amounted to the restoration of arbitration promised in Lang’s policy speech. It was referred to a hostile Select Committee (which Labor boycotted) and then unacceptably amended and seemed doomed.

The fortunes of the Bill were revived by the November 1931 appointment of 25 Lang Labor MLCs were appointed to the Legislative Council. This left Federal Labor with the balance of power. The government found to its frustration that Federal Labor MLCs, with the exception of AWU federal president Edward Grayndler, voted down key clauses of the Bill.

The government refused to accept Federal Labor’s amendments but as the political position of the government worsened trade union opinion shifted towards compromise. In February 1932 it appears that caucus rejected a proposal for a compromise, but in mid April 1932 TUSA requested that the government ‘accept those portions of the Bill which are acceptable to the Labor movement in general and are approved by the Committee of the Association’. At this time however the government appears to have believed that it would be able to force more of the original clauses through and it had not responded to this request by the time of its dismissal on 13 May.17

Selected aspects of the Bill

The Bill proposed substantial reforms to almost all aspects of industrial relations. Only a few of these can be discussed in this paper. I focus on proposals to extend the coverage of the arbitration system and to increase the powers of the Industrial Commission to investigate the operations of employers.18

The Bill specifically included outworkers, insurance agents, canvassers and commercial travellers, timber cutters and taxi drivers (s5). Baddeley justified this on the grounds that the device of an independent contract was frequently employed to remove workers from the protection of the award system. Employer and opposition critics argued that the wage relationship was not appropriate to workers whose activities could not be closely supervised.19

The proposal to extend award coverage was in part a response to the experience by many self-employed of work intensification and greater competition from the newly unemployed. Many who lost their jobs tried their hand at self-employment, but the portion of self-employed in the workforce actually fell from 1921 to 1933 which suggests how difficult it was to sustain self-employment.20

Commercial travellers exemplified the difficulties of the self-employed. In the late 1920s employers forced many commercial travellers off wages and onto commission systems. In 1926 70 per cent of Commercial Travellers’ Association (CTA) members who voted in an internal ballot opposed the pursuit of an industrial award for commercial travellers, but by 1929 72 per cent were in favour. The Association’s NSW president Charles West, although politically conservative, moved to register a travellers association for industrial purposes. Some more radical commercial travellers formed the Commercial Travellers’ Guild, which admitted women as members, unlike the Travellers’ Association, and sought industrial registration. There were further attempts to form unions of the self-employed such as taxi drivers (which pledged support for the Lang Plan) and canvassers.21

However at a time of mass unemployment many self-employed feared that arbitral regulation threatened their employment. The CTA was confused on this issue. West appeared before the Legislative Council Select Committee and accepted their argument that the definition of commercial travellers as employees imposed unreasonable constraints on their employers. Concerns about the employment consequences of regulation were echoed by Federal Labor’s parliamentary leader Joseph Coates, a former commercial traveller and he led Federal Labor to support exclusion of commercial travellers from the definition of employee under the bill. However the CTA then requested Coates to reverse his position and Federal Labor then voted to include commercial travellers in the Bill. Federal Labor initially supported the inclusion of taxi drivers as employees under the Bill but after receiving a deputation of drivers supported their exclusion from the category of employees on the grounds this would safeguard their employment.22

The Bavin Government had legislated to exclude workers in managerial positions, except on the railways, and those receiving more than £15 weekly or £750 annually from access to arbitration. Labor proposed to reverse this.23
Labor’s explicit appeal to private sector non-manual workers was a feature of 1929-30 election campaigns, and the Bill can be seen as continuing this appeal. Employers and their advocates presented the inclusion of managerial and higher-paid employees as a plan to force technical and supervisory staff, ‘who are really the representatives of the employers’, into unions and destroy managerial authority. The Merchant Service Guild argued it would reduce the division between higher-paid workers and other wage earners and encourage them to reveal how capitalists hid profits. However Baddeley could suggest only mine managers as an example of those who might seek award protection. Federal Labor supported the removal of the income limit but it still wanted to exclude directors, managers and executive officers. Lang Labor was willing to concede directors but argued managers of small companies were employees.24

The Bill also sought to extend the scope of arbitral regulation to all aspects of business operation. In the definition of ‘industrial matter’ it included a long list of aspects of business operation and then included the very general clauses of ‘any matter whatsoever which in the opinion of the commission or committee has been, is, or may be a cause or contributory cause of a dispute’ and ‘control in any industry of methods of management affecting employment’ (s5). If this was not enough the Commission was also granted very broad powers to enquire into the operations of industry (s35).

Unions welcomed the expansion of the Commission’s powers but critics of the bill argued that these clauses gave the Commission power to pry into any aspect of the firms operation and effectively abolished managerial prerogative and so broke with previous arbitration law. In the Harvester Judgment Higgins had declared that he sought to leave ‘every employer free to carry on the business on his own system’. There also appears to have been some doubt about these clauses within the Department. A document prepared within the Department reviewed proposed changes to industrial law (perhaps as referred from TUSA) and described the proposed expansion of the definition of industrial matter to be ‘too wide’ and ‘opposed to all previous judgments of the Court’ and as interfering in the business of the employer. Employer concern about Commission was heightened by its reorganisation under the Bill to consist of one member: Piddington.25

Although the proposed expansion of Commission powers evoked substantial opposition Labor was unclear as to what these powers would mean in practice. Some MPs believed investigations would flush out concealed profits but a few went further to suggest that many companies were poorly managed. Labor’s attitude to industrial efficiency was ambiguous. The Labor Council had argued that rationalisation could only benefit workers under socialism. But with employers pleading inability to pay and blaming workers for inefficiency Labor had an interest in showing that employers were responsible for inefficiency. Baddeley hinted that some firms were poorly managed, but pressed by the opposition as to the consequences of a finding of poor management, he could only suggest only it would be up to the company’s board.26

Conclusions

In this paper I have focused first on labourism as process: how a Labor party governs? Lang’s demagogy and Baddeley’s opportunism notwithstanding, the example of the Bill reveals Lang’s second administration as one which worked very closely with unions. I have focused then on labourism as policy: the content of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Bill itself. Union support of compulsory arbitration depended on what form of compulsory arbitration was proposed.27 Through their support for Lang former radicals such as Baddeley and Garden, and even self-professed moderates such as Schreiber, sought to fashion an industrial relations system that directly challenged employers’ property rights in the means of production.

Endnotes


10. SMH, 5 November 1930, p. 13; Labor Daily (LD), 7 November 1930, p. 1, 18 November 1930, p. 5; Hotel, Club & Restaurant Employees, Minutes 1932 to 1935, General Meeting, 2 December 1930, T12/1/3, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (hereafter NBAC); Baking Trades Employees Federation, Minutes of General Meetings 1938 1939 to 15 June 1932, General Meeting 19.11.30. (These minutes have ‘Labor Council’ crossed out and replaced by ‘TUSA’), T13/2/2, NBAC; Industrial Arbitration Bill 1932, Deputation from AWU to Minister 20.11.30; SRNSW, DLI Submissions 1931, 286775, Notes of deputation received by the minister from the ARU 12 November 1930, 6/3465, SRNSW; SMH, 13.11.30, p. 10 (Baddeley).


15. SMH, 15 April 1932, p. 13 (Bellemore visit); Water Board Employees, Minute Book 1930-37, General Meeting, 15.5.31, MSS 3021, KV 6592, ML. The Amalgamated Engineers complained about the role of TUSA but was then granted a representative on the committee, Trolley, Draymen and Motor Drivers Union of NSW, Minutes of General Meetings 1925-36, General Meeting, 17 November 1930 (citing correspondence from the AEU), Z274, Item 74, NBAC. On TUSA: Catholic Press, 22 January 1931, p. 25. 5 February 1931, p. 25, 23 April 1931, p. 21. 17 December 1931, p. 20; SMH, 9 October 1931, pp. 8, 10; Workers' Weekly, 19 July 1931, p. 2; North Broken Hill, Committee of Barrier Mines, Memos 117-125 May 1931 to January 1932, H.R. Lee, (Secretary Australian Mines and Metals Association, New South Wales), New South Wales Political Position (7 January 1932), p. 3, UMA, Box 55, Item 10.

17. Industrial Arbitration Bill 1932, Bundle 1, Matter for party 2 February 1932 (this outlines a compromise proposal), O. Bryant to Lang, 15 April 1932. The Drummoyne AEU agreed (R. Gurry to Lang, 14 April 1932), 5/3490, SRNSW; North Broken Hill, Committee of Barrier Mines 1929-1931, memos 126-133 February-September 1932, H.R. Lee (secretary Australian Mines & Metals Association(NSW)) to T. Maughan (General Secretary, Australian Mines & Metals Association), 4 May 1932, Box 55, Item 11, UMA.

18. All references to clauses of the Bill are its March 1931 printing; Industrial Arbitration Bill 1932, Bundle 8, 5/3490, SRNSW.


21. Australian Traveller, vol. 27, no. 6, 1931, pp. 1, 24a; vol. 27, no. 8, 1931, p. 4; SCICAB, Minutes of Evidence, qq. 2264-65 (C. West, CTA), qq. 1057, 1675 (J. Wilkins, Commercial Travellers and Salesmen’s Association) NSWPP 1930-32, vol. 5. Examples of support for regulation are in SRNSW 5/3490 Industrial Arbitration Bill 1932 Bundle 1: L Green (Salesmen’s, Saleswomen’s Demonstrators, Canvassers and Business Solicitors Union (to be registered as an industrial union) to Baddeley, 18 February 1931; ‘Commercial traveller’ to Baddeley, 1 March 1931 (did not give name for fear of dismissal); H. Paterson, Secretary, NSW Taxi Owners & Drivers’ Union to Baddeley, 3 March 1932.


23. NSWPD, vol. 125, p. 1759, Baddeley, 10.3.31; SCICAB, Report, p. 25.


Intersections of gender and class: female employers and self-employed workers in interwar Queensland

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Using a case study of interwar Queensland, this paper examines white female employers and self-employed women, groups whose role in the economy rarely attracts sustained attention from historians. After offering a brief explanation for this lack of attention, the paper explores four aspects of the experiences of these women: the types of businesses they operated, how and why they acquired those businesses, the income they generated, and the relations between female employers and their staff. All four aspects demonstrate the central influence of gender, but they also suggest a degree of flexibility in the gendered patterns of economic activity and female proprietors’ ability to benefit from that flexibility.

Yet another successful woman garage proprietor – Mrs V. Holland, of Bowen Bridge, Q. She started with a trifling roadside petrol station, which in three years she has expanded to such an extent that a big modern building is now in course of erection to house her business. 1

Mrs Holland was one of several thousand women in Queensland in the interwar period who operated her own business. She is representative of a group of Australian women whose role in the economy as employers and self-employed workers rarely attracts sustained attention from historians. Yet taking Mrs Holland and her peers seriously, enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the intersections of class and gender, extends our appreciation of the gendered nature of the economy, and highlights some of the opportunities as well as the restrictions which shaped the working lives of a group of women whose relationship to the economy diverged from majority experience. It also prompts consideration of why, with a few important exceptions, neither labour nor feminist historians have evinced much interest in female proprietors in Australia. After offering a brief explanation for this lacuna, this paper explores four aspects of the experiences of white women in interwar Queensland who were employers or self-employed workers: the types of businesses they operated, how and why they acquired those businesses, the income they generated, and the relations between female employers and their staff. All four aspects demonstrate the central influence of gender in a society in which gender was a primary axis of power, but they also suggest a degree of flexibility in the gendered patterns of economic activity and female proprietors’ ability to benefit from that flexibility.

Female proprietors in labour and feminist historiography

While some studies of particular occupations recognise female proprietors as well as employees, Australian historiography on businesswomen tends to be notable for its omissions rather than its inclusions. 2 These omissions are particularly glaring for the twentieth century. 3 Although there is an expanding body of work that analyses white women who employed domestic servants, especially Aboriginal servants, other female employers and self-employed workers are rarely considered. 4 With the notable exception of Jill Julius Matthews’ examination some two decades ago of white women who earned money in the informal economy, there has been little substantial appraisal of self-employed women or female employers as members of distinct groups with particular relationships to the economy. 5 Instead, such women appear as fleeting and/or as interesting and exceptional individuals, in histories of businesses and in biographical dictionaries. 6

This lack of attention derives from problems relating to available sources and from the research preferences of Australian labour and feminist historians. Many of the commercial operations operated by women were small-scale, were frequently run from home, and have not generated extant records. Matthews writes that ‘the women would rarely declare themselves as workers for any census or survey purposes; they paid no tax’. 7 The extent and variety of information on white female employees in such sources as government, trade union and Industrial Court records do not exist for female employers.

Additionally, female employers have tended to fall through the gaps of labour and feminist historiography. Notwithstanding occasional calls for detailed examination of employers as well as employees, labour historians, understandably, have usually been more interested in workers than in bosses.
Feminist historians have tended, again understandably, to concentrate on women’s lack of power in the past. Certainly, feminist authors have emphasised concepts of difference and diversity in their explorations of women’s histories, and analyses of the relations between Aboriginal domestic servants and their white female employers have demonstrated the power that some white women could exercise. White women who employed workers in commercial ventures or who achieved a measure of independence through self-employment, however, remain neglected topics.

Women like Mrs Holland were a minority in interwar Queensland and, indeed, Australia. The nature of surviving documentary sources makes it difficult to develop a definitive interpretation about them and some of the conclusions in this paper are tentative. Given variations in economic trends in different Australian states in this era, including the relative importance of primary industry versus the manufacturing sector and differences in unemployment levels, the findings of this paper, with its case study of Queensland, may not be easily transferred to other states. Yet the existence of Mrs Holland and her peers serves not only as a reminder of the diversity of women’s experiences in the economy but also emphasises women’s differential access to power and the interpenetration of gender and class identities and relations.

Non-Aboriginal women and their businesses

The Commonwealth Censuses are major sources of information on non-Aboriginal women’s roles as employers and self-employed workers but they leave some questions unanswered. In 1921 the Statistician commented that ‘the subject of occupation opens a wide field for investigation, and presents more complexities than any other subject that comes within the scope of a Census’. In that year, respondents selected from the categories of employer, working on own account (not employing others), assistant (not receiving wages), wage-earner, out-of-work and not applicable; the last category included dependents of breadwinners, persons of private means who were not in business and pensioners. The 1933 Census adopted some different terminology but otherwise retained and refined the categories from 1921, distinguishing between full-time and part-time wage earners and adding a section for apprenticed wage earners. Neither the 1921 nor the 1933 Census recognised out-workers or sub-contractors as distinct categories, nor did they include questions about individuals’ previous grades of occupation, complicating any attempt to track the movement of individuals across occupational categories, although it is probable that the Great Depression prompted some unemployed wage-earners to reinvent themselves as self-employed operators.

Women constituted almost half of the adult population of interwar Queensland but, according to the 1921 and 1933 Censuses of the Commonwealth of Australia, only about 10 per cent of employers and self-employed persons. Even allowing for the under-estimation in the Censuses of the numbers of female proprietors, women were far less likely than men to own commercial ventures. Of the nearly 55,000 women recorded as employees, employers and self-employed workers in the Queensland economy in 1921, just over one in ten belonged to the latter two categories. Not surprisingly, far more men and women were employees than employers or self-employed workers, although within particular occupational classifications, notably music teaching and agricultural pursuits, the number of female business owners exceeded the number of female employees.

The Commonwealth Censuses underestimate the number of women who operated commercial enterprises. Not all women engaged in small-scale self-employment were counted as self-employed, especially those women who defined themselves primarily as mothers and wives, and the Censuses largely overlooked the informal economy in which both men and women participated. There were also businesses which women effectively operated but which were nominally owned by their husbands or other male relatives. Jessie Rosina Grant managed Mandalay Farm in northern Queensland in the mid-1920s, prior to and after her husband’s death, before her son assumed control of the farm. Instances of women operating their male relatives’ commercial ventures may have been particularly likely to occur in the post-World War I period, owing to the inability of some physically and psychologically damaged veterans to resume control of their businesses.

The businesses which white women commonly operated included those based on such traditionally ‘female’ skills as dressmaking, millinery and cooking. Typical of these commercial ventures were fashion boutiques, beauty salons, cafes and small stores, including grocery shops. Women owned and managed boarding houses, private hospitals, nursing homes and hotels. They also worked as
self-employed private teachers of music, drama and dance. Some female authors, artists and performers, and some craftswomen were self-employed.\textsuperscript{12} White women often ran businesses that required skills which they could acquire through their roles as wives, mothers, daughters and/or employees. This association occurred because women were likely to establish businesses in which they could exercise skills which they already possessed. It also reflected broader societal assumptions about the types of work and sectors of the economy appropriate for women, regardless of whether they participated in those sectors as employees, self-employed workers or employers. As a result, such businesses had domestic associations and tended to exist in sectors of the economy in which white women also participated as employees. This may have encouraged acceptance of white women as proprietors of businesses while simultaneously reinforcing assumptions about the areas of the economy in which they belonged.

Dressmaking, one of the businesses most commonly owned by women, conforms to the characteristics outlined above. Women owned almost one-third of the new factories that were registered in Brisbane in 1931. The majority of these female-owned factories were small-scale (in Queensland a factory contained two or more individuals) and fell into the categories of dressmaking, hemstitching, millinery and clothing, areas in which women could acquire the necessary skills for these pursuits through their role in the home, schooling, apprenticeships and employment.\textsuperscript{13} Women were numerically dominant in certain types of businesses, including dressmaking. In 1933, 1168 women owned dressmaking establishments in Queensland compared with just 11 men and, despite men’s dominance in other areas of the clothing trade, women constituted nearly 55 per cent of employers and self-employed workers in the 1933 Census category of ‘manufacture of articles of dress’.\textsuperscript{14} Advertisements for fashion clothing shops and beauty salons suggest that there was also a preponderance of women in these areas.\textsuperscript{15} The majority of proprietors of boarding and lodging houses were female, with women constituting 87 per cent of that Census category in 1933.\textsuperscript{16}

The commercial ventures of dressmaking establishments, dress shops and beauty salons were characterised by a confluence of female proprietors with a mainly female clientele. The provision of services for women constituted a significant proportion of the businesses owned by women. This confluence parallels the presence of female employees of department stores in ‘female’ departments. Gail Reekie’s analysis of the necessity for those stores ‘to maintain sexual propriety by employing women assistants to sell women’s goods to women’ may be applied to enterprises in which the female owner had direct contact with the commodity and the consumer.\textsuperscript{17} There was a pattern, although somewhat imperfect, of gendered distinctions in the production, sale and consumption of certain goods.

Although white women who were self-employed or employers tend to have been clustered in particular types of commercial operations, they owned businesses in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the Queensland economy in the interwar period. A minority of women were present in industries which traditionally had been, and during the interwar period remained, mostly male-controlled. In 1933, for example, the 3073 women who owned grazing properties, farms, market gardens and apiaries in Queensland represented nearly 6 per cent of business owners in the state’s agricultural, pastoral and dairying industries.\textsuperscript{18} Amongst the small number of women who entered the medical and legal professions, some ran their own practices alone or in partnership. By 1933, 15 female doctors were in private practice. The solicitor and barrister Katherine McGregor was senior partner in a Brisbane law firm during the 1930s. A female pharmacist, Betty Colwell, was a partner in and subsequently became the manager of a Brisbane firm of chemists.

White women also worked as garage proprietors and motor repairers, stock and station agents, and butchers. One woman was a road-building contractor in Innisfail; another was the proprietor of the Gulf News. Individual women established themselves respectively as a furrier, a self-employed bullock driver, a saddler, a professional angler and a mail carrier contractor. In 1933 an Australian Woman’s Mirror reporter visited the north Queensland gold fields and found 62 women working as self-employed gold miners and prospectors, either independently or in conjunction with their husbands.\textsuperscript{19} The presence of women as gold prospectors offers one example of the wide range of economic activities undertaken by white women in rural Queensland. In part, the breadth of those activities reflected the existence of commercial operations peculiar to those regions, such as pastoral properties. It also indicates some flexibility in the occupations deemed appropriate for white women in rural areas.
When a woman entered a male-dominated industry, however, she did not necessarily pose a major challenge to traditional gender roles, particularly if she entered that industry to replace a male relative. Julie Matthaei argues that in the United States such women ‘were not destroying the sexual division of labour, or even challenging it; as widows, daughters, or sisters, they were fulfilling their womanly obligation of replacing an absent or deceased male family member at the helm of the family business’.  

**Acquiring a business: how and why**

Inheritances and family connections enabled some white women to acquire control of commercial ventures while others began their own businesses with very little capital. Mrs Laura Duncan inherited Mooraberrie Cattle Station in far western Queensland from her husband in the early twentieth century. She managed the property with her three daughters until World War II, when her eldest daughter assumed responsibility for the station. Miss Eva Rosenstengel became governing director of the Toowoomba furniture firm, Rosenstengels Ltd., in the mid-1920s. She was appointed on the recommendation of her father who was the former director, and she had previously worked in the firm as his assistant. Miss Ellen Barry became perhaps the only female owner of a bullock driving business in Australia in the 1930s when, at the age of 18, she succeeded her father on his death. Having previously worked for her father, she possessed the skills necessary to continue the venture.

Other women owned businesses in conjunction with their husbands. Mr and Mrs Pritchard were joint proprietors of the Ascot Riding and Driving School in Brisbane in the 1920s. Some women established profit-making activities within the context of their husband’s or father’s existing business, thereby avoiding the need for initial substantial capital. In 1936 the *Australian Woman’s Mirror* reported on an unnamed Queensland woman who had established a poultry raising business on her husband’s wheat farm, and subsequently persuaded him to buy 400 head of sheep for her. Such women could enjoy a degree of financial independence, although they probably remained subject to their male relatives’ acquiescence to their activities. Moreover, the women’s profits could be absorbed by their male relatives’ businesses. The unnamed Queensland woman began her commercial activities in order to augment her husband’s diminishing income during the Depression.

The businesses which white women acquired through family connections included large enterprises such as pastoral properties. By contrast, many of the businesses which women themselves began did not require extensive financial resources. White women’s roles in the home, the low wages they often received as employees, the temporary nature of many white female workers’ participation in the workforce, and a tendency for sons rather than daughters to take over family enterprises, militated against women acquiring substantial start-up capital. Most of the businesses owned by white women were small-scale. A majority of them did not have any employees, thereby avoiding the costs of a wages bill. Census records indicate that in 1921 only one in five female proprietors employed labour; in 1933, approximately one in three employed labour. Some women ran their businesses partly or fully from their homes, and avoided the expense of renting or buying commercial premises. During the 1930s Depression, for example, a Brisbane woman bought fat from cafes and restaurants, rendered it into soap in a shed in her backyard, and sold it to local stores.

White women who were self-employed differed in their reasons for establishing or assuming control of a business. Although comparatively little information is available on why women chose to run commercial ventures, it is clear that some did so as a result of financial necessity. Others appear to have wanted the independence associated with managing their own business. Some women engaged in small-scale economic activity to supplement an existing source of income. A widow at Monto in the 1930s, who received state aid for her children, earned additional money through poker work, which is the art of burning images and designs onto wood or leather and renting rooms.

Women often appear to have established or assumed control of businesses due to financial necessity caused by the death or incapacitation of the male breadwinner. Alice Pickard took control of and subsequently expanded her father’s service station in Brisbane after his death. She was able to support her mother, sister, brother and herself. As well as assuming the role of breadwinner, some women also fulfilled household duties. Mrs Rose Range, for example, continued to do the housework when...
she took over her husband’s fishing business in Cairns after he was seriously injured. The existence of adult men who were not active in the formal economy and who were partly or wholly dependent on the earning capacity of female relatives represents a departure from traditional gender roles. It also offers support to feminist critiques of those stratification theories which assume that a woman’s class position inevitably derives from that of her husband or father.

Although female business owners included women who were single, married, widowed and divorced, the likelihood of white women entering the Queensland economy as owners of businesses rather than as employees was influenced by marital status. Of the single women actively involved in the Queensland economy in the 1920s and 1930s, almost 94 per cent were employees and only 6 per cent were employers or self-employed. By contrast, approximately one-half of the widows and between one-third and one-half of the married women who were actively involved in that economy owned businesses. The tendency for single women to be employees rather than business owners was partly a consequence of their age. Overall, single women were younger than married and widowed women; they were also more likely to be eligible for apprenticeships and were less likely to have accumulated funds to establish a business. Marital status itself, however, also contributed to the pattern of female participation in the economy.

Married women had fewer opportunities than their single counterparts to be employees because of the legal and social barriers that confronted them. The Queensland public service, for example, refused to employ married women. Especially strong opposition during the Depression to married women’s employment may explain an increase in the proportion of married women business owners from the 1920s to the 1930s. The high proportion of widows engaged in the economy as employers and self-employed workers rather than as employees probably reflects in part the significance of inheritance. An unknown number of widows would either have inherited existing businesses from their husbands or inherited sufficient funds to establish their own commercial operations.

The greater likelihood of married and widowed women operating their own businesses compared to single women also suggests that for the former, small-scale self-employment could offer advantages over being an employee. First, it enabled some married white women to earn an income while remaining essentially within the parameters of wife and mother. In addition, the autonomy derived from ownership of a business could enable a woman to manage more easily the responsibilities of breadwinner and mother than she could as a worker subject to an employer’s control. This would have been of relevance to married, widowed, divorced and deserted women who had children. Not all aspects of self-employment, however, held advantages over other types of employment. A small commercial venture did not necessarily provide financial resources equal to or greater than those which could accrue to some employees. Louise Polzin, a widow, ran a shop at Windera, west of Gympie, during the late 1930s. In 1939 she wrote to her son that ‘it needs all my wits to keep the things going and to keep a roof over our heads’.

**Generating income and exercising power**

The major source of information on the incomes of employers and self-employed workers in Queensland in the interwar period is the *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1933*. Given the impact of the Depression, the Census statistics on income may not have been typical of the interwar years. The 1933 Census records a wide range of incomes among women who were employers or self-employed. It also reveals that a considerable number of female business owners had earned less than the Queensland female basic wage in the year prior to the Census.

The incomes of female employers and self-employed women in Queensland for the 12 months prior to the 1933 Census ranged from no income, including a net loss on their businesses, to earnings of £260 or more. Approximately one-third of female employers and two-thirds of women who described themselves as self-employed are recorded as receiving an income of less than £104; at that time the Queensland female basic wage was £101/8/- . According to the Census, approximately 4 per cent of female business owners had recorded no income for the previous year; a further 11 per cent of female employers and 33 per cent of self-employed women had earned less than £52. Some female employees earned higher incomes than some of the women and men who were employers or self-employed.
As a group, female proprietors earned less money than their male counterparts, a gendered distinction which partly reflected variations in prosperity of the different ranges of business in which men and women were clustered. It may also relate to the fact that, in general, women probably had less access to initial capital than did men. Whereas over 40 per cent of male employers earned £260 or more, less than 30 per cent of female employers were included in this category. Compared with 25 per cent of self-employed men, 37 per cent of self-employed women had earned below £52. Nevertheless, as individuals, a considerable number of female business owners earned more money than their male counterparts. Whereas some female proprietors had earned over £260 in the past year, some male owners of businesses recorded no profit for that period.\(^{33}\)

Some women generated sufficient income to employ staff. Unfortunately, there is little evidence on the relations between female business owners and their staff. Nonetheless, the very existence of examples of white women exercising direct power over men and women in interwar Queensland prompts questions about the ways in which gender and class identities and relations intersect with each other and the extent to which particular dimensions of female employers’ experiences are best understood within a class-based analysis, rather than stressing those employers’ gender.\(^{34}\)

The confluence of female employers, self-employed workers, employees and consumers in particular business sectors suggests that female employers would usually have employed women. Annie Cusack, the proprietor of the Paris Café in Brisbane, employed five female staff including a cook, kitchen maid and waitresses. Other women, however, particularly those who owned grazing or farming properties, employed men. Mrs and Miss Barton, who ran about 4000 sheep on their 14,000 acre property near Charleville in the early 1930s, employed male workers during the shearing season. Some female pastoral property owners appear to have employed white male managers to oversee their businesses and it seems likely that some of these women would also have employed Aboriginal men. Female direction of male labour was not restricted to rural property owners. Phoebe Healy, who ran a messenger service in Brisbane from 1935, employed several messenger boys.\(^{35}\)

**Conclusion**

Not surprisingly, gender emerges as a fundamental category for an exploration of white women as business owners in interwar Queensland. In a society in which gender was a primary axis of power, it was an important factor in the relative scarcity of white women in business and in explaining the types of ventures that women were most likely to establish. The segregation which characterised the formal economy was evident in the clustering of female employers and self-employed workers as well as employees in particular sectors. The incomes of female business owners as a group compared to those of male business owners indicate gendered differentiation in earnings, although analysis of the 1933 Census cautions against a simplistic acceptance of a direct correlation between gender, class and income.

While it is important to recognise that women were a minority among business owners in this era, it is equally important to acknowledge that several thousand women operated commercial ventures and to consider how they negotiated the gendered patterns of power within Queensland society. Many operated in sectors of the economy regarded as being appropriate for women. Some exercised the power that they derived from their class location. That location enabled white female employers in particular types of businesses to hire workers regardless of those workers’ gendered identities and despite the existence of a gendered hierarchy which placed white men above white women.

**Endnotes**

1. *Australian Woman’s Mirror*, 22 March 1927, p. 20


7. Matthews, Good and Mad Women, p. 162.


11. Notes accompanying the Grant Family Diaries, 79L, James Cook University.


15. This paragraph is based on articles in the Australian Woman's Mirror during the interwar period and Labour and Industry Department, List of New Factories registered during 1931 in the Factories and Shops District of Brisbane, 24 March 1932, A/18998, QSA.


19. This paragraph is based on articles in the Australian Woman's Mirror during the interwar period and Labour and Industry Department, List of New Factories registered during 1931 in the Factories and Shops District of Brisbane, 24 March 1932, A/18998, QSA.

30. The 1921 census recorded 50 per cent of widows and 37 per cent of married women who were engaged in the economy as employers and self-employed workers; the figures for 1933 are 54 per cent and 47 per cent respectively. *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921*, vol.1, pp. 510-11; *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1933*, vol.2, pp. 1122-23.

31. Letter from Louise Polzin to David Polzin, 23 November 1939, Denholm and Polzin Family Papers, JOL OM71-15/2A.

32. Statistics in this paragraph are based on *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1933*, vol.2, pp. 1914-15; *Queensland Year Book*, 1940, p. 270.


34. Here I am interested only in those relationships that existed within a business; the relationships between white women and domestic servants are outside the scope of this paper.

35. ‘Café and restaurant employees’ award – south-eastern district – dismissal of employees – claimed benefits of award’, *Queensland Industrial Gazette*, vol.21, no.3, 19 September 1936, p. 623; *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 26 August 1933, p. 28 and 29 October 1938, p. 43; Central and Northern Graziers’ Association membership list, 1927-41, OM.AD/18/1, JOL.
Assumed but rarely documented: women’s entrepreneurial activities in late nineteenth century Australia

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Women’s paid work and economic contribution to the household and national economy were seldom recognised in public documents in the second half of the nineteenth century in Australia. The discourse of women’s role within the home and family was dominant. In this paper we attempt to uncover women’s entrepreneurial activities in small businesses in a country town. Women’s roles in the hospitality and retail industries are examined and we conclude that, whether through economic necessity or individual preference and choice, women were essential to the financial success of these businesses.

Recognising women’s work

In nineteenth century Australia, as in Britain and elsewhere, the significance of women’s work and economic contribution was downplayed. This results in the lack of recognition of women’s work in official records, including census data, taxation records, civil registrations, arbitration proceedings, and all other methods of control of the mainstream economy. Indeed, in mid-nineteenth century England, ‘at a time when the concept of occupation was becoming the core element in masculine identity, any position for women other than in relation to men was anomalous’. In Australia, ‘denying women’s contribution to the family income became entrenched as a tradition’. This paper is one attempt to redress this lack in the official records by examining the working lives of a handful of women who established their own businesses or made a significant contribution to family enterprises in a small country town.

The principles on which women’s work was categorised by the censuses of the second half of the nineteenth century in the Australian colonies shows the transition of official categorisation of women’s work towards one which recognised individual paid work as valuable but ignored women’s work within the home or in the family enterprise. While the changes in the nineteenth century censuses differed somewhat between the colonies, this model was accepted ‘more decisively’ in the Australian colonies than in Britain ‘with the result that women were regarded as naturally dependent on their husbands, who were the sole legitimate breadwinners’. In NSW the government statistician, Timothy Coghlan, used it as the primary division for employment: ‘the population of a country is naturally divided into two broad divisions – breadwinners and dependents’.

This rationale supported the prevailing view of women as dependents, and reinforced the ideal of ‘the entire separation of love and duty rendered within the domestic circle, as between the wife, husband, and other related members of a family’. For middle class women, the prevailing ideology of ‘separate spheres’ with the mother as the ‘angel in the home’ creating a haven of moral and physical safety for husband and children well away from public life, was a further incentive to undervalue a woman’s contribution, encouraging the label of ‘dependent’. At the same time, a few families were beginning to encourage their daughters to obtain an education and have independent careers, particularly as teachers and nurses.

The Australian colonies went ‘further than the British censuses of 1881 and 1891’ in this regard. Coghlan ‘argued that both women’s contributions to family economies and their competition for jobs lowered the wages of men and the community’s standard of living. A high standard of living and good-quality workmen were found … where men had to support families’. He concluded that ‘the large employment of women in gainful pursuits is not a matter of congratulation’. On the contrary, ‘the condition of a country can in some measure be gauged by the number of such women as are compelled to seek occupations other than in their domestic sphere’. Although women had been engaged in trade and business in the colony from earliest times (for instance, before 1820, one fifth of liquor licences were issued to women) and had worked for wages or on their own account, such activities were later downplayed or ignored as this view of the ideal society took hold. As Matthews pointed out, women came to be regarded as supporting themselves or supplementing their husband’s incomes only ‘as a matter of last resort’.
In the civil registration of demographic events (after 1856) the occupations of women are mentioned only on rare occasions. The data outlined suggests that very few women were perceived officially as having a specific occupation of their own but were differentiated by the occupation of a father or a husband. This suggests that their work was defined by their situations as wives and daughters, and not, as was the case with men, by its relationship to the wider economy. The division of labour within a family was not incorporated into the design of official records. Only the relation of the household to the economy through its male head was recorded. As Davidoff and Hall noted about women in England, women’s identification with the domestic and moral sphere implied that they would only become active economic agents when forced by necessity. As the nineteenth century progressed, it was increasingly assumed that a woman engaged in business was a woman without either an income of her own or a man to support her.

While women’s work was not recognised in the public records, this does not mean that women did not take charge of their lives. Their economic circumstances, skills and location, plus the number of children that they bore and raised, influenced the opportunities that they had. From the few examples that we have uncovered, it is clear that numbers of women took a leading role in commercial activities which supported themselves and their families. Within the constraints imposed on them, they manipulated their opportunities. The task of uncovering their contribution is difficult as it went largely unrecorded and probably unpaid, whether they were occasional or regular workers, behind-the-scenes managers or business owners.

The site for investigating women’s work is the town of Dungog, a small but growing town in the valley of the Williams River, a tributary of the Hunter River on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. The population of the town rose rapidly in the 1880s from 436 at the 1881 census to over 1,000 in 1891, and then more gradually during the next decade. It serviced a rural population dependent on mixed farming, where maize was the main crop covering 70 per cent of the cultivated area, and was grown on 265 holdings, with potatoes, oats and oranges as secondary crops. A few large landowners had extensive holdings and dominated the economic and social life of the district, and others had obtained land under the Selection Acts of the 1860s or the Land Acts of the 1880s, or purchased it. Dairy farming became increasingly important from the early 1890s. In 1899 there were 296 landholders who could be described as farmers, and of these 129 had dairy farms. Of the 140 landholders whose land was entirely given over to crops, many were tenants of the large estates and amongst the poorest in the district.

The local economy was supported by a cornflour mill and two creameries, which accepted the products of local farms and employed a small workforce. In the town, several banks, up to eight hotels, assorted auctioneers and merchants, a growing number of general and specialty stores made for a small but lively commercial centre. Building trades such as painters and carpenters were in evidence as well as those more closely associated with the rural economy such as smiths and saddlers. A weekly newspaper appeared from 1888 while the Centennial Hall, School of Arts, race course, cricket, football and tennis clubs provided for citizens’ recreational and intellectual lives, and several churches served the town and a number of outlying congregations. A cottage hospital was built in 1892 by local subscription. Daily coach services to Maitland and Clarence Town were supplemented by weekly or bi-weekly services to more remoted settlements such as Stroud and Barrington by 1900.

Reconstructing women’s lives

The difficulties in reconstructing the working lives of women on small farms in the second half of the nineteenth century has been discussed in a previous paper. Some understanding of the work they did in dairying, poultry raising and to some extent pig farming can be gleaned from family memoirs and local sources such as advertisements in the local newspaper. A few women owned land and carried on farming in their own right. Evidence of intermittent waged work comes from education files, which also show that providing board and lodging for the school teacher was a source of extra income, as was the sale of eggs, butter or other produce. This is quite apart from women’s contribution to the farm economy of child bearing and rearing, of seasonal work at harvest or at other times, or of housekeeping and production for domestic use (for example clothing, candles, preserves), contributions which are neither reflected in the public record or, for the most part, private sources. Official statistics of rural
production mostly relate to activities which were directed towards the market economy, such as grain production, or which recorded ‘progress’ in terms of fencing and pasture improvement. They ignore those industries of a local or domestic nature, such as poultry rearing or butter making where the women’s labour contributed in large measure to the survival or prosperity of families on small farms.

As noted above, census data provides few clues as to the working lives of women. However hard married women worked on the family farm or in the family business, and however much they contributed to its income, the work they did was defined by their situation as wives and daughters, not by their relationship to the family economy. Civil Registration Certificates provide some clues: the bride’s and groom’s occupation is included on marriage certificates, and the deceased’s occupation appears on the death certificate. However, women’s occupations were almost never included and where they are they are rarely enlightening, for example, the occupation ‘farmer’s wife’ appears on several occasions, while others are simply designated ‘married woman’ or ‘widow’. The information is fragmentary as ‘local records favour men’s role in both enterprise and market relations’.

Probably the mixture of waged labour and home enterprise was, for many families in the town, simply a variation of the family enterprise economy of farm families. Providing regular or occasional services for wages including child care, catering for community events, or care of the sick fell to many married women in Dungog, and would have been seen as just one of the ways in which family members contributed to the family’s survival. Similar claims have been made for low-wage earners in the cities, although some opportunities existed in the cities for women to be employed in manufacturing and office work that were largely absent in Dungog in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Regular paid work as domestic servants or assistants in workshops or retail stores was no doubt common, but there is little direct evidence to explain which women did this work or what their conditions of employment were. Some evidence comes from family histories, themselves dependent on memories and oral narrative. In one family, for instance, the father was a successful tenant farmer, at least two daughters were domestics and one of the sons married a shop assistant. None of these young women continued their employment after their marriage, or at least there is no evidence that they did. One woman is identified on her death certificate as ‘housekeeper’ and another as ‘washerwoman’ but such fragments of information are more tantalising than helpful. Such women did not advertise in the newspaper, their occupations were omitted from official documents, and their working lives remain hidden from view. If others were engaged in illegal activities, the lack of police or court records for the area makes it impossible to locate them. It is possible, though, to reconstruct some details of the lives of a few women, using newspaper advertisements, obituaries published in the local press and civil registration data.

The hospitality industry

An important area of employment for respectable women in small towns was in providing hospitality. Here they moved from private to public sphere on a constant basis. Clare Wright has argued for a better understanding of the role of women in the Australian hotel industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Noting the lack of scholarly recognition of female publicans despite their relatively large numbers, she considers that much that has been written about hotels has favoured masculinist interpretations of its role in society, and feminist historians like Marilyn Lake have ‘set up a hostile opposition between powerful men in hotels and vulnerable women at home’ and has posited the hotel as ‘anti-home’. This, Wright argues, ‘has clouded the reality that public houses were the domiciles of not only the publican but also his/her immediate family, extended family, lodgers and staff’. The hotel provided a public meeting place but was also a private home to the publican’s family and a home-from-home to travellers.

Many functions of the hotel were essentially domestic in nature and an accepted part of the female role: cooking, cleaning, laundry, offering hospitality. A female publican was thus able to work within the current model of feminine orthodoxy, while earning money and acquiring status at the same time. Moreover, hotels were not always purpose built, and resembled private homes in many respects, especially in the country. The distinction between the space used by the publican as his family home, and that occupied by paying guests, was often blurred. In this context, there was no clear point of demarcation in the architecture of the public house, nor was there between domestic and economic life.
While Wright concentrates on women who were licensees of public houses, she also acknowledges that women could be informal partners with their husbands in managing hotels, or could work in them as members of the publicans’ immediate or extended family. Here is the same dilemma faced by women on farms: women’s work is assumed but rarely documented.

In Dungog, only one woman appears as a publican in her own right, but what little we know of Jane Sheridan’s life may shed some light on other women’s work in hotels. John Sheridan brought his young bride, Jane, to Dungog in the late 1870s. Most likely they were accompanied, or soon joined, by John’s daughter and son (by a previous marriage) and Jane’s sister. He built the Farmers’ Home Hotel in 1881, and remained its licensee until he died in 1903. He is listed as owning 32 acres in 1885 and in 1893 he advertised a cottage to let in Dungog. The Farmers’ Home Hotel was a well known and respected establishment. It was used for meetings such as the Agricultural and Horticultural Association, and there are occasional references to ‘Sheridan’s rooms’ as a venue for community events, but Sheridan did not often advertise in the Dungog Chronicle. When he did, it was to boast of ‘good accommodation for man or beast, excellent table and unsurpassed paddocks’. At his death, Jane was 38 years old. He left money, furniture and stock-in-trade to his wife and daughter, some shares to his sister in Ireland, and his real property – the hotel, its paddocks, a cottage in Myles St, Dungog and other property – to be held in trust for his daughter and grandson.

Evidence for Jane’s involvement in the management of the hotel is scant: on the public record two advertisements for servants for the hotel provide the only clues. However, her death certificate identifies her as a hotelkeeper, and an obituary in the Chronicle describes Jane as the proprietress of the Farmers’ Home Hotel, following the death of her husband two years before. The obituary acknowledges that she and her husband built the hotel, and describes her role as hostess in glowing terms. She was, the newspaper declares, known for her kindness and hospitality. She was ‘esteemed for a disposition that was amiable, homely, and kindly’. Long before she became licensee on her husband’s death, Jane Sheridan was an integral part of the Farmers’ Home Hotel. She looked after her guests, offering friendship and food; she hired the servants and supervised the housekeeping. Just as women licensees could achieve financial independence and social esteem without transgressing the conventional expectations of women as nurturer and homemakers, so this licensee’s wife shared both the work and the prestige of the hotel, contributing her skills to the success of the business, even though her name did not appear above the door.

If it is possible to uncover, albeit obliquely, something of Jane Sheridan’s working life, that of her sister, Miss Lucy Tester, provides a different challenge. Lucy was Jane’s ‘life-long companion’ and continued at the Farmers’ Home hotel after Jane’s death, although it was her brother-in-law, George Lloyd, who became licensee for a time after Jane Sheridan’s death. Eventually the license was revoked, but Lucy continued to run the premises as a boarding house up until her death in 1929. While there is no specific evidence to support it, logic suggests that Lucy continued in a role that had become familiar to her in her long years living with her sister and brother-in-law. After her death she was described as a remarkable woman. ‘Despite her years she continued with the boarding house, doing all the work and battling along with a smile, and the determination not to leave the old home until death claimed her’. Here are two working women, sisters, who seem to have taken an active role in running a successful hotel and boarding house, but whose working lives can be more guessed at than thoroughly documented.

Jane Sheridan and Lucy Tester were not the only women involved in providing hospitality in Dungog and surrounding areas. Again the evidence is frustratingly fragmentary. Mrs E. Errington advertised her Temperance Hotel, Dungog in the Chronicle regularly from 1888 to 1891. In November 1891 the goodwill and ‘fast furniture’ were offered for sale and Mrs Errington disappeared from view. Other publicans’ wives remain shadowy figures, but as the licensee was required by law to reside on the premises, we may assume they shared the same blurring of the boundaries between public and private life and work as is evidenced by Lucy Tester and Jane Sheridan. Certainly Mrs Robson, wife of publican Joseph Robson, was known for her ability in catering for large events.

Private boarding houses were another source of work for women, often as proprietors in their own right, and again often straddling the divide between the public and private aspects of their lives. Travelling with a wagon load of oranges and home cured bacon from Bendolba for sale at Paterson in the late 1880s, the Shelton brothers had an ‘overnight stop at the wine saloon and boarding house known as Bird’s Inn, run
by the late Ellen Bird’. Among those whose names appear in advertisements in the local paper are Mrs Redman, who also had a local reputation as a nurse. Mrs P.F. Callaghan advertised Millview House as a boarding house in 1898. According to family records, in 1886 George and Mary Shelton ‘leased a hotel building on the Fosterton Road, Dungog, where for the next six years they conducted a boarding house’. However, when it was advertised in the Chronicle, only George’s name appeared.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century dentists advertised frequently in the Chronicle, and included their traveling schedule to small communities. Hence Mrs McNevin at (illegible), Mrs Cox at Monkerai, Mrs Chisolm at Barrington and Mrs Crick at Stroud made their premises available as temporary dental surgeries for Wells Bros, whose representative made monthly visits. It is likely that they also accommodated the dentist and his assistant, and probably took in other boarders on a regular basis. At Booral, Eliza Jane Carnell was already well known for her boarding house when she obtained a Colonial Wine license in 1896. She was at that time aged about 53, recently widowed and the mother of seven, the youngest 16 years old.

Education records show that families often took in school teachers as long-term boarders and that this was often an important supplement to a meager income derived from farming or farm-related trades. The additional work of cooking and laundry fell to the woman, for whom running a boarding house was an extension of her domestic duties. This regular income was essential in many poor farming families and a useful addition for many more, but such arrangements could be fraught with difficulties for both the boarder and the host family. Conditions were often cramped, primitive and uncomfortable, so that there was little room, literally and figuratively, for privacy on either side. This occasionally led to open conflict between the teacher and the woman in whose house she boarded.

The women who offered space to traveling dentists were, like those who accommodated school teachers, most likely contributing their earnings to a family economy, but while they were unseen by official eyes, they attained a certain status in their tiny communities. Again, in these establishments, the boundaries between women’s working lives and their domestic lives is fluid and complex. Guests were accommodated in a physical and social space which was often shared with family members and in these women’s lives there was no clear distinction between public and private spheres. Some, like Miss Tester, achieved economic independence by fulfilling a role that was at once public and private, but many more performed the same functions in families where their roles as wife, mother and worker were intertwined.

The retail industry

The distinction between public and private lives is perhaps clearer when we enter the retail arena, but here, too, the close connection between family business and public business is evident. General stores provided the necessities, and some simple luxuries, for local people, very few of whom could be described as wealthy. In the last decade of the century, when the population was increasing more rapidly, some specialty stores also opened. Women were constantly appealed to as consumers of the latest fashions or the best and cheapest household goods. Many took their eggs and butter to one of the stores for sale or to exchange for other goods. A few women were also active as storekeepers and retailers.

The most longstanding woman shopkeeper in Dungog was undoubtedly Eliza Dark. Evidence for this comes from country guides and almanacs published in the second half of the century which are the main source of information about the commercial life of Dungog before 1888 when a weekly newspaper was founded. In 1851, 1861, 1868 and from 1874 to 1880 Eliza’s name was listed in various almanacs as a store keeper. By 1884 Eliza’s name had disappeared from the almanacs, and was replaced by that of H.C. Dark, her son. Eliza migrated from England as a young woman and married Stephen Neate Dark in 1841 in Sydney. She had eight children, probably all born at Clarence Town, some 20 miles from Dungog, where Stephen had a flour mill. S.N. Dark is listed as auctioneer at Dungog in 1867, but his occupation is given as ‘miller’ on his death certificate. The Maitland Mercury carried an advertisement in February, 1861, announcing the sale of the flour mill at Clarendown. Dark then moved to Dungog where he was a storekeeper. When he died in January 1872, the Mercury noted that ‘his ailments had kept him to his room for more than two years, and for a longer period than that he had been incapacitated for any active part in worldly affairs’. He was remembered, however, as an energetic businessman and sometime Member of Parliament. He was 57 years old when he died.
Eliza is listed in the *Australian Almanac* as a storekeeper from 1868, four years before her husband’s death. At that time she was in her early forties, with a grown family (her youngest child was 15) and a wealth of life experience to draw on. Presumably, Eliza continued to manage the store at Dungog, probably with the help of her children, for the next ten years or so. Her eldest son, Stephen W., settled in Clarence Town, where he is listed as a storekeeper from 1875. Sometime after 1880, Eliza Dark must have handed the reins of her Dungog business to her youngest surviving son, Henry Charles. Meanwhile, another son married the daughter of a prominent Dungog family and became involved in that family’s business. Eliza died suddenly in 1896, aged 71, of a stroke.

When Eliza died, the *Dungog Chronicle* printed a long obituary, in which it described her late husband as a storekeeper, but made no mention of her working life. She was characterised as ‘a good mother and a thorough Christian lady’. Conclusions about Eliza’s life must be speculative. From her obituary and that of her husband, it is clear that she and her family were respected and prominent citizens of the Dungog area. Her husband’s tenure as Member of Parliament and her son’s position in the public life of Dungog (as Mayor, member of the Agricultural and Horticultural Show Committee, Hospital Committee) would alone have ensured that Eliza was well known in the community and that her death would not pass unnoticed. Her children had in turn married respectable middle class spouses and continued to own and manage prosperous businesses. Eliza’s life would have been immeasurably different from that of many working women of her generation, for instance widows who eked out a living taking in laundry or seeking casual work on farms. When she was widowed, her children were already self-supporting or nearly so, and she was already an experienced business woman. Solid evidence of her working life is notable for its absence, but if the *Maitland Mercury’s* correspondent is to be believed, her husband was incapacitated for some years before his death, perhaps explaining why her name appears in the almanacs as ‘storekeeper’ from an early date. As a widow, the store continued to bear her name, and it is probably safe to assume that she was the prime mover, even if her adult children also worked there.

It seems logical that her sons Stephen, Henry and Albert all helped in the store until Stephen left to become a storekeeper in Clarence Town and Albert married, leaving Henry to take over the Dungog store when he was ready. As for her daughters, there is no evidence at all of their working lives. If this is the pattern, it is not surprising that Eliza was praised as a mother, having taken on the role of businesswoman out of necessity and remained at its head until her sons and daughters were established in their own lives. In the absence of business records and judging only by the success of the enterprises Stephen and Henry ran, she had equipped them with business skills and provided a capital asset on which to build. For the Darks, the opportunities were greater than for many other families in the district, but Eliza’s life shows persistence in retaining and extending her wealth in order to see her children with businesses and families of their own.

Gerard Bouchard has posited a model of ‘family reproduction’ common to frontier areas, where families, typically with a large number of children, are able to make use of plentiful land to acquire and expand their holdings, making provision for all the children (who have contributed their labour to the establishment of a family farm) so that family property is transmitted in a number of stages, whether directly, by transferring land or acquiring more land in the same district, or by providing resources for children who migrate to other areas. The Dark family were never property owners, but there are similarities in the way an apparently close-knit family, headed during its most crucial years by the widow Eliza Dark, was able to transmit their material assets and social standing to adult children, who could take advantage of the opportunities presented by a growing economy and an expanding population.

Less is known about other women who kept shops in Dungog. Before the late 1880s, when a growing population made for increased consumer demand, there was probably little room for specialty shops. One of the first was undoubtedly Mrs Emily Jane Kelly, who advertised the opening of her shop in Dowling St, the main commercial thoroughfare, in 1889. She sold gift items, toys, stationery, confectionery and fruit. She later advertised her range of Christmas cards and picture frames. Her husband George offered his services as a professional photographer from the same premises. Mrs Kelly advertised her wares from time to time, adding tobacconist’s lines and fishing tackle to her array of goods for sale. Her fifth and last child, Edie was born in 1897 and so for some years Mrs Kelly juggled family and business responsibilities.
Mrs E.A. Collins had a general store a short time, advertising her Dungog Cash Store in 1897 and 1898 with offers of the highest prices paid for eggs and poultry. However the venture does not appear to have been an unbridled success. Later Mrs Collins advertised that she had commenced business as a dressmaker. Mrs Bradfield opened her millinery in 1899 and advertised regularly until June of the following year. Judging by Skillen and Walker’s heavy advertising for millinery at around the same time, business may have been a struggle for Mrs Bradfield. About these last two women there is no further information available, so the reasons for the success or failure of their retail enterprises, and the skills and motivation they applied to them, are lost to us.

A small handful of women advertised in the Chronicle from time to time as dressmakers. Mrs Brown had a shop in the main street, and a dressmaker was employed at W.H. Green’s general store at the end of the decade, but Mrs Collins, Miss Newell and Mrs Cooke appear to have worked from home. For these women, too, the physical and social boundaries of their working lives and domestic lives were fluid. Other women were no doubt occupied in commerce or industry, but their work remains hidden from public view. Not every business would have found it necessary or desirable to advertise in the Chronicle, and no doubt many services were carried out without the need for public announcements. In a town of 1,000 inhabitants, word of mouth was probably the best advertisement.

Conclusion

It was not only women on farms for whom the boundaries between production for profit and production for family were hard to define. For some, like Eliza Dark, the balance of responsibility shifted between child rearing and other activities as the years of child-bearing were left behind. Mrs Cooke had two daughters old enough to have been trained as dressmakers. Eliza Carnell was similarly a widow with a grown family. Others, like Jane Sheridan and Lucy Tester, were childless, or, like Annie Robson, wife of publican Joseph, had smaller families than average. But Emily Kelly managed a small shop and a family of small children simultaneously, and we know little about the family structure of other women whose working lives have been partially uncovered. What is common to most of these women is the blurred boundaries between the public and private parts of their lives. Work, including paid work, took place in the same geographical space and was often indistinguishable, or nearly so, from their household duties. Keeping a shop, hotel or boarding house was just an extension of the woman’s domestic role. So ‘the entire separation of love and duty rendered within the domestic circle, as between the wife, husband, and other related members of a family’ was a construct not supported by the little we can re-construct of the lives of these women.

Endnotes

4. The complexity of interpreting census data and women’s labour has been examined elsewhere but suffice it to say that comparison between censuses is difficult. See F.L. Jones, ‘Occupational Statistics Revisited: The Female Labour Force in Early British and Australian Censuses’, Australian Economic History Review, vol. 27, no. 2, 1987, pp. 56-76.


17. For example, Dungog Chronicle, 7 May, 1901.


30. Ibid., p. 62.


32. Dungog Chronicle, 1900.

33. Last Will and Testament of John Sheridan, a copy of which is reproduced in Dawes, Shelton Story.

34. Dungog Chronicle, 21 April 1891.

35. Ibid., 19 May 1905.


38. Ibid., 23 August 1929.

39. F.L. Errington was a painter and glazier in Dungog. He continued to advertise until April 1894. Dungog Chronicle.


41. See, for example, civil registration of births where Mrs Redman is frequently a witness, that is, she was present at the birth.

42. Dawes, The Shelton Story, p. 49, illustration; Dungog Chronicle, 7 January 1890.

43. Dungog Chronicle, 3 August 1897.


45. Index of Births Deaths and Marriages.


48. Maitland Mercury, 2 February 1861.

49. Ibid., 16 January 1872.

50. The Australian Almanac for the year 1868.

51. In 1879 H.C. Dark, aged 26, married Mary Ann Wade. He erected new premises and expanded the store, dying unexpectedly in 1901 at the age of 48. (Dungog Chronicle, 24 September 1901).

52. Albert was married to Isabella Abbott at Wingham in 1884. He died at Port Macquarie in 1928.


54. Dungog Chronicle, 26 February 1889.

55. Ibid., 6 December 1892, 21 December 1895.

56. Ibid., 30 December 1898.

57. Ibid., 9 November 1897, 10 March 1899.

58. Ibid., 19 August 1902.

59. Ibid., 10 March 1899.

'You could go to the Trades Hall and meet organisers": labour precincts and labour women in interwar Sydney

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This paper analyses spatial influences in Sydney on labour women’s interwar industrial activism and strategic networks with labour and non-labour women. By referring to physical space and place, including to the Trades Hall, transport and streets, it shows how they used these spaces to reinforce their organising within the predominantly male world of Sydney’s labour movement.

This paper is part of my larger study on women’s trade union organising in interwar Sydney, which focuses on the lives and industrial strategies of women who were union organisers, or were otherwise activists in the labour movement. That study investigates their union involvement, organising strategies and connections with other activists between 1917 and 1942, and particularly in the 1920s. These were industrially active labour women who organised collectively, creating and harnessing occupational, ideological and social networks as a strategic foundation to their professional activism. These networks linked a range of organisations and community groups, drawing on the resources of the labour movement and the women’s movement to strengthen women’s agency in unions and workplaces, and in the wider public sphere. They were embedded in the parochial or workplace sphere and were facilitated by the locations, precincts, and specific buildings occupied by the labour movement in the inner city of Sydney. The following analysis explains the spatial influences on the class identities and activist orientations of these interwar women organisers and labour women. I argue that it is essential to examine spatial influences on class and labour, drawing on theoretical frameworks on space and place, and on class to assist this analysis. In this context, spatial references both allude to, and facilitate, the strategies and dialogue of women’s activism. Space provides the context for communication, contact, familiarity and relationships that assert community and facilitate networks.

As Giddens notes, ‘locale’, as well as ‘time’, creates the setting for social interaction. Points of intersection created by space prompt networks in workplaces and amongst workers as residents in towns and suburbs. In this way, space underpins the formation of networks of nominally disconnected people. For the labour movement, space and the built environment not only facilitate these networks, they encourage community. The built environment is a persistent reminder of spaces culturally owned by workers, embedded in local community, and financially controlled by capital. Symbolically and tangibly it embodies class conflict and identity. Class and labour identity are fundamental to interpreting women’s industrial networks, and critical to interpreting the shared motivations and connections of these women. Incorporating spatial influences into class and gender analysis shows how the embeddedness of the networks in the parochial sphere and labour space preserved their class integrity, even in the context of social and strategic collaboration with non-labour women.

Organisers and the relational and spatial bases of class identity

John Shields has described the workplace as ‘an important site for the formation of social identity’. I argue that formation of this identity is not restricted to interaction among workers in a workplace, but includes interaction with those who helped shape the workplace – the trade union organisers – who have a special relationship to workers’ identity. The workplace is a ‘workspace’ that underpins identity and relationships. Even though they did not inhabit their members’ workspaces, organisers were frequent visitors to these sites. As industrial advisers, negotiators and advocates, they influenced labour dynamics and worker self-awareness in the places of work. The presence and influence of women’s organisers was therefore crucial for women workers. This was so because women were often the disadvantaged inhabitants of workplaces: their industrial interests were a low priority for many unions, almost always running second best to the interests of men.
Connections between union members and their organisers, and between organisers and labour activists, were also supported by their shared community identities. These were identities based on their relational connections and awareness as part of a class or community, and on their primary class or community loyalties. Identification with the labour movement and with the working class influenced relationships, and the way connections were made, between organisers from different unions. Analysis of working-class community needs to take account of these relational dynamics as well as spatial influences on the maintenance and nurturing of labour and working-class identity. Spatial factors to be taken into account include physical factors such as residential proximity, neighbourhood street grids, industrial sites and locations and social factors including the significance of workplaces for supporting and defining labour relationships between workers, and between workers and their representative organisations, the trade unions. For Sydney’s workers, that built environment included the streets which unions nominated to delineate organisers’ industrial workplace responsibilities, including the immediate precinct around the Trades Hall. Hence, the phenomenon of trade union consciousness and identity deriving from sites of union activity is directly related to the place occupied for the labour community, both physically and symbolically, by Trades Hall.

Ira Katznelson’s observations on class formation provide two important explanations for the nature of labour women’s activist collaborations and identity. Firstly, their world ‘experience’ was that at times they were more disadvantaged by their gender than by their class affiliation, although each created tensions to which they learned to respond. Secondly, and specific to this paper, their experience of labour’s relationship to capital was affected by the nature of Sydney’s economy and built environment. Interwar Sydney provided particular spaces in which women could operate, and could thus negotiate and confirm networks. This combination of places and networks influenced the ways they related to each other and to men in the labour movement. It affected their industrial strategies and enabled their activism to carry into the public sphere.

Working class sites for labour and community needed to be near public transport services, so that workers could reach their places of employment, their sites for collective action and planning, and their social or community gathering places. This was ensured by the sophisticated and comprehensive transport system established in Sydney by the mid 1920s. The main Central Railway Station had been built in 1906, and tram and bus routes on near by George Street linked to ferries and later to rail at Circular Quay. Extension of the railway into the suburbs began in 1916. Location near the central axis of this system enhanced Trades Hall’s status as the central formal and informal meeting place for the labour movement. Labor, labour and communist women met there. Mary Lamm recalled regular meetings of the Militant Women’s Group, suggesting that the building continued to be important for CPA women even after the ‘class against class’ split saw the Communist Party oppose the ALP and the Labor Council in 1929. Lucy Taksa explores the notion of working class ‘hubs’ of community, applying this particularly to Sydney’s ‘Domain’, until recent years a hub for working class and radical speakers and audiences. The term derives from Simmel’s discussion of hubs of activity, or clusters of locations, which reinforce identity. Just as the Domain was a ‘hub’ of working class activity, Trades Hall was a ‘hub’ for the union movement. Most Sydney organisers worked out of the building, with the site facilitating a network of female organisers and left women. They shared valuable debriefings on issues ranging through equal pay to sexual harassment, and lobbied the New South Wales Labor Council for more practical recognition. In October 1925, for example, The Printer (journal of the New South Wales Branch of the Printing Industry Employees’ Union of Australia, PIEUA or PIEU) noted that the Trades Hall Executive was to be asked to set a room aside as a rest room for Trades Hall Girl employees. With its net of hallways, corridors, linked rooms, and large rooms and small meeting rooms the building encouraged otherwise logistically difficult communications. In this way Trades Hall clearly was an industrial and political hub for the labour movement. So was its surrounding site: workers talked as often of ‘dropping down to Goulburn Street’ (that is, the locality) as of visiting ‘the Trades Hall’.

Apart from the administrative convenience of being centrally located with the bulk of labour movement organisations, many unions had operational reasons for retaining rooms in or near Trades Hall. Proximity to workplaces and to transport was strategically important for each organiser’s portfolio of workplace responsibility. Location near the Goulburn street retail and department stores facilitated familiarity with members’ workplaces for Shop Distributive and Allied Trades Union (SDA) organiser Carmel Nyhan. Trade union records for the PIEUA (NSW Branch) and for the Hospitality, Catering and Restaurant
Employees’ Union (HCREU) show organisers’ responsibilities distributed on an axis of the streets around Goulburn Street, further enhancing the Trades Hall community. The NSW Branch minutes of the HCREU illustrate the importance of location for industrial portfolios. In Sydney, responsibilities were distributed by type of business and then by city street. For example, the Subcommittee allocating work to organisers agreed on 22 April 1925 that street divisions should define city areas of responsibility, and then divided suburban responsibilities along the main transport divisions of railway lines and the Harbour. This allowed liaison with workplaces and members, crucial to monitoring of conditions and tactically useful during industrial action for swift mobilisation. Efficient worksite access meant good organising.

**Women’s labour and working class identity**

Taksa has drawn attention to the need to recognise women’s multiple identities. In doing this she acknowledges Liz Bondi’s insistence that Marx’s thesis of divided identity has little applicability for women, because it neglects the significance of the private sphere on women’s identity formation. As Taksa puts it, the concept of multiple identity ‘highlights the numerous and potentially competing subjective realities that women often experience as result of their indeterminate position vis a vis both public and private spheres’. As she adds, we need to be aware of how such multiple identities shifts in response to changing needs. Labour movement women’s complex networks saw them moving within and between their union communities, their networks of labour and non-labour women, and their social collective. In other words, multiple affiliations and identities came together to meet the demands of their industrial work. The spaces hosting and connecting the communities were critical to this process. Labour organising is highly reliant on the spatial links between labour – for example labour precincts – and working class precincts. The notion of hubs of community reinforcing identity is useful as a way of understanding communities in Sydney’s inner working class suburbs, from Newtown through Ultimo and Balmain – places where workers and their families could live, congregate and easily communicate.

Aspects of the role of labour precincts can be seen through Jack Kavanagh’s diary. Kavanagh was a Boer War veteran and Canadian Communist who arrived in Sydney at the end of World War I and became a leading figure in the CPA. He became a close friend and early mentor to the young Edna Ryan. His diary for 1931 and 1932 identifies meeting sites for the unemployed and communists during the Depression, sites including Newtown Town Hall, Sydney Town Hall, Trades Hall, the Domain, and the Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Alexandria. During 1931 and 1932 he edited and published *The Challenger*, the news-sheet of the Unemployed Workers’ Union (UWM), and addressed numerous meetings for the CPA and the UWM in Sydney’s inner suburbs. The significance of Eveleigh as a site supporting working-class identity is endorsed by former Eveleigh worker and communist Hal Alexander and by Taksa, who notes that meetings at Eveleigh were targeted to ‘support collective action, and also to promote class-consciousness’. Some of the evidence for the labour ‘hubs’ identified for this thesis is also embedded in the trade union reports. The concept is crucial to interpreting women’s separated and linked communities.

Access to the social capital embedded in relationships among members of the Sydney’s interwar working class was strong in the interwar years because the working class in the interwar years had not yet been dispersed into Sydney’s suburban sprawl. Working-class women in the 1920s and 1930s maintained their physical community. This cohesion assisted political and industrial mobilisation, or impetus to collaboration, with the suburbs themselves nurturing other hubs of activity for working-class women. Mobilisation was further facilitated by the connections resulting from involvement in paid work. Thus networks, as highly important channels for communication for working women, were one consequence of enhanced workplace relationships.

Interviewed by Taksa, Edna Ryan described how the docks and maritime workers facilitated international working class networks. These important sites acted as communication channels, with incoming and outgoing workers on ships keeping local workers informed about international events and debates. According to Taksa such evidence shows how networks, linked to working class institutions, ‘reinforced working-class identity and culture both within and beyond national boundaries’. These links are explored in a separate context in her research on Sydney’s Eveleigh railway workshops. As an important and reliable local employer, the site reinforced the social and intellectual cohesion of the working class in surrounding suburbs.
When Ryan discussed her work as a political activist in the 1920s, she spoke about childhood and adolescence in inner Sydney, and the way Pyrmont Bridge was the physical and symbolic link between domestic life and working life for the inner city working class. She experienced this link as part of her childhood because her mother and sisters reached their work in the City by walking across Pyrmont Bridge. The geography of the city was integral to Ryan's remembered working-class childhood identity. Her testimony contributes to evidence that, for Sydney's working class, identity formation in the pre-war and interwar years was particularly grounded in suburbs close to the harbour, which was where sites of industry and employment were concentrated. Harbour-side Paddington remained a working-class suburb at least into the 1950s and Balmain, Glebe, and Annandale, as waterfront locations for timberworks, boatyards and large industrial sites, were home to the working class for two decades after that. Inner city residents and workers maintained a strong sense of place, particularly of the places such as meeting halls and streets, which facilitated the habits of lifetime activism. This awareness infused the dialogue of both Edna Ryan and Labor-feminist Eileen Powell, the one evoking Pyrmont and Ultimo as her childhood suburbs and the other describing Labor activism in Petersham and Stanmore, and in Balmain. Both women also drew attention in interviews to the importance of Trades Hall for their young adulthood.

The issue of multiple working-class identities is informed by Katznelson's observation that 'spatial divisions between working-class and non-working-class residential areas (promoted) the increasing autonomy of working-class neighbourhoods and institutions and thus “the mutual insulation and repulsion of the masses”'. Spatial alienation persisted in interwar Sydney, reinforcing class identity. Solling and Reynolds note that moves to rid Sydney of its inner-city 'slums' began in the interwar years. They observe the impact of bureaucratic condemnation of homes on residents of the terrace house suburbs. Most of these residents were working-class and further outraged when the Labor Daily joined the criticisms, their responses again demonstrating working-class solidarity and community in the inner suburbs. In describing these working class homes as 'slums', the Labor Daily showed how the perspectives of political Labor and the working class could diverge. In attacking developers as the builders of slums and landlords as ongoing profiteers it explicitly deplored the quality of workers' housing. However, by taking this approach the newspaper not only attacked the forces of capital but was also seen to attack the worker's private sphere, the working-class home. Women's domestic and private sphere roles meant that this assault on working class housing was as much a specific slur on women's private space as a broader attack on working class neighbourhoods. Residents were sceptical about 'concerns' over the quality of workers' housing, believing these concerns to be motivated as much by an obsession with civic dignity and appearances as by a genuine concern for the dignity of the worker. Their anger shows how attacks against their space could reinforce working-class identity by inciting collective resistance.

Publicly and privately, place was crucial in facilitating, and in hindering, women's participation in formal and informal groups and their access to networks and mentoring. For both labour and non-labour women activists, mobilisation was enabled not only through personal and professional connections, but also by pragmatic considerations including proximity to other women and meeting places, the physical location of meeting places, and regular social or quasi-social reinforcement. Trade union files show that this applied for industrial as well as political activists. Because family or private sphere demands limited women's opportunity to be involved in public life, accessible locations providing opportunities to meet with other activist women took on both material and symbolic importance as meeting spaces. Scheduling of meetings to fit with women's commitments was important, but so was the positioning of the meeting place, including accessibility by transport from home and/or workplace. Arrangements needed to accommodate children and irregular attendances, and groups needed to promise support, mentoring, education or simply friendship to participants. Two very different city sites meeting these criteria were the Cavalier Cafe in King Street, and the Trades Hall. Others were located in suburbs like Newtown and Balmain. Newtown figures prominently in Jack Kavanagh's records as a hub for socialist and communist social and political gatherings attended by women as well as by men. For Eileen Powell, Balmain was home to ALP activity. Each of these sites could be reached by public transport, facilitating the participation of women both in paid and in unpaid work. King Street, Sussex Street and Newtown were near the major railway and tramway system and to city workplaces. Balmain was accessible by tramway and ferry systems. For labour women who collaborated with organised feminism, Rose Scott's home in Sydney's eastern suburbs was accessible through the city's tramway system.
Workplace proximity to meeting places was critical to effective interaction between members and union officials. Many of the women and girls who belonged to the PIEUA worked close to the Trades Hall, so that their workplaces were close to organisers who needed to carry out industrial inspections and workplace visits. As we have seen, the HCREU exploited Sydney’s street grid to apportion organisers’ portfolio responsibilities. Women as industrial activists could therefore attend meetings and could interact with other organisers and members, either in Trades Hall or in workplace visits. Much earlier, Bertha McNamara’s bookshop had similarly channelled information to the working class and provided labour education. For working women these activities and locations fostered an industrial awareness, reinforcing their militancy at times such as the Depression, when otherwise short-term private need could overrule class principle.

**Trades Hall sites**

Accounts of networks and cooperation, particularly for cross-party or cross-organisational combinations of women, commonly locate that cooperation at particular sites. Location, place and space are factors of ritual and convenience to be considered in analysis of labour movement dynamics, particularly for women. Given the multiplicity of occupations and geographic dispersal of workplaces and home sites, central gathering sites were not only convenient, but were symbolically important for women involved in the industrial and the political sphere. Recognised gathering places facilitated informal and formal meetings, which enabled them to develop approaches to issues important to women. This was apparent in a brief discussion between Muriel Heagney and Edna Ryan in the Trades Hall, when Ryan raised the issue of the family wage with Heagney following a Labor Women’s meeting. These were two women who did not usually work closely on issues: Ryan remembered as a young woman feeling intimidated by Heagney. The substance of the exchange was that the latter rejected the concept of the ‘family’ wage by reminding Ryan ‘There ought to be a rate for the job’. The meeting stimulated Ryan’s evolving position on financial assistance to mothers, a position at odds with much of the labour movement. Hence, this chance meeting facilitated by a labour women’s network within Trades Hall prompted further development in her feminist awareness.

Such instances show how spatial dynamics and buildings are crucial to understanding the community of Sydney female activism in the 1920s. Buildings such as the Sydney Town Hall and the Trades Hall allowed female labour activists, organisers, and union officials to share working accommodation and formal meeting places. Together with the proliferating teahouses and cafes that provided less formal links, these became the spaces in which overlapping social and industrial networks were initiated. This applied particularly to Trades Hall, with its importance stressed by both Edna Ryan and Eileen Powell. This was one place where, as Ryan put it in the conversation providing the title quote for this paper, ‘you always bumped into people’. Powell made it very clear that the Trades Hall was crucial to her political and industrial education. As she remembered in 1997: ‘the ALP and the union had offices in the same (building) Trades Hall … mother used to be in the Trades Hall. … I more or less grew up knowing all the officials, (the) Trade Union people’.

Formal and informal meetings in the rooms and corridors of Trades Hall, together with the shared experience of industrial work, initiated and reinforced the sisterhood of industrial women. This dynamic is in part explained by Taksa when, drawing on Craig Calhoun, she comments that ‘the perception of mutual interests based on the shared experience of everyday activities’ is more likely to promote collective action than the mere existence of common interests unsupported by regular contact. Working in the building gave these organisers an ‘everyday’ occupational link. The Trades Hall corridors could be explained as providing organisers with such shared experience, giving them easy access to other unions and to casual information or debriefing, providing a ‘web’ of contact points to facilitate women’s communication. In 1940 Mel Cashman retired from the PIEUA to become a Commonwealth Arbitration Inspector, and her farewell function testified to the cohesion and durability of labour sisterhood in Trades Hall. It was ‘the Trades Hall girls’, led by shop employees’ organiser Carmel Nyhan and ‘some union officials’, who made a point of attending a women’s gathering in the building to say goodbye: it had been her workplace, and the workplace of many at the farewell, throughout the interwar years.
Labour women needed a flexible approach to place in order to enhance their formal and informal collaborations. For example, because in Sydney women were legally banned from entering hotel bars, they were excluded from the pub culture which was an important focus for informal contact between trade unionists. Being in this way locked out of an important avenue of union collaboration and communication, they needed to secure alternative sites where women could share knowledge between themselves, and also with men. As Edna Ryan remembered, Mockbells coffee shop was one of these sites. Furthermore, buildings designed and built by men were domains organised according to male needs, which deliberately or by ‘accidental’ effect restricted female occupation. Because of this, the women who worked in Trades Hall had to negotiate having the building itself modified to female needs as well as men’s, hence the lobbying for a restroom, noted earlier. Shared purpose and common challenges can generate bonding amongst individuals meeting those challenges. In Trades Hall, women’s responses to exclusion encouraged a sisterhood amongst those using the building. This concept of a sisterhood is supported by Eileen Powell’s evidence. When asked whom she worked with on pay issues, particularly who in Trades Hall would be called on to contribute to particular campaigns, she replied (for) ‘anything to do with women’s welfare, people would tend to come to whoever happened to be handy at the time who was active in the women’s movement’. This describes the broader process of women’s activism in Trades Hall, with working women’s issues seen as the responsibility of female activists, and with those female activists, whatever their union, perceived as linked to the women’s movement.

Trades Hall nurtured significant long-term connections between trade union women and those involved with the ALP and the CPA, as well as others whose business brought them there, such as workers at radio station 2KY, also located at this site in its early years. That one location enabled Eileen Powell to sustain her networks after she resigned from her organising position at the ARU. ‘Others’ who came to Trades Hall as workers included journalists, and industrial roundsmen for the newspapers such as Fred Coleman-Browne (the two later married). Edna Ryan described her friendship with Carmel Nyhan and Mel Cashman in terms showing her own labour networks to have been sustained by this site. Indeed, many of Ryan’s observations relate to these networks: ‘meeting people, never knowing who you might pick up with, particularly of course in Trades Hall in Sydney at that time’. As she explained (about Nyhan) ‘Well, I used to be quite chummy with her, because you could go to Trades Hall and meet organisers’. Hence this site not only strengthened labour women’s networks, but the unions themselves: common location allowed cross-union communication and efficient industrial practice, facilitating effective and informed organising.

**Conclusion**

The concentration of unions in Trades Hall reinforced the ‘sisterhood’ of organisers (and labour women), particularly in the face of male unionists who worked within a labour movement structured around male hierarchies and priorities and saw trade unions as male territory. Beyond that space, individual and social networks were critical resources for interwar women activists and industrial organisers. Network resources included non-labour feminist organisations like the National Council of Women and the Feminist Club which at times specifically addressed the needs of working women, as well as non-working women and girls. Conflict inevitably arose for labour movement feminists because many men (and women) in the labour movement disputed the integrity of that support. This challenged the class loyalties of labour movement feminists, creating crises of decision because, while the political left and labour asserted that feminism was neither political nor pro-worker, feminist ideology and activism was far more ‘pro-woman’ than most labour and Labor institutions. Collaboration was a necessary strategy against the male labour culture which had shaped Sydney’s inner city labour movement locations. Female organisers and labour activists, using the familiarity accorded by their own parochial spaces, resisted the undermining potential of that culture in order to pursue their goals for working women. Ultimately, confronted with obstructionism from labour men and ruling-class bias from non-labour feminists, interwar labour women were reinforced in identity and purpose both by their labour-feminist networks and by the trade union and labour precincts around the Trades Hall in Sydney.
Endnotes

1. Edna Ryan, referring to her networks with trade union women, as a young CPA activist. Interview with author, Canberra 1996.

2. The parochial realm as the workplace or ‘missing link’ between public and private space, first proposed by Albert Hunter, has been further developed by Lofland for urban space. Lyn H Lofland, The Public Realm: Exploring the City’s Quintessential Social Territory, Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1998, pp. 10, 46.


5. For one illustration of this connection see Max Solling and Peter Reynolds, Leichhardt: on the Margins of the City: a Social History of Leichhardt and the former Municipalities of Annandale, Balmain and Glebe. Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, p. 128.


7. For an instance of women’s insistence on their union status in the face of male denial, see Mel Cashman in The Printer, 16 February 1940, p. 23, S353, Printing Industry Employees’ Union of Australia (NSW Branch), Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), ANU.

8. See for example the dynamics suggested by organisers’ reports in The Railways Union Gazette, 1922-24, and in Edna Ryan’s comments on Mel Cashman, Carmel Nyhan, and meetings of working class women in Trades Hall (Edna Ryan, Interview, 14 September 1996).


10. Katznelson, Marxism and the City, p 204.


15. Regarding the Domain, see Tawks, ‘Considering Community’, p. 22.

16. The Printer, 10 August 1925. ‘Restroom’ in that connotation and in that period was more than a washroom, it was a room to which women and girls could ‘retreat’. By this time there were evidently enough women in Trades Hall for them to be able to demand added facilities. Regarding the union acronym, union records commonly refer to the specific form PIEU for State Branches – for example, PIEU (NSW Branch) and to the extended PIEUA (Printing Industry Employees Union of Australia) for the Federated Union.

17. See for example, Jack Kavanagh papers, P12/2/1, NBAC.

18. Executive Minutes 1925, HCREU, T12/1/3, NBAC; For the Printers, see Union list of Master Printers (workplace addresses), as Membership List of Master Printers and connected Trades Association, September 1917, Industrial Files, PIEUA New South Wales Branch, T39/28, NBAC.


25. Jack Kavanagh papers, P12/2/1, NBAC.


30. Ibid.

31. Opened in the 1880s, the workshops employed many members of the same families, over generations, and working class residents of the surrounding suburbs. Taksa, ‘Considering Community’, p. 24.

32. Edna Ryan, Interview with author, Canberra 1996.

33. For discussion of these interwar inner urban housing changes see Spearritt, *Sydney since the Twenties*, pp. 71-76.


36. Solling and Reynolds, p. 192; Spearritt, *Sydney since the Twenties*, p. 73.


38. Edna Ryan remembered that during the 1929 Timber Workers Strike, the Militant Women’s Group delegation travelled by tram to appeal to the Minister. Ryan, Interview, 1996.


40. Kavanagh papers, P12/2/1, NBAC; Sir Frederick Hancock papers, ML mss 772; Eileen Powell, interview, April 1997.

41. Spearritt, *Sydney since the Twenties*.

42. Wotherspoon, *Sydney’s Transport*.

43. Membership List of Master Printers and connected Trades Association, T39/28, NBAC.

44. Ryan, Interview, 1996.

45. Edna Ryan described economic need overruling principle for one of the women in the 1929 delegation: ‘the timber worker’s wife said ‘it’s not the hours we care about it’s the money’. In the face of worsening Depression, the public and class militancy of wives was challenged by their private sphere economic need. Ryan, Interview, 1996.

46. *Ibid*.

47. *Ibid*.

48. Eileen Powell, Interview (2) with author, May 1997; For a listing including some of these sites in Sydney see Terry Irving and Lucy Taksa, *Places, Protests and Memorabilia: The Labour Heritage of New South Wales*, Industrial Relations Research Centre, UNSW Studies in Industrial Relations, no. 43, The University of New South Wales, Kensington, 2002, pp. 45-58, 73-166.

49. Ryan, Interview, 1996.

50. Eileen Powell, Interview (1) with author April 1997.


53. Taksa, ‘Spreading the Word’, p. 81.


55. Powell Interview (1), 1997. The response alluded to collaboration with Labor’s Kate Dwyer.


57. Ryan, Interview, 1996.

58. National Council of Women (NCW) Miscellaneous records 1919-1924 (Professions and Trades of Women Report), MSS CY3054 item 297, Rose Scott Papers, ML.

59. In 1931 Jack Kavanagh described the NCW as ‘a well known anti-working-class organisation’, a remark typifying labour preconceptions. Kavanagh Papers, P12/2/1, NBAC.
‘Liberty ... That’s a lot of bunk!’: the meaning of the 1944 Philadelphia transit strike to black Philadelphia

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This paper examines the meaning of the Philadelphia transit strike of 1944 in which some 10,000 white workers walked off the job rather than accept black promotions to the position of driver. It particularly focuses on two issues: what African Americans thought the strike revealed about the nation’s hypocrisy as it maintained Jim Crow at home while waging a war for democracy overseas and the demands blacks placed on the state to ensure their rights. Ultimately, it argues the strike helps us see more clearly employment discrimination in mid–20th century America and how African Americans responded to it.

George White walked into Independence Hall and looked around. The building was nearly empty and that was good: White wanted no interference with the statement he was about to make. It was all so infuriating, White thought, his brother risking his life in the military while his wife and five children sat at home waiting and worrying. And all the while the white employees of the Philadelphia Transportation Company (PTC) refused to work because African Americans wanted to drive trolleys. Those drivers were ready, White knew, to shut down America’s third–largest war production centre for as long as it took to preserve their racial prerogatives. White must have looked down one last time at the bulky quartz paperweight, cool and heavy in his hand, and then he smashed the rock with all his might into the Liberty Bell. The crash brought the police running. ‘Liberty Bell’, White shouted at them. ‘Liberty Bell. That’s a lot of bunk!’ A few hours later he appeared in court and angrily told the judge that he had struck the bell to call America’s attention to the hateful strike.

The feelings the 1944 Philadelphia transit strike inspired in George White were common to most black Philadelphians. The walkout angered them, but with the nation at war they knew they had a prime opportunity to finally secure the democracy America was fighting for overseas. The fact that the U.S. needed their labour both in the military and in industry strengthened their hand considerably, a fact made plain by the federal government’s reluctant acceptance of A. Philip Randolph’s request to establish a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to combat discrimination in war plants. The government now seemed at least a tentative ally. To African Americans in this new context, the strike clearly revealed the nation’s hypocrisy as it prosecuted a war to preserve democracy while maintaining a Jim Crow state at home. To them, government intervention could change the nature of American race relations, and they demanded that federal authorities support their right to equal employment opportunities. If the government backed them, then the country could be on its way to constructing a more equitable state.

The outcome of the strike, then, mattered not just for the job opportunities it could lead to in the transit industry, it also suggested the kind of nation America could become in the postwar world.

The transit strike, which was one of the longest and costliest hate strikes of the war era, began at 4:00am 1 August, 1944 when the PTC’s nearly 10,000 white workers walked out. Across the city, trolleys, buses, and subway cars sat waiting for drivers who would not come. America’s third largest war production centre, hamstrung by wartime gas rationing, came to a halt. The Frankford Arsenal, Bendix Aviation, and dozens of other plants reported debilitating absentee rates that eventually amounted to some three million lost hours of labour (a fourth of the total). Coming just weeks after D–Day, Rear Admiral Milo Draemel worried the strike could ‘delay the day of victory’.

While the strike had obvious ramifications for America’s war effort, what particularly infuriated African Americans was that white workers struck not for better wages or working conditions, but to prevent black promotions to the position of driver, a job that had been reserved for whites only. African Americans could work for the company, but only in menial positions such as janitor and mechanic. PTC employees were organised in a company union (the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Employees Union – PRTEU) that in negotiations won wages lower than other big cities, no overtime pay, and no paid holidays.
The quid pro quo that made the PRTEU palatable was that union leadership, through its close connections with management, guaranteed white drivers would not face outside, meaning black, competition. As the newspaper *PM* put it, ‘PTC has operated along Southern lines [for years and white workers have] simply accepted the fact that [driving] is a white man’s job, and no Negro is going to get it’. To an extent this was the ‘psychological wage’ David Roediger and other scholars have analysed, ensuring whites sole access to the company’s better jobs and giving them greater security in these years just after the Depression. But while the wage may have been ‘psychological’ in some ways, it also had the material effect of making sure African Americans did the dirty, menial labour while whites occupied the most respected, best-paying jobs. This situation kept the PTC’s labour force divided along racial lines for years, a managerial divide and rule strategy that kept wages depressed and workers focused on race rather than class concerns.

Black PTC employees knew how the company structured its employment as well as anyone and lived with the situation for a time. During the Depression, as many as 500 African Americans were happy just to find work there. But by the start of World War II, black Americans’ attitude toward employment discrimination shifted. The Double V campaign that urged victory over fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home, A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement that that led to the creation of the FEPC, black service in the armed forces, and the general rhetoric about defending democracy in a time of war led African Americans to more openly challenge discrimination. So in August 1941 a group of long time transit workers formed the Committee for Equal Job Opportunity of PTC Employees and asked company president Ralph Senter and PRTEU head Frank Carney to overturn the PTC’s unfair employment system. Both refused, and their stance sparked a two year campaign by Philadelphia’s African Americans to secure equal opportunity at the transit company.

That campaign, which has been detailed in other studies, involved the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Transport Workers Union (TWU – a Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) affiliate), and the FEPC. Of the three groups, the NAACP assumed leadership in the battle. Headed by a new Executive Secretary, Carolyn Davenport Moore, the NAACP worked with area churches and other black organizations throughout fall 1943 to put together protest marches and ‘indignation meetings’ that attracted thousands of supporters. In those protests, black Philadelphians demanded verbally and in petitions that the PTC ‘put into practice the principles of democracy in American life, including employment practices in American industry’. To Moore, the PTC struggle was no different than the war overseas. ‘We are in the front lines in the battle for democracy’, she said, ‘just as much as if we were in the fox holes of the Solomons’, and all of the city’s African Americans had to fight for equality.

While black Philadelphians led the campaign, they could not have won without the support of the Transport Workers’ Union. The TWU, which had several Communists in its leadership corps and advocated non-discrimination among its members, had tried to organise the company in the past. It had always foundered, however, on the racist management–company union alliance. But with wartime contracts making the transit company’s low wages and poor working conditions abundantly clear, the TWU thought it could finally organise the PTC. In a series of meetings the TWU’s James Fitzsimon assured black transit workers that the union would treat them fairly, but that it had to downplay racial equality to win a representation election. The key, Fitzsimon argued, was to convince white workers that the TWU would bring higher wages and better working conditions. Organisers would not deny the union’s stance on racial equality, but they would not promote it either. Throughout the campaign TWU organisers claimed, ‘We want unity in a militant industrial union’, and ‘[Follow us for] higher wages, better working conditions, and genuine collective bargaining’. Race was rarely discussed. Within a few months the TWU earned enough support to carry the PTC representation election in spring 1944. The TWU’s victory and sotto voce support of black rights demonstrated the complexity of white working-class racial views. Some white workers believed racism benefited them, preserving their better jobs and higher pay. Others, particularly with a leftist politics, understood racial divisions fractured working-class solidarity to management’s gain and tried to organise across the color line.

To build on the work of black organisations and the TWU, African Americans next turned to the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The committee had opened a branch in Philadelphia in summer 1943 and received dozens of complaints against the transit company in the first few weeks after the office opened. In response, FEPC chair Malcolm Ross in November met with the PTC and PRTEU and ordered them to halt their discrimination and accept black drivers by the following summer. The PRTEU
balked, and at a public FEPC hearing on December 8 union Secretary–Treasurer Frank Cobourn warned ‘chaos’ would envelop the city if African Americans became drivers. Coming just a few months after Detroit had exploded in a race riot, everyone understood just what Cobourn meant. Ross responded that ‘chaos’ was not inevitable and that the union and company bore responsibility for keeping the peace. The hearing showed black Philadelphians the support the federal government could offer, but many remained unsure the PTC’s white workers would really accept the promotions.8

Their feelings were justified: In the six months before the eight promoted black drivers’ August 1, 1944 start date, racist rhetoric swept the car barns. Fliers produced by the company–backed PRTEU told workers: ‘Your Sons and Buddies that are away Fighting … are being Stabed [sic] in the Back on the Home Front, [by blacks who want to take] All The Jobs and Everything Else that Belongs to the White People’. Another called for ‘a white supremacy movement for the protection of [our] jobs’. Such language goaded white employees into action. On the morning of August 1 they walked out, shutting down the PTC and, by extension, the city. The strike itself lasted only a week, ending when Franklin Roosevelt, primarily concerned about declining war production, sent 5,000 troops into Philadelphia to drive the transit vehicles and had the Selective Service threaten to revoke the draft deferments of any strikers who refused to return. While the strike lasted only a week, for African Americans and white liberals it laid bare the fundamental injustice of the PTC’s employment system and raised crucial questions about the nature and future of black rights in American society.9

Black and white commentators argued from the start that the transit strike offered a prime example of why the U.S. had to buttress the FEPC. The Nation wrote that the strike teaches us that we must ‘give [the FEPC] full statutory recognition, with power to enforce its decisions’. The New York Post added that a permanent FEPC backed by federal law would make white workers think twice about staging future hate strikes. Black commentators agreed the strike proved the need for a permanent FEPC, but expanded their arguments to take on all forms of discrimination. For Arthur Huff Fauset, a local leftist black leader, the transit strike was ‘the test of the FEPC’. ‘The Negro people wait patiently’, he warned, ‘but not too patiently … If there is no equity now … they have even less hope for equity once the war emergency has been safely passed’. Others made the links between the FEPC and black equality even more explicit. ‘Congress’, a leader of the National Negro Congress insisted, ‘must give permanent status … to [the FEPC] and it must adopt legislation to abolish the polltax and end Jimcrowism in all other areas of our social life’.10

For many observers the strike went beyond demonstrating the need for a stronger FEPC to highlighting their country’s greatest hypocrisy. As one man wrote, ‘If the Negro is good enough to die for me on the battlefront, [surely] he is good enough to drive for me in Philadelphia’. To people with this view, backing down in the strike, accepting that certain Americans did not deserve equal treatment, undermined the country’s very principles. An FEPC lawyer argued that acceptance of the strikers’ aims was tantamount to ‘suspending the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights’. ‘Over there’, wrote one woman, ‘where the blood of white and black men flows in a common stream for a common cause – Democracy – they might well ask, where is this Democracy for which we die?’11

Not everyone opposed to the strike held such high principles. Many argued the strike must end because it was damaging the war effort, nothing more. Proponents of this view believed black equality could be ‘negotiated’ in the future, once the war drew to a conclusion. ‘The major imperative is to get the cars, trains and buses running’, wrote the Philadelphia Inquirer. ‘Philadelphians and the national war effort have suffered enough through this … walkout. It must be ended … There will be time [to settle racial matters] later’. Many letters to the editor agreed. ‘Let’s do first things first’, wrote one man. ‘Get our transportation system rolling so our war workers can get to [work] … Discussion … of controversial questions should be postponed until after the war’.12

African Americans dismissed this view, arguing that there was nothing to negotiate. Their country could either live up to its democratic promises or expose itself as the defender of Jim Crow in a war against other proponents of ‘Master Race’ theories. In telegrams to Philadelphia Mayor Bernard Samuel, Pennsylvania Governor Edward Martin, and President Roosevelt, NAACP officials demanded the government ‘stand absolutely firm and refuse to yield to strikers … [because] the American Government cannot afford to yield to mob action [that] negate[s] Democracy’. ‘Mr. President’, one man asked, ‘will we ever have a true Democratic country? Will what has been printed in our constitution just be mere words?’
And a woman whose family had lost two young men overseas added a poignant appeal. ‘We who have lost boys have a right to expect something because of it’, she wrote. ‘We sent them to the ends of the world to fight for this thing – and we don’t seem to enforce it [at home]. The government has a right to stick to its guns in this issue, and let us know that they expect to insist on a better life for all because our boys have died for it’.13

With the strike stirring ever stronger emotions, many feared Philadelphia would explode in racial violence. The town, wrote one reporter, felt ‘panicky’, and local NAACP president Theodore Spaulding commented that ‘All the ingredients of a first class race riot were boiling and brewing’. In North Philadelphia, the city’s largest black ghetto, African Americans threw coal at passing motorists and smashed the windows in some 300 stores. The violence had a political edge as blacks avoided damaging businesses known for fair practices, but singled out stores that discriminated against them. African Americans told one merchant, ‘We aren’t going to hurt you none … You haven’t done anything to us; it’s those damned transit fellers who think they’re too good to work with us. They’re our real enemies’. One black Philadelphian reflecting back on the strike put into words what many were thinking: ‘I thought then and many times afterwards, how much and how far did they (the whites) feel they could push us? Did they not realise that the point beyond which no human being can go and maintain dignity was dangerously close? … In a matter of seconds every indignity suffered, every injustice or hurt received at the hands of whites flashed … through my mind … I felt and knew I could kill easily, whom did not matter, just so the person was white’.14

While the city had the right climate for a massive racial clash, the actions of black organisations and the arrival of federal soldiers kept things relatively peaceful. The NAACP and other black groups, for example, sent members into the most disturbed neighbourhoods, urging people to remain calm and distributing thousands of fliers telling African Americans to ‘Keep Your Heads and Your Tempers! … This stoppage is a disgrace to Philadelphia, to America and to Democracy’. The government, they promised, would not fail them. Ultimately federal intervention ensured the peace. Across the city, the arrival of troops brought laughing, clapping crowds into the streets. ‘The Negroes in this section are satisfied now that Uncle Sam has taken over’, said a black policeman in north Philadelphia. ‘They have confidence that things will work out without them getting shoved around, now that Washington [is involved]’. The NNC, the Urban League, and local black leaders such as Fauset offered their thanks to the federal government and the CIO. ‘Aren’t you proud of our great President!’ Fauset wrote. ‘And of the mighty CIO! Suppose either had faltered. Every gain made in recent years would have been lost. The FEPC would be a dead letter; trade unionism among Negroes would pass away like a summer’s breeze’. No one was happier than the eight recently promoted drivers who always believed the government would compel Philadelphians to observe the principle of non-discrimination. They all told reporters they thought of themselves as pioneers and that, with the government’s help, they would make it. Their ‘implicit faith’ in the government, as one reporter put it, led them to believe federal authorities would ‘take swift action to guarantee [their] rights’. Some still had nagging doubts, however, about what the strike said about American society. One of the drivers’ wives, after telling a reporter her husband had served nine months in the south Pacific, said, ‘What I wonder about is whether the sacrifice was worth it?’ When the strike ended a few days later and African Americans began taking trolleys out on their runs, most of the city’s blacks would have answered yes to her question. Within a year, when the PTC employed some 900 blacks, many more would have agreed.15

Strictly from the viewpoint of access to transit jobs, the outcome of the strike was a victory for African Americans. But the strike’s importance goes beyond the employment of 1,000 or so people in an industry that went into decline in the decade after World War II. The Philadelphia transit strike highlighted the necessity of government support of black rights, including the role the FEPC should play in settling workplace disputes and the government’s use of force to promote racial equality. It also highlighted for many Americans, white and black, their nation’s hypocrisy as it claimed to fight a world war for democracy at the same time that it accepted Jim Crow at home. And it was part of a broader movement across the United States that saw African Americans no longer accept second class status. In many ways it contributed to a new black view of the country that spurred the civil rights movement in the years ahead. As one woman put it: ‘The deaths and tragedies of war won’t have served a Goddam purpose’ if we do not realise that equality, as typified by the PTC struggle, is a big part of what we are fighting for.16


Part B: Non-Refereed Papers
They were calling it ‘Hollywood Remembers the Blacklist’. It was an event scheduled for Monday, 27 October, 1997, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the testimony before the House Committee of Un-American Activities (HUAC) of the writers, directors, producers and actors some of whom had become known as the Hollywood 10. It had been organised by a coalition composed of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), the Directors Guild of America (DGA), and the Writers Guild of America (WGA). I was one of the Equity Stage Managers for the evening.

On the Saturday prior to the event, a run-through of the speeches was scheduled. The only people from the staff present were the writer, director, producer and two stage managers. We would be the privileged few who would hear, for the first time in public and spoken from his own lips, the statement that Ring Lardner, Jr. had not been allow to read before the Committee. The screenwriters Abe Polonsky and Paul Jarrico were also there. They were to be presented awards and asked to speak at the event. Also present were the representatives of the four guilds/unions mentioned above. Knowing that I was on staff at Actors’ Equity at that time, SAG’s then president, Richard Masur, told me that there was a part of his speech I would like:

Tonight, the Screen Actors Guild would like to express how deeply we regret that when courage and conviction were needed to oppose the Blacklist, the poison of fear so paralyzed our organization. Only our sister union, Actors’ Equity Association had the courage to stand behind its members and help them continue their creative life in the theater. For that, we honor Actors’ Equity tonight.

There was an enthusiastic round of applause at the event when he spoke those words, and it made me proud that Equity was my parent (first) union. It had not been an easy thing for Equity to do and the decisions were not done in haste or without much debate. What follows is just a sample of the story that led to Mr Masur’s words that evening in 1997.

Actors’ Equity Association began when a group of actors finally were unwilling to bear the treatment they were receiving at the hands of the producers. Included among the problems were the policies of being discharged without notice and sometimes without being paid; receiving pay for rehearsals which could drag on for months was virtually unheard of, and being stranded far from home when a show closed was common practice. This early group of actors, numbering 112, met in New York City in May, 1913. In July of 1919, the American Federation of Labor charted the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (the 4 A’s) of which Equity was its largest constituent. A strike for recognition followed in August, closing 37 plays and preventing 16 additional productions from opening. Resolved in October, it resulted in a five year contract between the union and the organisation representing the producers at that time, the Producing Managers Association.

Gains in the years to follow included bonding provisions guaranteeing salaries and transportation (1924); restrictions on actors from other countries working on the American stage (1928 and still a major issue today); agents franchising (1929); and minimum wage guarantees (1933).

The governing body of Equity is Council which in the time period covered by this paper was composed of 50 members of the union elected to five year terms. Each year one fifth (ten members) stand for election or re-election. The process begins with a committee made up of Councilors and members who form a nominating committee and put forth a group for election. Members who are not endorsed by the committee can then chose to run by petition. In discussing the factionalism that could grow out of such an election process and that they believe actually contributes to Equity as a democracy, Pearlin and Richards noted, ‘There seems to be a desire for this [factionalism] on the part of many Equity members as reflected by a tendency to split votes so that ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ will both be represented on the Council’.
It is also important to note for the purposes of this study that in 1951 Equity was a union centered in New York with branches in Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco. The branches did not work autonomously, and any motions passed by a regional office had to meet approval by Council in New York. It would not be until the 1990s that Equity would be restructured as a national union with local decisions left in the hands of the regions. This is the ground from which has sprung over the years the varied opinions on Equity’s involvement in things political, leading to debate and ultimate compromise regarding the blacklist.

The resolution that came out of the membership meeting of 28 September, 1951, was not the first to deal with the issue of blacklisting. The Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration had been the first victim of HUAC when in 1938 its Artistic Director, Hallie Flanagan was called to testify as to the presence of communists in her productions. The death of the Federal Theatre Project would put many union actors out of work, and put them on notice of the power of this committee.

On 17 July, 1949, when returning from an engagement in Shannon, Eire, Clarence Derwent, President of Actors’ Equity and member of the Hamlet Festival Company was detained by immigration where ‘suddenly he was asked if he was a communist’. It seems that Mr Derwent had traveled to Prague in 1948 for a meeting of the International Theatre Institute, a branch of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and to Russia in 1936 for the purpose of visiting the Theatre Festival. Although ultimately resolved, the members of the union would remember this incident.

On 5 March, 1951, the West Coast Advisory Committee, through Christopher O’Brien, Assistant Executive Secretary in charge of the West Coast office wrote to Council:

The West Coast Advisory Committee wishes to call attention to the fact that the House Committee on Un-American Activities has already subpoenaed a number of West Coast Equity members to appear before it in its current investigations, and to the danger that members so subpoenaed may be damaged professionally by the tendency of theatrical employers to accept the fact of such subpoenas as grounds for blacklist discrimination. We urge that Council consider action to protect its entire membership and ultimately the Association itself from this danger and from this discrimination.

New York determined that it would ‘watch with interest and concern the manner in which this (Congressional) Committee manages its current investigation and the actions of employers in the engagement of Equity members who may have appeared before this Committee’. The statement was purposefully evasive as councilors felt it was an issue more for SAG then themselves, and indeed at the time, Hollywood seemed to be the major target. Equity even borrowed a page from a letter written by SAG’s Board of Directors to close this article:

But as a general statement of principle, this Council believes that the deadly seriousness of the international situation is responsible for our decision that this is not the time for dialectic fencing. Like the overwhelming majority of the American people, we believe that a ‘clear and present danger’ to our nation exists. This council believes that all participants in the International Communist Party conspiracy against our nation should be exposed for what they are – enemies of our country and of our form of government.

In response to the ever darkening landscape, the Membership at the Quarterly Meeting, Friday, 28 September, 1951, would present and pass a resolution. Being passed at a membership meeting meant that it had to be considered before Council. It came before the meeting on 2 October. On the recommendation of the executive, Louis Simon, it was moved to make it a ‘Special Order of Business’ for two weeks later with the text of the resolution being sent to members of Council. The resolution they received read as follows:

WHEREAS the Council of Actors’ Equity Association, in July of 1950, concerned with the spread of Blacklisting in the Entertainment industry, passed a resolution which declared that, quote, ‘the use of the so-called Blacklist is contrary to some of the most fundamental purposes for which the Actors’ Equity Association and Chorus Equity Association were formed, as herein set forth, and in order to protect themselves and their members they must vehemently denounce such practice and take action to eliminate it’, end quote; and

WHEREAS, in September of 1950, the membership of Actors’ Equity Association, moved by our failure to be effective in the Jean Muir case and the threat of Blacklisting in the Legitimate Theatre, passed a resolution almost unanimously reaffirming Council’s previous declaration; and
WHEREAS, in spite of all these declarations, the practice of Blacklisting has not abated, but in fact has spread to such an extent that more and more of our members find themselves on one or another blacklist which jeopardizes their employment in all entertainment fields, so that we men and women of the theatre are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that Blacklisting of one actor in any area of the Entertainment industry threatens the security of all actors and, indeed, jeopardizes the very existence of our Association; and

WHEREAS we recognize that this overall Blacklist against our members, Negro and White, constitutes a double Blacklist, an added burden for our Negro members, as they have always been discriminated against in term of employment;

THEREFORE: in the spirit of our tradition in the Theatre of our Association of – ‘ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE’,

BE IT RESOLVED: that Actors’ Equity Association declare that Blacklisting of its members for color, race, religion, political belief, or union activity, is hostile to the fundamental purposes of this Association, and that Actors’ Equity Association will act to the fullest of its capacities in defense of its members.

TO THESE ENDS WE FURTHER RESOLVE: that Actors’ Equity Association take the necessary steps with the League of New York Theatres to secure the inclusion in our basic agreement of a clause declaring Blacklisting of members of Actors’ Equity Association for color, race, religion, political beliefs or union activity and unfair labor practice and a violation of our basic agreement.

WE FURTHER RESOLVE: that Actors’ Equity Association declare that Employer usage of ‘Red Channels’, ‘Counterattack’, and any other published and/or unpublished list constitutes an unfair labor practice; and

WE FURTHER RESOLVE: that Actors’ Equity Association act to secure mutual cooperation with the 4 A’s and/or any member union thereof, T.V.A. and any other union in the entertainment field for the purpose of eliminating Blacklisting in the entertainment industry, and specifically to inform our Equity Representative in T.V.A. of our position against Blacklisting; and

WE FURTHER RESOLVE: that a Committee be formed, composed of equal numbers of Council members and members-at-large, said members-at-large to be elected from the floor, to implement the foregoing ‘Resolve’.

The ensuing debate on 16 October was fierce and varied and too much to be included here. Minutes of these discussions are available for anyone who wishes to know more. Suffice it to say, the resolution as written was rejected and a committee was formed to rewrite it. At the Council Meeting of 13 November, 1951, the committee selected to redraft the Membership resolution made their final report. After extensive debate and any number of amendments, the final Resolution looked like this:

WHEREAS, this Association now, as in the past, is unalterably opposed to Communism, Fascism and any and all forms of subversive acts and ideologies, and has repeatedly gone on record to this effect, and

WHEREAS, it is against the declared policy of this Association to aid or defend any person who has been duly proven to be subversive, and

WHEREAS, it has been repeatedly been brought to the attention of this Association that certain employers within the entertainment industry have used a form of anti-union discrimination, commonly known as ‘blacklisting’, which practice this Association deems to be to the detriment of its members, and

WHEREAS, This Association, through its Council and its membership, has heretofore gone on record that the United States Government, by and through judicial process, is amply capable of determining who is subversive and who is not, and has declared itself with great vigor and emphasis in protest against the practice of certain employers within the entertainment industry who are allowing themselves to be intimidated by private individuals, organizations and publications, who, in the irresponsible manner of vigilantes have improperly assumed the functions of government and are thereby injuring some of its members by publicly branding them as disloyal without giving them an opportunity to be heard and are thus depriving such members of the pursuit of their chosen profession and ability to earn a livelihood therein, and

WHEREAS, this Association is also against the blacklisting of any members who suffer because of their opposition to duly proven subversive activities and ideologies, and
WHEREAS, the aforementioned practice of ‘blacklisting’ is by its very nature, based on secrecy and prejudiced judgment and results in conviction by accusation without an opportunity given to the accused person to be heard and to defend himself, and

WHEREAS, this Association deems the aforementioned practice of ‘blacklisting’ and the detriments necessarily arising there from to innocent persons to be a practice diametrically opposed to the time-honored American principle that an accused person has the inherent and vested right to a just and fair hearing.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: That this Association again condemns the practice of ‘blacklisting; in all its forms, and that this Association will act to aid its members in their right to obtain a fair and impartial hearing of any charges that may be brought against them. To this end, BE IT FURTHER

RESOLVED, that this Council appoint from among its members a Committee of five persons for the purpose of recommending a course of action to this Council. The Committee shall have no power to enter into any commitments or to take any action other than to investigate, but this Committee shall specifically be empowered to:

(1) Create such working Committees composed of other members of the Council or of the membership as in its discretion it may deem advisable; such working Committees to function as directed by the Committee and solely with the provisions of this Resolution.

(2) Contact such unions and organizations as may be helpful in its work.

(3) To interview such actors, and other persons as it may deem advisable for the purpose of gathering such information as may be helpful to the Council in their endeavors to stop blacklisting.13

The story was far from over. The Screen Actors Guild would take an entirely different approach to the situation. When member Gale Sondergaard was scheduled to appear before the committee in March of 1951, she would ask for her union’s support. In reply she would be told:

The Guild as a labor union will fight against any secret blacklist created by any group of employers. On the other hand, if any actor by his own actions outside of union activities has so offended American public opinion that he has made himself unsaleable at the box-office, the Guild cannot and would not want to force any employer to hire him. That is the individual actor’s personal responsibility and it cannot be shifted to his union.14

At Equity, a Committee on Blacklisting became a standing and very active committee, while in 1952, the League of American Theatres agreed to add anti-blacklisting language to its agreements. This followed a time when members of Council would have to deal with the death of one of its own. With strong evidence that the blacklisting of actors had been the primary reason, Councilor Mady Christians, the Mama in I Remember Mama would die of a cerebral hemorrhage in October of 1951.15

In 1953, SAG introduced a referendum to instigate a membership wide loyalty oath. It went to a vote on July 1. It passed by a vote of 3,769 in favor; 152 opposed.16 The oath would be made optional in 1967 when the Grateful Dead would refuse to sign it, and was removed from the by-laws in July of 1974.

In July of 1955, the New York local of AFTRA, a relatively new union, would pass a resolution condemning one of the organs of the blacklist, AWARE.17 Any joy locally would be erased as nationally, in August of 1955, a rule would be adopted by a vote of 3,967 to 914. It read:

If any member of AFTRA is asked by a duly constituted committee of the Senate or House of Representatives of the United States whether or not he is or ever has been a member of the Communist Party, and said member fails or refuses to answer that question, said member shall be subject to the charge that he is guilty of conduct prejudicial to the welfare of AFTRA. The accused may be investigated and the charges may be heard by the board of the local of which the accused is a member. The local board may, in its discretion, fine, censure, suspend or expel the accused from membership, in accordance with the constitution and by-laws of the local, subject to such appeals as are provided in the local and national constitutions.18

It was in that same August that HUAC finally came to New York and subpoenaed a group of Equity actors and other theatre personnel. Of the 23 witnesses who appeared in the first four days, 22 refused to cooperate and those with theatre jobs returned to their stages. Painfully though, the next month would
bring the death by suicide of yet another Equity councilor, Philip Loeb of The Goldbergs. Yet if there was one bright light in the all consuming darkness, it would be that try as they might, there would be no blacklist in the theatre.

Fighting the blacklist was not the only major event wherein Equity would affect major change in the United States. In 1947, Equity refused to allow its members to perform at Washington, D.C.’s National Theatre until such time as Negro actors were treated with the same consideration as was accorded their Caucasian colleagues, and performances of these productions were done before a fully integrated audience. As a result of this boycott, the National Theatre closed its doors. It reopened in 1952 as a fully integrated example for the country. For its leadership in this area, Equity was presented with the National Brotherhood Award by the newly formed Labor Council of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Once again with the help of the League of American Theatres this policy spread throughout the country’s formerly segregated venues. A union by definition manages the common good and Equity’s history has proven this out.

Honoring diversity is a hallmark of Equity’s behavior even today with groups such as the Non-Traditional Casting Project carrying forward and expanding on the work begun by the committees and membership of the 1940s. The union supports the creativity of its membership by handling the nuts and bolts of employment such as salary minimums, safe and sanitary working conditions, along with pension plans and health coverage. The goal being that by not having to think about such things, the artist is free to pursue the art.

Today’s members often ask, ‘What has the union done for me?’ They need to learn from their history that Actors’ Equity Association has often been at the forefront as an organisation concerned with creating social change through its members and the art of making theatre. As difficult as it seems for them now, perhaps this atmosphere can be created again.

Epilogue

As I wrote in the introduction to this paper, on 27 October, 1997, Richard Masur promised that the Screen Actors Guild would not stand idly by if there was a next time, but like Actors’ Equity had in the past, they too would demonstrate the courage to stand behind their members. In March of 2003, SAG remained true to his words as they defended their members threatened by a new ‘blacklist’ for speaking out against the war with Iraq:

Some have recently suggested that well-known individuals who express ‘unacceptable’ views should be punished by losing their right to work. This shocking development suggests that the lessons of history have, for some, fallen on deaf ears. Today, having come to grips with its past, having repudiated the insult of loyalty oaths and examined its own failings, our industry, perhaps more than any other, understands the necessity of guarding and cherishing those rights for which Americans have fought and died.

In that spirit, the Screen Actors Guild board of directors, appreciating the value of full and open debate and devoted to the belief that the free flow of information, opinion and ideas contributes to the health of our nation, supports the right of all citizens, celebrated and unknown, to speak their minds freely, on any side of any issue, as is their constitutional right. In the same vein – and with a painfully clear appreciation of history – we deplore the idea that those in the public eye should suffer professionally for having the courage to give voice to their views. Even a hint of the blacklist must never again be tolerated in this nation.

Endnotes

5. Ibid., p. 7.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
14. G. Sondergaard, Files of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1951, at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
‘The solidarity was misapplied’: the historiography of the Great Strike of 1917

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The Great Strike of 1917\(^1\) occupies an unusual position in Australian labour historiography. It is, arguably, the most dramatic confrontation between capital and labour in Australian history. Ian Turner, for instance, has argued that it was, in almost all respects, a larger-scale confrontation than the strikes of the 1890s.\(^2\) Yet there is a paucity of published material on the strike. The most substantial publications devoted specifically to relating a narrative of the strike are a chapter by Dan Coward, published in 1973, and another chapter in Turner’s *Industrial Labour and Politics*.\(^3\) More recently, Lucy Taksa produced an article for *Labour History*, arguing for a reinterpretation of the motives behind the strike.\(^4\) Otherwise we are left with brief references to the dispute that vary in length from the two paragraphs devoted to it in Manning Clark’s Volume IV to more substantial summaries covering a number of pages.\(^5\) Some of the best of these are narrow in scope. They are either restricted to individual unions, as with Buckley’s history of the engineers or Fitzpatrick and Cahill’s history of the seamen, or, as in the case of Lockwood’s history of the Melbourne waterfront, there is a geographic limitation of focus.\(^6\)

When the strike *has* drawn the attention of historians there have been, moreover, at least two serious and interrelated problems with the historiography that has resulted. The first involves an overwhelmingly negative assessment of the strike. Childe’s classic *How Labour Governs*, first published in 1923, contains the archetype of this sort of analysis:

> the uselessness of a strike, however widespread and popular, when the forces of labour lack organisation and unitary control – was cruelly demonstrated…In the Great Strike of 1917 there was as much solidarity as in the Coal Strike. The craft unionists and the unskilled fought side by side. But there was no directing plan animating the whole, and the solidarity was misapplied.\(^7\)

Variants on this theme have continued to be expressed as late as 1981 by Farrell: ‘The strike was spontaneous, badly organised, and mostly led by the rank and file…It succeeded only in worsening the lot of its participants’.\(^8\)

The emphasis in this historiographical tradition is placed firmly on the immediate consequences of the strike – its dramatic defeat. Coward’s chapter, which focuses on analysing the state’s repressive response to the strike neither endorses nor challenges this tradition. Turner, however, argues his own variant, albeit with a Leninist gloss. He concludes that the strike was a mistake, on the rather abstract basis that the circumstances did not meet the ‘Leninist…conditions for a successful general strike’.\(^9\)

The spontaneous nature of the strike, the insurgent spirit of the rank and file, and the reluctance of the officials are all acknowledged by these various historians. They are, in any case, clear to even the most casual of researchers. The NSW Legislative Assembly commissioned a report on the strike in 1918 which listed the workplaces involved, with the dates the strike action began and ended in each case.\(^10\) The report appears more like a detailed accounting ledger than a description of a strike – the reason being that each workplace apparently decided to strike individually, resulting in a multitude of entries.

The conclusion most historians have drawn from this, however, is that rank and file workers were wrong to strike. The reason given might vary from Childe’s strategic argument that coal stocks were too high, to Turner’s invocation of Lenin. They all, nevertheless, combine to absolve the officials of blame for the strike’s defeat. In Turner’s case, this is despite the fact that he relates in some detail the way in which the leading officials in Sydney engaged in secret negotiations and then spent two weeks fighting in the face of furious mass meetings to enforce a settlement which amounted to an utter capitulation. But then, what does it matter that a strike was sold out if it was doomed to defeat from the outset!

The most extreme variant on this theme of blaming the rank and file can be found in Lockwood’s history of the Melbourne waterfront. Joe Morris, the Melbourne waterfront leader, who had taken over the national leadership of the Waterside Workers’ Federation after the expulsion of Billy Hughes, is, to Lockwood, a hero of the dispute:
Joe Morris had been telling them for weeks. There wasn’t a hope of winning the strike with volunteers to spare…Through the bleak month of October the rank and file rejected his advice: their judgement had become as blinkered as their fighting spirit was redoubtable.\footnote{11}

There is a problem, however, with the assumption that any strike was destined to fail. It is difficult to prove unless the strike was conducted in an exemplary manner and all possible tactics to ensure victory can be shown to have been exhausted. This was clearly not the case in 1917. Farrell, for instance, cites the lack of organisation and implies that this was a consequence of the strike’s spontaneous genesis. Yet there was an organising body – the Defence Committee set up by the Sydney Trades and Labour Council and headed by the Council’s Secretary, E.J. Kavanagh. A second Defence Committee in Melbourne was headed by Kavanagh’s opposite number at the Melbourne Trades’ Hall, A.J. Pearce. The rank and file may have gone out without reference to their officials, but once on strike, it left the dispute’s direction in the officials’ hands. The situation is summed up in an extract from the notebooks left by Ted Moyle, the leading Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) activist in Adelaide at the time. Moyle applauded the fact that the strikes were started by ‘the workers themselves, in opposition to the union officials’, but regretted that ‘high salaried officials’ were in charge of the strike, and that the officials appeared to be ‘hanging back’ and ‘afraid to move’.\footnote{12}

There is plenty of evidence, even before the secret negotiations and the Defence Committee’s eventual capitulation that the officials on these Committees were, at the very least, in two minds about the advisability of striking. Kavanagh revealed the key to the officials’ attitude when he complained in his autopsy of the dispute that ‘the difficulty was not in getting men to come out, but to keep them in’.\footnote{13} In Melbourne, the *Age* cites unnamed Defence Committee members in Melbourne making an almost identical statement regarding the situation in Victoria.\footnote{14}

A useful litmus in this regard is provided by the example of A. Willis and J. Baddeley, the miners’ leaders, who were, arguably, the most militant officials in the country (at least outside of Broken Hill). Turner records that they were opposed to a stoppage on the grounds that coal reserves were too plentiful, but that they could not hold the rank and file of the lodges back.\footnote{15} Willis was quoted early in the strike as arguing that a general strike would be defeated in a week and that, instead, the Defence Committee would ‘call this union and that union out as the occasion demands’.\footnote{16} This might have impressed some of the crowd listening to him in the Domain as strategic wisdom rather than an excuse for inaction. Unfortunately there is no record of either the Sydney or the Melbourne Committees calling a single union out.

On the contrary there are plenty of examples of the opposite – of officials doing their best to obstruct the spread of the dispute. Two of the most important are recorded in histories that focus on single unions and, because they are, therefore, only critical of the officials of those unions, have not significantly reversed the tendency to absolve the officials as a whole from the strike’s defeat. Buckley, for instance, records how the Victorian Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, in a mass meeting attended by around 800, requested permission to strike (in fact they simply requested permission to ballot for a strike) and were refused by the union’s national leadership in Sydney.\footnote{17} Fitzpatrick and Cahill record the fact that the seamen in Sydney voted to strike at a mass meeting despite being told by their officials that it was unconstitutional for them to do so.\footnote{18} In Melbourne, the seamen walked off on a ship by ship basis in defiance of their union. Towards the end of the dispute, the officials in the Melbourne Branch exacted revenge by cutting off strike pay.\footnote{19} In the Victorian railways, the shunters voted to strike but were ignored by their officials and lacked the confidence to defy them.\footnote{20} Also in Melbourne, the officials of the tiny Manufacturing Grocers Union, after more than half of their members (mostly in soap factories) had walked out, intervened to keep another two factories working.\footnote{21}

It could be argued, of course, that the officials were on the horns of a dilemma. If the strike was unwinnable, then it may seem hardly surprising that they lacked enthusiasm and that they attempted to limit the damage. Yet if one were to accept that the strike was a mistake, what then could they have done? They could, of course, have done their utmost to stop it from spreading beyond the railway workshops. But once it had spread, as it did within days, to the railways and the waterfront and the coal mines, then the only sensible strategy would surely have been to make it as effective as possible.

The behaviour of many key officials was the exact opposite of this. Take, for example, Lockwood’s wise old Joe Morris and the national leadership of the Waterside Workers’ Federation. The Federal
Committee of Management of the union did not meet until 24 September, nearly three weeks after their members struck in Sydney and 11 days after the Melbourne Branch voted to join the strike. There are no records of the Melbourne mass meeting that voted to strike apart from a report in the Age. This report implies that the officials seized upon the need for solidarity with the strike in Sydney as a useful excuse to end an offensive strike over conditions begun that very day by the Melbourne members. Beginning, however, with the meeting on the 24th, the records tell a different story – one of frantic activity by Morris and the federal officials to end the strike at all costs. The catalyst of this change is revealed in a transcript of a Conciliation and Arbitration Court hearing on the 23rd in which Morris was interrogated by Justice Higgins regarding the Melbourne strike:

Higgins: How do you explain their conduct in leaving work?
Morris: I cannot explain it at all
Lewis (Company Rep.): Why don’t you be frank and say that they are standing by their Sydney colleagues?
Morris: They are doing nothing of the kind. The executive of the union has given them no instruction to do so. It is the men who are to blame, and not the Federation.

The very next day the Central Organising Committee met and, from that point on, it met regularly. The apathy that had characterised the federal officials’ initial response to the strike was replaced by an energetic determination to end it at all costs. They were largely unsuccessful in their efforts, although, at Higgins behest, Morris did manage to push through a constitutional amendment banning the various state branches from initiating strike action without the federal committee’s consent.

The strike was ultimately beaten in the end by mass scabbing. The conservative State and federal governments mobilised the rural and middle class to help maintain skeleton services. Indicated by the persistence of scab unions on the NSW railways, on the waterfront and in a number of factories such as Dunlop in Melbourne, there were also many working class recruits to the army of ‘volunteers’. This was a dramatic defeat, and, as Turner and Coward both attest, there was a considerable bitterness towards the behaviour of the officials. Turner, in particular, draws a causal connection with a leftward shift in the trade union movement. This was signified most dramatically by the overthrow of the leadership of the Seamen’s Union by a team led by Tom Walsh and by the replacement of Kavanagh as head of the Trades and Labour Council in Sydney by Jock Garden, the colourful figurehead of the ‘Trades Hall Reds’, both of which occurred in 1918. Turner does not, however, draw any connection between this outcome of the strike and the dramatic revival of the movement in 1919.

The events of 1919 are, however, essential to a balanced assessment of the 1917 strike. That year saw the largest number of strike days lost in Australian history. The movement, which had apparently been dealt such a crippling blow at the end of 1917, had, within 12 months, recovered to an astonishing degree. Moreover, the two most dramatic strikes involved groups of workers that had struck in 1917, the Broken Hill miners and the seamen. In Broken Hill they won the 35-hour week, an astonishing achievement at a time when most workers throughout the world were only beginning to demand the eight-hour day (with a six-day week).

A contrast between the fortunes of the seamen and the wharfies during that year is revealing. Morris was to remain at the helm until 1928, just before his members were plunged into an even more disastrous lockout. In 1919, he continued to restrain the rank and file, though there was an unsuccessful strike in Melbourne in August of that year to try and get rid of the hated ‘Bureau’ and its scabs, as well as an infamous riot on the Fremantle docks. The union battled throughout the 1920s with scab unions, gaining some success as the decade progressed, but never entirely destroying the rival organisations (which would rise again during the lockout of 1928-30). In 1919, under their new left-wing leadership, the seamen engaged in a strike which lasted from May to August, winning a remarkable 35 shillings a-week pay rise and dramatic improvements in conditions.

Another possible reading of the 1917 strike emerges from this evidence. It is a reading which blames the pusillanimity of the officials rather than the disorganisation and unthinking militancy of the rank and file for the strike’s defeat. It is a reading, moreover, that sees the defeat of the strike as having some positive consequences. Just as there are Pyrrhic victories, sometimes there are defeats from which valuable lessons can be learned and by which future victories are made possible. For crucial sections of the working class in Eastern Australia, the mass strike of 1917 appears to have been just such a defeat.
How they reacted to the defeat depended on their experience during the strike: the extent to which they were active and organised, and (as the contrast between the wharfies and the seamen shows) the extent to which an alternative leadership crystallised out of that experience.

It is curious in its way that the orthodox negative assessment of the strike has prevailed to the extent that it has. As we have seen, some historians, such as Buckley, Fitzpatrick and Cahill, have been critical of the behaviour of officials from individual unions. Taksa, in her article in *Labour History*, challenged the traditional explanations of the strike’s origins, arguing that the strike involved an implicit protest at the perceived breaking by the state of a form of social contract. From this she concluded that Childe’s argument that ‘the solidarity was misapplied’ has misinterpreted what was in fact an outburst of social protest on narrow tactical grounds as if it were no more than a straight forward strike over conditions.31

Taksa’s positive assessment of the strike’s ‘spontaneous’ genesis is the only whisper within the Australian historiographical tradition (at least in relation to this strike) of an approach which has been pioneered in Britain—that of ‘history from below’. An entire generation of British labour historians, inspired by the example of E.P. Thompson, rejected the previous orthodoxy of the ‘Oxford school’. It rejected an approach that limited labour history to the study of institutions, turning its attention instead towards the working class itself and including (following the example of E.J. Hobsbawm and others) social and economic imperatives.

So influential was this approach that it inspired a reaction, made notoriously manifest in a polemic by Jonathan Zeitlin in the *International Review of Social History*. Zeitlin claimed to have identified a new orthodoxy in British labour historiography based upon what he considered to be an artificial division between the ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ of the labour movement. He singled out for attack Hinton, Holton and Price.32 He also included Richard Hyman, a sociologist rather than a historian, whose studies of contemporary workplace relations in Britain in the early 1970s had celebrated the achievements of shop floor organisation in those turbulent years.34 This polemic in turn sparked a debate in which one side challenged the validity of the very notions of ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘rank and file’ whilst the other, most notably Hyman, retaliated by accusing Zeitlin of conflating and caricaturing the work of the scholars he attacked.35

The ‘rank and filist’ debate has had an impact on scholarship in Australia.36 Yet the original thesis of the so-called ‘rank and filists’ – the rejection of an exclusive focus upon the institutions of the labour movement and an understanding that ordinary people are capable of being the subject as well as the objects of history – has had less influence. This is certainly the case with our understanding of the tumultuous period of World War I and its immediate aftermath. There has yet to be a serious challenge to the sort of analysis that can be found, for instance, (albeit in its most explicit form) in an argument made by Rawson in the 1960s. Rawson argued that the key source of the leftward shift in the labour movement during World War I was a ‘general discontent with capitalist society’ arising from ‘the particular discontents of many of the trade union officials with the actions of Labor Governments’.37 Rawson’s focus was purely on the attitudes and behaviour of trade union officials and Labor politicians. What was clearly missing from his analysis was the attitude of the workers they represented. Were they discontented with capitalism and the behaviour of Labor governments? If so, how was this manifested, and how did it influence the behaviour of their officials?

Rawson’s approach is, unfortunately, not atypical of much of the historiography of this period. Writers such as Bedford, Turner and Farrell all demonstrate this institutional focus to varying degrees.38 Turner’s book, arguably the most influential history of the period, records the various strikes and other manifestations of mass protest. He understands that there was a leftward shift amongst the rank and file as well as the officials and that the strike wave of 1916 and the first conscription referendum were central to this phenomenon. Yet little is done to integrate this with his analysis of the leftward shift in official labour. The single exception is his observation that the defeat of 1917 played a key role in the rise of the ‘Trades Hall Reds’. But this is very much an exception. The main theme of Turner’s book is the conflict between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement. As a result he devotes far more attention to the institutional manifestations of the wartime radicalisation than to its wellsprings in the turmoil of those years.
Turner’s approach is most clearly shown in his treatment of the 1919 strikes, which he deals with much more briefly than, for example, the long saga of conferences, motions etc associated with the ‘One Big Union’ movement, or the ALP conference in 1921 which adopted the Socialisation Objective. Nor are the 1919 strikes dismissed merely in terms of space. After a brief discussion of the 18 month long Broken Hill strike which began in 1919, Turner makes the astonishing comment that the workers had ‘little to show’ for their efforts. They had in fact won, amongst other things, the 35 hour week.

As we have seen, understanding the connection between the defeat of the 1917 strike and the strike wave of 1919 is crucial to any reassessment of the former. More importantly, a reassessment of the Great Strike is a logical place to begin a new and more balanced understanding of the wartime radicalisation – an understanding which sees the activities of ordinary workers as central and not simply as a backdrop. To quote Rosa Luxemburg, whose famous pamphlet, *The Mass Strike*, was such an important part of the theoretical inspiration for the idea of ‘history from below’:

> it is high time that the mass of Social Democratic workers learn to express their capacity for judgement and action, and therefore to demonstrate their ripeness for that time of great struggles and tasks in which they, the masses, will be the active chorus, and the leaders only the ‘speaking parts’, the interpreters of the will of the masses.

The chorus was in full voice in 1917. It deserves to be heard and acknowledged more clearly by labour historians.

In addition, a reassessment of the Great Strike has the potential to make a significant contribution to the ‘rank and filist debate’. One of the points made by Zeitlin in his original polemic against ‘rank and filism’ has not been replied to by his critics. This is unfortunate, because, unlike many of Zeitlin’s arguments, it is a point which, perhaps in a way he never intended, illuminates a genuine demarcation between his historiographical methodology and that of the historians he was attacking. He criticised the fact that, with their various ‘intellectual and political preoccupations, historians of a rank-and-filist bent were naturally attracted to the more turbulent periods of British labour’. The implication is that their approach has involved a distortion of reality: labour history looked at through a prism that magnifies conflict and minimises periods of relative peace.

The scale and nature of the Great Strike of 1917 threw into sharp relief divisions between the rank and file and officials within the labour movement. In a sense this is not surprising. Only in confrontations on this scale are the fundamental questions of class rule posed. Marxist historiography is informed by the implications of history for revolutionary practice. It has, therefore, an in-built bias towards periods in which revolutionary possibilities are evident. In the context of the rank and filist debate, it is important to understand that the class location of the trade union bureaucracy – its role as a broker between labour and capital – is most likely to be evident in situations where class conflict reaches a level of intensity where brokerage is impossible.

A useful reply to Zeitlin’s criticism is, then, to defend the idea of focussing on the highpoints of class conflict – such as 1917 in Australia. The point in doing so is not to pretend that such conflict is normal or natural, that the proletariat is forever straining at the leash, or that trade union officials spend most of their time restraining or even betraying a militant rank and file. There is a place for social history and sociology which attempts to establish what is normally the case – to map, monitor and analyse the patterns of everyday life in times of social peace. There is also clearly a place for a historiography that focuses on moments of conflict, on war and revolutions, on strikes and civil unrest. In such great moments of conflict aspects of society that are normally hidden from view can sometimes be discerned. One such aspect is the inherent conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy.

If a discernable ‘bureaucracy’ exists, and if that bureaucracy is incapable of leading a struggle that goes beyond the bounds of normal trade unionism, then only in conflict which breaks those bounds can this incapacity be discerned. Concentration of effort on understanding the highpoints of class conflict is, therefore, not simply a manifestation of historical thrill-seeking, or an unbalanced and distorted focus on episodes in history predetermined to justify a hypothesis. It is instead the only legitimate way in which such a hypothesis can be tested.
However trivial the issue that triggered the 1917 strike, it drew, inevitably, a repressive response from State and federal governments that threatened the continued existence of many unions. To reiterate, the ‘rank and filist’ position contends that there is a distinct trade union bureaucracy and that that bureaucracy acts as a broker between labour and capital. It follows from this hypothesis that the bureaucracy must fail the test of such a momentous confrontation. It certainly appears to have done so in 1917. It was a confrontation that appeared to meet all the criteria for the caricature of the ‘rank and filist’ position drafted by Zeitlin in his polemic. Here we had the rank and file insurgent in spirit, ready and willing for a battle that would go beyond all the hitherto-established bounds of trade unionism, and a bureaucracy shrinking even from the sound of battle and eager to end the conflict on any terms. Thus, this conflict has the potential to clearly illustrate an argument that has yet to be made in reply to Zeitlin. That argument would contend that the highpoints of class conflict are not aberrant episodes of disorder. They do not punctuate an otherwise orderly history of industrial relations that is at once mundane and complex and that is, therefore, resistant to explanation by such ‘reductionist’ terms as ‘class’, ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’. Instead, only in such moments is the validity of these terms fully revealed.

Endnotes

1. In this paper I have avoided the usual appellation ‘NSW General Strike’ in favour of the older term ‘Great Strike’. The reason is simple: the strike was neither general nor confined to NSW.
17. Buckley, *Amalgamated Engineers*, pp. 266-7. Buckley states they voted to strike. The *Age*, 24 August 1917, p. 5, states that they merely voted to request a ballot. It also makes the (persuasive) suggestion that one of the motivations for not spreading the strike was that an interstate strike would lead to a cancellation of the union’s award.
20. *Age*, 23 August 1917, p. 8: ‘There is a turbulent section of the railway service which is badly disappointed over the result of the recent strike ballot and which is now advocating sympathetic action in respect of the New South Wales railway men. These men are in the minority, and not the least militant among them are to be found among the shunters’.
21. ‘The Secretary also reported that the members at Prowlings desired to cease work owing to being asked to handle black goods but he had attended the factory and had informed them that in accordance with the policy of the Defence Committee that no more unionists should cease work...,’ Manufacturing Grocers’ Employees Federation of Australia, Vic. Branch, papers, 1/1/4, Minutes, 11 September 1917, University of Melbourne Archives.
22. *Age*, 14 August 1917, pp. 5-6.
24. *Age*, 24 August 1917, p. 6
26. Age, 8 October 1917, p. 7, for instance, states that there were 700 ‘loyalists’ employed at Dunlop. Geoffrey Blainey, Jumping Over the Wheel, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 97, states that in 1918 the ‘Share Purchase Association’ (which had evolved into a company union) had 638 members. Presumably many of these had been ‘volunteers’. If they had simply been middle class ‘patriots’ doing their duty, one assumes they would not have remained once the strike was over.


29. Ibid., pp. 188-93, Beasley, Wharfies, pp. 53-8.

30. Fitzpatrick and Cahill, The Seamen’s Union, p. 51, also notes that seamen’s wages continued to rise up until the defeat in 1925 while British seamen over the same period, under a notoriously right-wing leadership, saw their real wages halved.

31. Lucy Taksa, ‘Defence not defiance’.


This paper sketches Jessie Street’s part in the quest for equal pay, from the 1930s to the 1950s, and the role of the transnational networks through which she worked.

From its establishment in 1919, the League of Nations was a forum where transnational organisations of women negotiated their participation in government. The League and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) made Geneva the focal point of these networks. For many feminists, issues for women workers were common ground, with employment a vital item on the agenda of women’s citizenship. For Australian labour activists like Muriel Heagney, who worked at the ILO in Geneva in 1925 during an extensive period of travel, including a visit that year to the Soviet Union, labour issues were predominant. Australian women were active in established organisations and in new ones like the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI) established in Berlin in 1929. Founding members included prominent Australian reformers, Bessie Rischbieth, president of the Australian federation of Women Voters (AFWV) and Linda Littlejohn, a Sydney colleague of Jessie Street.

**Common ground**

Jessie Street’s first visit to Geneva was in 1930, a high point for organised opposition to employment discrimination – not because any major goal was achieved, but because reformers were then at their most united. The maturing of multilateral campaigning through the League of Nations was one influence on this high level of cohesion; another was the local experience of economic depression. From June to October 1930 Jessie Street travelled in the USA, England, and Europe, with social insurance schemes and equal pay among the citizenship issues she was researching. In early July she was working at the Washington headquarters of the National Women’s Party (NWP), founded by Alice Paul. The UA and the NWP shared the ‘identical aims’ of securing ‘equal pay for equal work and equality for men and women in all laws, rules and regulations’.

Jessie Street arrived in Geneva in mid-August, when delegations of the international organisations of women were gathering to prepare for the 11th session of the League of Nations. She became a founding member of the Equal Rights International (ERI) and at the invitation of the ODI addressed a meeting on ‘the iniquity of the Australian basic wage’. She was also part of a delegation to the ILO, arguing on the disadvantages protective legislation could place on women workers.

In Australia the precedent of a ‘living wage’ established in 1907 had led to the principle that every male worker should be paid an amount to provide for himself, a wife and three children as a minimum rate employers could pay. For women reformers, this was the notorious ‘2/3 of a man’ assumption that all men but no women workers had, or would ever have, dependents to support. Jessie Street’s interest in social insurance stemmed from this stumbling block to equal pay. Her approach was to remove the rationale for this embedded discrimination by diverting the dependents’ quotient to a national fund providing for all unwaged people.

All this was a long way from Jessie Street’s own experiences; her personal income gave her the freedom to work full-time for feminist reform. Middle-class feminist reformers campaigning on the broad agenda of women’s citizenship had been of little concern to the labour movement. But when Jessie Street brought the United Associations across that divide, comforting assumptions and entrenched prejudice were challenged – on both sides. Her socialism grew from her relief work with the UA during the Depression. Jessie Street’s position on employment discrimination was based in the wider questions of women’s citizenship, where there was much common ground between the United Associations and women trade unionists. But from the first Jessie Street argued for equal pay for work of equal value. Any insistence by trades unions on solidarity about occupational pay rates – ‘one rate for the job’ – held the seeds of division.
In the 1930s the injustice of wage discrimination was ‘in the air’, ignited by the evidence of the impact of the years of economic depression, and fuelled by transnational networking. As a result of the vigorous campaigning of the women’s networks in Geneva, in 1932 the ILO established a ‘Corresponding Committee for Women’s Work’. International attention and local pressure fed each other. In Australia, for a decade from its foundation in 1933, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* took a stand against employment discrimination. Articles by Linda Littlejohn, Jessie Street and Muriel Heagney appeared regularly in a range of publications inside and outside the labour movement. Jessie Street’s letters to newspaper editors were pungent attacks on the ‘reprehensible’ principle of basing a wage on the worker’s sex rather than on ‘the value of the work done’. Jessie Street’s views on equal pay regularly appeared in the press, including trades union journals like the Australian Railways Union’s *Railroad*, edited by Eileen Powell. Throughout 1935 high hopes of progress towards equal pay flourished on this common ground. Muriel Heagney was welcomed to Sydney at a luncheon held in her honour by the UA, presided over by Jessie Street, and joined the UAs’ Like Conditions of Work Committee. In August Linda Littlejohn represented both the United Associations and the Australian Open Door Council at the ODI’s 4th conference, in Copenhagen. In September, she was part of the delegation that presented the Open Door International’s equal pay submission to the 16th Assembly of the League of Nations. That year Australia’s official delegation included the president of the AFWV, Bessie Rischbieth. And in 1935 both Jessie Street and Muriel Heagney published monographs on employment discrimination. In her pamphlet *The Justice of Equal Pay and Equal Opportunity*, Jessie Street summarised the arguments on three paths to equal pay – legislation; occupational rates; and a gradual adjustment upwards of female rates to achieve parity for equal work within five years. Opting for the last, she pointed out the first could induce unemployment if applied outside the public service, and the second could result in lowering male pay rates in some occupations.

Muriel Heagney’s ‘omnium gatherum’ *Are Women Taking Men’s Jobs?* was not a statement of argument, but a comprehensive gathering of evidence. It contained a survey of women’s work in Victoria, with comparative studies on conditions in Britain, Alice Henry’s reports on the USA, the deteriorating conditions in Germany and the enhanced position in the USSR. Also included was Linda Littlejohn’s report on the ODI, including its unflinching advocacy of equal pay for equal work, and opposition to protective legislation. In her conclusion, Muriel Heagney pointed not to a difference in equal pay strategy among feminist reformers, but to the division within the trade union movement.

This cohesion of purpose was maintained for two more very active years, with no opportunity missed. When an interstate ministerial conference in January 1936 recommended protective legislation for women in industry, Jessie Street, then president of the Australian Open Door Council, appealed to the federal Minister, advocating the advantages for both male and female workers of equal pay and opportunity. In May both she and Muriel Heagney spoke at a conference on equal pay. As a vice-president of the AFWV, Jessie Street gave a spirited summary of the effects of employment discrimination at the Federation’s 1936 conference in Adelaide.

When the NSW Industrial Commission lowered the female living wage, it was the United Associations who responded immediately, and kept up the pressure until the reduced wage was restored. In a 1936 article, Jessie Street charged the NSW Labor Party to do more than pay lip service and to implement its longstanding policy on equal pay, condemning attempts to undermine the feminist equal pay campaign with ‘misleading criticism’. Their campaigning was not only reactive; at the same time Jessie Street was arguing for emerging new industries to introduce equal pay, rather than basing new rates on old awards.

**Battleground**

At an equal pay conference convened by the NSW Clerks’ Union in Sydney on 22 May 1937, Muriel Heagney established a peak body in the equal pay campaign, the Council for Action on Equal Pay (CAEP). This was the first equal pay organisation linking trades unions with other bodies, including the United Associations and Jessie Street was a member of its ‘Organisation Commission’, convened by Eileen Powell. While women trade unionists had common ground with feminist groups on the broader agenda of employment discrimination, with the focus directed to equal pay, differences rapidly became
defended positions. The CAEP soon became a site of open conflict, with Muriel Heagney disputing the gradualist strategy proposed by Jessie Street as the very opposite of the principle of equality.

The United Associations had changed their equal pay strategy to the gradualist approach Jessie Street recommended two years before, in *The Justice of Equal Pay and Equal Opportunity*. Though she continued to use the ‘2/3 of a man’ rhetoric to point to the gap between the assumptions and the reality of a gendered basic wage, Jessie Street was aware the target had changed. In January 1931 as a Depression measure, the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration had reduced wages, including the basic wage, by 10 per cent. This move established a new federal principle of wage fixing – the capacity of industry to pay – and overturned the ‘family wage’ principle, the change affirmed by the Court in cases throughout the 1930s. Jessie Street’s ‘gradualist’ strategy was a pragmatic response to this change, recognising that employers’ ability to pay, and more broadly the impact of equal pay on employers as well as employees, was now a factor in wage fixing.

This was not a position Muriel Heagney was prepared to consider. While Jessie Street and the United Associations continued to lobby for gradual gains, the CAEP reiterated the policy defined at the founding meeting in May – an immediate raising of the female rate from 54 per cent to parity with the male rate to achieve equal pay in one move, and occupational rates for both men and women workers. The CAEP protested at the United Associations’ position, arguing that affiliated bodies should pursue Council policy. But with a Bill before the NSW Parliament to amend the Industrial Arbitration Act, in October the United Associations was actively lobbying parliamentarians for an additional amendment. Their proposal made the division with the CAEP clear – they were pressing for raising the female basic wage from 54 per cent to 60 per cent of the male wage, with provision for an annual 5 per cent increase until an 80 per cent proportion was reached.

The crisis, perhaps inevitably, erupted when the Clerks Union brought a case for an equal minimum wage before the NSW Industrial Court in 1937. Muriel Heagney was now a member of this Union and the application, like the formation of the CAEP, owed much to her drive, ability and reputation. However, the United Associations briefed barrister Nerida Cohen to intervene in this case, with a submission on phased-in equal pay. To the UA the success of any equal pay measure meant addressing the effect on industry, but to Muriel Heagney this struck at the core of the claim – the injustice of accepting the gendered wage. At the CAEP meeting on 23 November 1937, the United Associations’ position was rejected. This did nothing to weaken Jessie Street’s conviction and the debate became a public and at times a bitter one.

For two more years the UA persisted in maintaining its independent position, while affiliated with the CAEP. This was a considerable achievement for those who remained members of both bodies, among them NSW Teachers Federation representative Lucy Woodcock whose letter of introduction for Jessie Street’s travels in 1938 announced her ‘a loyal advocate of equal status and pay for women’. Jessie Street’s absence overseas from April to November that year was perhaps of even more assistance in extending the tense connection.

Just as Muriel Heagney had done ten years before, in 1939 Jessie Street was lecturing and writing on her visit to the USSR, outlining the achievements in greater employment opportunity and equal pay she had been delighted to observe both in practice, and in the new Soviet Constitution. And as with Muriel Heagney, this enthusiasm drew the attention of the Commonwealth Investigation Service. That year Jessie Street also joined the Darlinghurst Branch of the Australian Labor Party, and became president of Sydney’s Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, ensuring regular surveillance swelled her security file.

When the CAEP’s annual conference in September 1939 insisted on policy unity, the UA finally withdrew from the Council, but not from the fray. Two articles by Jessie Street on a ‘Five-year Plan’ for equal pay appeared in the same issue of Sydney’s *Daily News* as a report of the CAEP split charging that UA members ‘were bowing to the dictates of their bourgeois husbands’. As Jessie Street had changed neither her 1935 position on equal pay nor her husband, this attack flags a rebuilding of class rhetoric across what had been common ground. In her case however, the charge of taking advice from her husband might not have been inaccurate, as Kenneth Street sat on the NSW Industrial Commission from 1927 to 1931 and could have been a factor in Jessie Street’s grasp of the change in federal wage fixing.
Without access to the CAEP, Jessie Street set up a new body, the Trade Union Equal Pay Committee, to bridge the contested ground. The 1940 Basic Wage Inquiry in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court provided a national arena on equal pay, but its army was now split into opposing camps. The United Associations again briefed Nerida Cohen, and she and Jessie Street were both at the Court in Melbourne on 21 November 1940 to present the application for leave to intervene. Seventy unions had applications to the Inquiry, but none had made any claim for a female minimum wage, and thus leave could not be granted for the UA submission. Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen then arranged a meeting of 33 trades unions and secured a resolution to require the ACTU to make a separate application to the Court on equal pay. There was no consultation with Muriel Heagney, who with Labour Council president Jack Hughes had apparently intended to put a ‘one-step’ case for equal pay to the Basic Wage Inquiry, through the ACTU advocate Charles Crofts.18

The principle of employers’ ability to pay, introduced in 1931, was reaffirmed by Piper J in the 1940 Basic Wage Inquiry. He pointed out the ‘erroneous impression in some quarters that the guiding principle on which the basic wage is now fixed by this Court is that it is to be a family wage’. The error persisted even in high level quarters including the Commonwealth Public Service Board. Nine years later, when lobbying focussed on federal government responsibilities as an employer, the Board informed Prime Minister Ben Chifley:

Broadly, remuneration in the Public Service comprises a basic wage plus a margin for skill; the basic wage element being related to the needs of a family unit of four persons. The difference in total remuneration is due solely to the fact that the basic wage element, designed to provide for a family of four persons, is inapplicable to an unmarried female. The same argument might, of course, be used of an unmarried male, but he is paid the full rate on the grounds that he should be enabled to prepare himself financially for marriage, with its resultant financial responsibilities. This reasoning could not be applied in the same way to females.19

When this response failed to satisfy the lobbyists, who pointed to its discriminatory fallacy, Chifley’s office sought advice from the Attorney-General, who provided Piper J’s reasoning in the 1940 Inquiry. Chifley’s office employed it to fend off the lobbying and, one hopes, to correct the confusion in the Public Service Board.

Positive results from the debacle of the equal pay case and the 1940 Basic Wage Inquiry were limited to the publicity generated by the exclusion of Nerida Cohen and Jessie Street, and the leverage this provided within the ACTU. At the ACTU’s next triennial conference, delegates adopted the principle of wage equality and established a committee to implement this, with Muriel Heagney one of the six members.20

During the war years the UA escalated its campaign against employment discrimination, with the additional targets of wages and conditions of servicewomen, of women drafted into war industries, and of women replacing men in other occupations. In February 1941 the Advisory War Council established the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) to provide vital telegraphists and radio operators – over the opposition of both the Minister for the Air, Jack McEwen, and the Labor shadow minister, Norman Makin, united against the enlistment of women. Makin’s attempt to stymie the proposal by invoking a provision for equal pay failed, and the Council set the ‘2/3 of a man’ rate for the new service.21

The UA quickly seized the opportunity of the succession of a Labor government in October 1941 to campaign against this new inequity, an ‘appeasement to employers and the privileged class of male labour’.22 After a series of letters, Jessie Street and Erna Keighley were in Canberra in March 1942 to lobby Minister for Air Arthur Drakeford, and met the departmental secretary, Major Langslow, while waiting for Drakeford. In April Jessie Street was again at Parliament House in Canberra to continue the campaign, having meantime complained to Curtin of Langslow’s ‘positively antediluvian’ attitude to the employment of women. The internal correspondence between Curtin and his Minister reveals Cabinet’s divided opinion on the issue of pay and conditions in the WAAAF.23

The UA also lobbied both Curtin and his Minister for Labour, Eddie Ward, on the proposal for a Women’s Employment Board (WEB) to manage the employment of women in essential wartime industries. Eileen Powell was appointed to represent the Commonwealth as employer, while the UA campaigned unsuccessfully for Jessie Street to be one of the employees’ representatives.24
The WEB was established in March 1942, despite broad opposition. Employers had campaigned against it, and Muriel Heagney considered the ACTU had compromised its own position by accepting its establishment. When the Senate moved in September to disallow the National Security regulations under which the WEB was established, it took a High Court case to affirm the validity of the regulations and the WEB. In the Senate debate on extending the powers of the WEB in March 1943, the Opposition argued the Act already ‘practically gave to the Women’s Employment Board the right to mark its own card’. At the same time Jessie Street was using her International Women’s Day address to endorse the WEB as a progressive means by which ‘Women are proving the justice of their claim for equal pay and opportunity’.

There proved some grounds for this optimism, with the WEB setting rates for those women replacing male workers, at proportions ranging from 75-100 per cent of the male rate. Jessie Street also saw the effects firsthand, when she joined the Ironworkers Union and worked for several weeks in a Melbourne munitions factory, during which the employees successfully campaigned for immediate implementation of a promised but delayed 90 per cent rate – with back pay. Although the CAEP folded in 1948 and the WEB had wound down at the end of the war, both bodies, and the UA’s Trade Union Equal Pay committee, share the success achieved in the 1949 Basic Wage Inquiry in securing a 75 per cent rate for women.

Cold War

The battleground of equal pay persisted into the peace, but even so, progress seemed possible in the period of reconstruction and renewed hope in which the United Nations was planned and established. In March 1944 Jessie Street led a delegation to Canberra to present an ‘Australian Woman’s Charter’ to parliamentarians, including a call for an equal minimum wage amendment of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act. While Jessie Street was in Canberra, Muriel Heagney was at the 1944 CAEP conference in Sydney, relaying the proceedings to the Prime Minister. In an extraordinary letter that makes clear the level of bitterness and suspicion that had riven the equal pay movement. She wrote of a campaign directed ‘to capture or silence’ the CAEP and ‘then carry on with a semi-commo show run by Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen’.

Wartime had shredded the international network, but even more damaging was the deepening rift between Australia’s leading pre-war campaigners that severely weakened the ability of either to command ministerial support in State or Federal parliaments.

Curtin had sufficient confidence in Jessie Street to appoint her the following year to Australia’s delegation to the San Francisco conference to found the United Nations, successor to the League. There she distinguished herself in the group of women who successfully campaigned for inclusion of a clause on the equality in the Charter, and a proposal for a commission on the status of women. When the Chifley Government nominated Jessie Street to the Status of Women Commission (CSW) in 1946, Australia easily won a seat, and Jessie Street was elected first deputy chair for her two-year term. But after her return from the first CSW in 1947, Bessie Rischbieth established a Liaison Committee of Australian Women’s Organisations to lobby the Chifley Government against Jessie Street’s reappointment to the CSW.

At her last official CSW session in 1948, Jessie Street took part in drafting an Economic and Social Council resolution that United Nations members implement the principle of equal remuneration of work of equal value. While the Australian delegation abstained from voting on this resolution, through it Jessie Street helped open a door to federal action against employment discrimination.

The lobbying to wedge this door open was intense. In March 1949 the UA’s Trade Union Equal Pay Committee, with Lucy Woodcock and Jessie Street joint presidents, asked Chifley what instructions were being given to Australia’s delegates to the ILO session. In June 1949 Jessie Street led four separate Australian Woman’s Charter deputations on the CSW equal pay recommendation to ministers and public servants. In July, after the High Court rejected the continuation of WEB wage determinations under National Security regulations, Jessie Street pressed the Charter’s call for an amendment to the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act to introduce a single minimum wage for both sexes.
This wave had gathered force from the 1948 resolution of the UN Economic and Social Council, and the networking nationally and internationally in which Jessie Street was prominent. That year she was one of the ‘26 outstanding women in the world’ chosen to speak in a special broadcast on United Nations Day that October, her allocated subject ‘How to remove the impediments to equal pay’.

But there was also a powerful undertow in the deepening fear of Communism. A week after the United Nations Broadcast office sought the cooperation of the ABC to record Jessie Street’s Australian contribution to the international broadcast, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran allegations that the UA was ‘Communist-controlled’. In June this charge had been levelled in the Senate, by Labor’s Dorothy Tangney, against the other organisation most closely associated with Jessie Street, the Australian Women’s Charter movement. Press insinuations and public allegations against Jessie Street persisted, to the detriment of the work of the Australian Woman’s Charter movement and the United Associations, which reported in May 1950 that ‘The cause of equality of status is so unpopular with the press that we can expect no attractive publicity through them’.

The ILO passed Convention No.100 and the recommendation on Equal Pay on 29 June 1951, with Australia’s government representatives again abstaining from voting. At the CSW session in 1952 Australia’s representative Jean Daly supported the CSW move to have the Covenant on Human Rights include Article 21 on equal pay for equal work. The Commission on Human Rights agreed on the addition, with Australia’s delegate EG Whitlam abstaining from voting, as did the delegates from the USA and Britain.

Lack of government will and bureaucratic inertia had dogged the equal pay campaign from the first, but during the 1950s the obduracy even drew comment from the bureaucrats on the ongoing ‘duck-shoving’. In January 1956 after Ronald Mendelsohn drafted Menzies’ response to correspondence from the UA, he made a note to departmental head Sir Allen Browne ‘I had hoped that the PM might give us a direction on this … He simply changed the letter to avoid committing himself, even to the extent he had been committed in the past’. The response goes some way to explaining how faint the once high hopes of the quest for equal pay had become:

> I would suggest that we should take the absence of any instruction from the Prime Minister as meaning that he does not want any specific work done by the Department on this topic at the present time. I do not see any early prospect of direct action by the Government.

This certainly explains how governments can stall reform, though why so many Australian governments did this for so long is the more important question. But in sketching Jessie Street’s role in the equal pay campaign, a far more disturbing problem arises. In government records and private papers there is ample evidence of a reasonable, determined and thorough democratic participation in the cause of equality. While the campaigners must bear the charges of naiveté, and division, this evidence of the nature of the campaign means governments are more seriously indicted. By failing to respond accountably, responsibly, and reasonably, to a campaign based on the principle of equality, they undermined the legitimacy on which democratic governments should depend. And in the case of Jessie Street and others linked to transnational reformist networks of this period, it was not only inaction, but governments’ use of surveillance and insinuation as weapons against dissent that poses a most serious charge. The pursuit of equal pay was ‘simple justice denied’ not only in governments’ failure to act, but in acting so as to subvert the exercise of citizenship.

**Endnotes**


12. Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department to Prime Minister’s private secretary, 6 July 1949, Prime Ministers’ Department file. NAA A462, 374/7.


15. Lucy Woodcock, 2 March 1938. NLA MS2683.


19. Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department to Prime Minister’s private secretary, 6 July 1949; F.X. Schneider to Prime Minister’s private secretary, 7 June 1949. Prime Minister’s Department file. NAA A462, 374/7.


22. Jessie Street to Prime Minister John Curtin, 19 December 1941; Jessie Street to John Dedman, 23 December 1941. NLA MS2683/3/227 & 229.

23. Jessie Street to Prime Minister John Curtin, 6 April 1942; Drakeford to Curtin, 17 April 1942; Council for Women in War Work correspondence 1944, John Curtin Personal Papers. NAA M1415, 72.


25. Senator Leckie, Hansard, 16 March 1943. NAA A461, Q351/1/1.


27. For instance, see Report of Second Charter Conference, including the 1946-49 Charter, sent to Chifley on 3 September 1947, J.B. Chifley Personal Papers. NAA M1455, 289.


30. ECOSOC Resolutions 121 (VI) of 10 March and 154 (VII) of 20 August 1948. NAA A462, 374/7; Prime Minister Chifley to C.L. Scrimgeour, 11 August 1949; Private secretary for Minister Labour & National Service to Prime Minister’s private secretary 14 June 1949; Jessie Street to Prime Minister Chifley, 5 September 1949. In Prime Minister’s Department file ‘Equal pay for men and women – general representations on government policy’ 1949-56. NAA A462, 374/7; D. Nicholas to J.B. Chifley, 24 March 1949, in Personal Papers of Prime Minister Chifley April 1948 – August 1949. NAA M1455, 372.

31. E. Fletcher to Prime Minister 13 May 1949, in Prime Minister’s Department file ‘Equal pay for men and women – general representations on government policy’ 1949-56, Prime Minister’s Department file. NAA A462, 374/7.


33. Secretary’s report, 14 May 1950, UA Papers. ML MS2160/Y789.


The Labor Split revisited: old memories and new evidence

Robert Corcoran, Melbourne

Twelve years ago, at the Labour History conference in Newcastle, I presented a simple account of the Santamaria Movement’s activities at the time of the Split, based on my own experience. When I had finished, a well-known Sydney character in the audience ran up to the front, grabbed the microphone and asserted that what I had said about Santamaria and the Movement was just a ‘suburban myth’.

Since then, a lot of research has been undertaken on the Split, and a number of new books have been published. The most significant of these is Bruce Duncan’s Crusade or Conspiracy? and it shows clearly that Santamaria’s central role in the Split was not a myth.¹

In this paper, I will compare new research and earlier books with my personal experience at the time. It will stress the need to correct the distorted perceptions of the Split that began in the 1950s, when the newspapers ignored the Movement and simply blamed Evatt.²

Some of you will already be well aware of the early events that I will mention – and I ask you to be patient.

First-hand experience

My personal experience about it all began more than 60 years ago when my father, my brother and I were invited, at different times, to become members of the Movement. Each of us declined. According to Santamaria himself, it was founded began at a meeting of four people in his home in August 1941.³

During the years before and during the Split I was both a Catholic and an ALP member – and I learnt something of the inner workings of the Santamaria Movement. In the same period, as a returning officer for ALP selection ballots, I witnessed its impact on the Labor Party.

Opposition to communists in trade unions was a large part of its work in its early years, but it soon became clear that there was more to it than that. Santamaria’s aim was to gain influence over and, later, control of the Labor Party. He has acknowledged this himself in confidential letters that have only recently been made public.⁴

By the early 1950s the Movement was infiltrating the ALP in a serious way and in 1951 I warned other Labor people of the danger and tried to have the Movement investigated. I was threatened with expulsion from the party if I persisted.

The Labor leader, Dr Evatt, raised the matter publicly in his famous statement in October 1954. A Federal Executive inquiry followed and I gave evidence.⁵

Since the Split I have tried to keep up with the research and literature on the subject and a list of books, with comments, is given as an appendix to this paper.

The Movement and the Catholic Church

Santamaria gained the support and patronage of the elderly Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Mannix, and the Movement soon became powerful. It did so mainly because of its connection with the Catholic Church. This relationship has been controversial and is discussed in detail in books by Bruce Duncan and Gerard Henderson.⁶

Branches operated from Catholic parishes and met in Church buildings. Priests attended its meetings, prayers were recited and its members were required to take a semi-religious vow ‘never to disclose the existence or activities of this Movement’.⁷

Part of the reason why historians and others have found it difficult to obtain information about the Movement’s activities from its former members may be their fear about breaking this pledge, even after so many years.
The Past is Before Us

Part B: Non-Refereed Papers

The Movement in action

This is how the Movement operated.

Lists of Catholic parish members were scrutinised by local Movement leaders and workers likely to be union members were interviewed. Those who were classified as ‘reliable’ and willing to obey instructions would be informed of crucial union meetings and elections and transport provided to take them to meetings. They were told how to vote, or simply given the instruction ‘Watch so-and-so and vote as he does’. 8

On a few occasions I was invited to Movement meetings. (It was probably assumed that, being an active Catholic, I would also be sympathetic to the Movement). The invitations did not identify the real nature of the meetings so I innocently went along and learned some of the Movement’s secrets, although that was not my intention.

The Movement had significantly infiltrated the Labor Party in Victoria by 1949 and, in the Federal election of that year, six of the eight new Federal Labor members from Victoria were Movement supporters.

A couple of years later, I became a returning officer for selection ballots and saw the evidence first-hand. Many of the voters did not know what was going on. They had been ferried to polling place by people known to me as Movement members who instructed them about how to fill in the ballot papers. 9

Exposing the Movement – and a blunt threat

Until 1951 I had criticised the Movement only among Catholics and kept silent about it in other company. But, gradually, I became more worried about the danger to the Labor Party and I decided to expose the Movement – ‘to blow the whistle’ as we would now say.

So, at the Dandenong ALP branch meeting in October 1951 I explained the nature of the Movement and how it operated. The atmosphere was tense and the local Movement leader, (who had invited me to become a member) shouted that I was a ‘liar’ and denied the organisation existed. Within the Catholic community, the truth of I said was not challenged but I was called a ‘traitor to the Church’.

Most of the ALP members in Dandenong, including a few Catholics, supported me, and the branch formally requested the Victorian Central Executive to investigate the Movement.10 We received a brief letter of acknowledgment, but the real response came verbally from Frank McManus – later a DLP Senator. It was a threat. If we persisted, the Dandenong branch would be disbanded and Corcoran would be expelled from the ALP.11 The branch decided to be quiet.

Soon afterwards the State Secretary, Dinny Lovegrove, a non-Catholic, discussed the Movement with me in a private conversation at the ALP head office in Melbourne. He was not unfriendly but told me I was ‘rocking the boat’ and the Movement was not a problem.

We can conclude from these events that most ordinary ALP members, apart from Catholics, knew very little about the Movement at that time in 1951. Even the State Secretary was unaware of the danger.

Dinny Lovegrove remained supportive of the Movement for the next three years until his eyes were opened by events at the end of 1954. He then reversed his view and became an outspoken critic.

Evatt and Lovegrove: both in the dark

Evatt also seemed to be unaware the gravity of the threat posed by the Movement.

After his public statement in October 1954, Evatt was criticised as a ‘hypocrite’ by his opponents. They claimed that he must have known all about the Movement because he had had discussions with Santamaria before the 1954 elections. In fact, Santamaria already regarded him as an enemy at that time and would not have shared Movement secrets with Evatt.12

Compared to Lovegrove, who was in the thick of things in Victoria, Evatt had much less opportunity to learn about the Movement’s undercover activities. According to Senator Jim Ormonde, Dr Evatt was slow to realise the extent of Movement influence and quite incredulous when he heard stories of Movement machinations.13
Santamaria’s mission – or his wild dream?

A confidential letter uncovered long after the Split shows that Santamaria was quite confident he would control the ALP by the late 1950s. He wrote it to Archbishop Mannix on 11 December 1952. In this letter Santamaria explained that the Movement had more ambitious aims than restraining communism. He was confident that it would be no more than five or six years before Movement people controlled the Labor Party. After a Labor government was elected, he would have the power to ensure that legislation was passed to implement his own ideology.

The letter shows the nature of Santamaria’s hidden political aims and is confirmed by a previous letter he had written to Mannix along the same lines in November 1948. The historically important letter to Mannix has been mentioned in books and documents by many authors. They include Andrew Campbell, Edmund Campion, Gavan Duffy, Bruce Duncan, Ross Fitzgerald and Gerard Henderson.

Duffy, a strong supporter of Santamaria, comments on the letter in a vague way and it is little wonder that he fails to discuss it frankly as it shows that Santamaria was lying about his interest in politics at the time of the Split.

As an example, in 1955, Santamaria was reported in the Catholic newspaper ‘The Advocate’ as follows: ‘I repeat what I have already said on two occasions. The statement that I or persons associated with me have been interested in infiltrating the Labour Party is totally untrue’.

Schools’ finance scam

Another remarkable secret letter was discovered in the Bendigo Catholic Church archives. It was from Santamaria to Bishop Stewart – and similar ones were probably sent to all the Victorian Catholic bishops.

The letter, written in 1967, proposed that ten per cent of government financial aid to Catholic schools in Victoria be siphoned off for six years and given to the Movement. The scheme has been described as ‘unethical’ or ‘criminal’. To have proposed such a scheme suggests that Santamaria’s enthusiasm, or obsession, with the Movement must have clouded his moral judgment and overcame his common sense.

Evatt speaks out at last

Gradually, the Movement’s power was becoming more widely known – at least within political circles – and, at last, the Federal Labor Leader, Dr Evatt, spoke out publicly on 5 October 1954.

At that time the general public knew very little about Santamaria and the Movement. But some journalists did, and information was available to anyone who seriously looked for it. For example, a short but revealing article about the Movement was published in the Sydney Morning Herald, written by its editor, John Pringle.

Despite this, the overwhelming majority of newspapers published little more than Santamaria’s carefully worded statements that gave the impression that he was not involved in politics. It was not until years later that he even admitted the existence of the Movement. Meanwhile, the daily papers simply blamed Evatt.

Spurred by Evatt’s statement, the Federal Executive investigated the matter and focussed on Victoria. It held a series of meetings towards the end of 1954 and heard many witnesses who had a wide range of opinions. The Executive produced a report and condemned the Movement’s activities within the ALP. It dismissed the Victorian Central Executive and called a special conference.

The rest of the public events from 1955 onwards, related to the Split, are fairly well known. Labor politicians and supporters divided into two camps and the Democratic Labor Party was created.
**Political history after the Split**

In the years that followed, DLP preference votes were a major factor in keeping Labor out of government in Canberra until 1972 – and for ten years more in Victoria. It was a paradox that Santamaria chose to assist the conservatives in this way for so long, despite his professed concern for the less-privileged people of the community.

His reason may have been fear of international communism. More likely, in my opinion, Santamaria was bitterly disappointed at failing to gain control of the Labor Party – when it had seemed almost within his grasp in 1954. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

After the Split most people accepted the mass media’s version, namely, that Evatt was to blame. This has had its influence upon historians, including some who were sympathetic towards the Labor Party, such as Bob Murray and, to some extent, Ross McMullin. There were some writers, such as Paul Ormonde, who pointed an accusing finger at Santamaria, but they received little attention.

The facts about the Movement were not published in the daily press during the 1940s and 50s when Santamaria was gradually gaining power in the ALP. Otherwise, the interpretation that the newspapers gave at the time of the Split would have been impossible. But the press, usually so quick to comment on Labor factions, had pretended not to know.

Interest subsided as the years went by, but has resurfaced recently. Serious historians have done more research and unearthed new evidence. For example, both Andrew Campbell and Bruce Duncan gained access documents that had previously been unknown or unavailable. Duncan’s research has been professionally described as ‘prodigious’ and from it he produced a massive but carefully reasoned book.

**Sources of information**

Where should people look among the mass of material that has been written about the Split?

In an appendix to this paper several publications are listed, with notes, but I will speak briefly about half-dozen that are among the more important.

Early ones, published in the 1970s, were *The Split*, by Bob Murray and *The Movement*, by Paul Ormonde.

Murray’s *The Split* is famous and has been a big influence on later writers. It includes a mass of information on names, dates and events. But the author obtained much of his material in the DLP office and his writing shows the influence of pro-Movement people around him.

It is unfortunate that he did not interview more Catholic critics of the Movement who could have given him important information not mentioned in the DLP office. For example, many could have corrected Murray’s naïve assertion that the Movement took no part in ALP selection ballots. Murray repeatedly praises Santamaria with words such as ‘brilliant’, ‘eloquent’, ‘charm’, ‘patience’ and denigrates Evatt as ‘panic-stricken’, ‘unscrupulous’, ‘obsessive’.

*The Split* was published again in 1984, by which time there was ample evidence that the original edition was badly flawed. It is puzzling and regrettable that the 1970 version was not thoroughly revised.

Paul Ormonde’s *The Movement* was written by critics of the Movement. It is a source of first-hand information from several Catholics, including myself, who personally saw it in action. Ormonde’s book has been badly neglected by historians.

Santamaria’s own views are given in his 1981 political autobiography, *Against the Tide*. It was republished with additional chapters as *Santamaria: a memoir* in 1987. Neither of them tells us much about the secret activities of the Movement nor do they frankly explain Santamaria’s own political ambitions.

I referred earlier to Bruce Duncan’s *Crusade or Conspiracy?* which is a major contribution to political history. It contains a huge amount of detailed information on the background and history of the Movement and the Split. Duncan closely examines Santamaria’s motives and ideology. He also describes in detail the discord and argument over the Movement at the higher levels within the Catholic Church.
Ross Fitzgerald’s *The Pope’s Battalions* covers a lot of the same ground but focuses more on Santamaria personally — from his boyhood through to his old age. It includes an account of his boyhood visit to his parents’ home island off the coast of Sicily. This holiday gave Santamaria a rosy view of traditional peasant lifestyle that coloured his ideology.

Gavan Duffy’s *Demons and Democrats* is another new book and the title suggests that it is a rejoinder to Duncan’s *Crusade or Conspiracy?* It is published by Freedom Publishing Company, the publishing arm of the National Civic Council and gives arguments in favour of the Movement. Despite having held a senior position within the NCC Duffy discloses no secrets and little if any new information about the Movement.

**Conclusion**

I now come to the conclusion of this paper. It will be brief and will give my personal opinions about the Labor Split and the lessons to be learned from it.

First, Dr Evatt should not be blamed. In fact, he should be applauded for exposing the hidden danger to the Labor Party. My regret is that the danger was not recognised and made public years earlier — by Evatt or some other senior person in the party.

Secondly, the mass media deliberately created the perception that Evatt was to blame and they chose to hide the facts about the Movement. The distorted story was widely accepted and helped to keep Labor out of office.

Next, I have no doubt that Santamaria was the one most responsible for the Split. More precisely, it was Santamaria’s belief that his vocation in life was to change Australia to conform to his own strange ideology.

And, finally, the lesson to be learned from the Split is the need for constant vigilance within the Labor Party — and the courage to take prompt action before any problem caused by factions gets out of hand. In practice, this is unlikely unless the ALP officially demands that factions must be continuously open to scrutiny by Labor Party members.

**Appendix: a select list of publications related to the Labor Split, with comments**


In the 1930s Brennan was familiar with the characteristics of the Catholic community and other circumstances that made the Movement possible. He supported the Movement for some years but his views altered and he became one of its opponents.

**Calwell, A.A., Be Just and Fear Not, Rigby, Melbourne, 1978.**

This is a political autobiography. Calwell joined those who opposed the Movement at the time of the Split. He remained a staunch church-attending Catholic despite insults and bitter antagonism from some fellow-Catholics.

**Campbell, Andrew, Politics as a vocation: a critical examination of BA Santamaria and the politics of commitment 1936-1957, PhD Deakin University 1989.**

Campbell was given access to many of Santamaria’s files and records and delves deeply into the development of Santamaria’s ideology. His thesis discusses how Santamaria came to believe that it was his vocation in life to gain political power and ‘reform’ Australia according to his own ideology.

**Campion, Edmund, Rockchoppers: Growing up Catholic in Australia, Penguin, Melbourne, 1994.**

Campion describes the Catholic community in Australia in the first half of the 20th century. The cohesion of Catholics was a factor, among others, that made the Movement possible.

**Catholic Worker, Melbourne, July 1959.**

Ten pages of this issue deal with the Movement which was still largely unknown four years after the Split. The article includes the controversial relationship between the Movement and the Catholic Church. It also shows how Santamaria changed his avowed principles to suit the changes in the attitude of the Catholic bishops towards his organisation.

Well-qualified speakers deal with several topics related to the Split. Among the subjects are the relationships to the Split of the Movement, the Catholic bishops, the media, and even the Liberal Party.


Some chapters are pertinent to the Split, particularly the references to Chifley’s growing concern about the new Labor MPs coming from Victoria and their connection to the Movement.


The title seems to be a rejoinder to *Crusade or Conspiracy?* Duffy, as a senior member of the NCC, would have had access to historical information about the Movement. So it is disappointing that the book offers little, if any, new facts about the Movement or the Split. However, Duffy does acknowledge the existence of the important letter that Santamaria sent to Mannix in December 1952. It is regrettable that he brushes it aside without discussing the substance of Santamaria’s letter.


This is a recent book based on a huge amount of research. It covers a wide range of factors involved in the Santamaria Movement and the Labor Split including the differences of opinion within the Catholic Church about the status of the Movement. It is a closely reasoned work and not always an ‘easy read’, but parts of the book can be studied independently, according to the particular interests of the reader. However, the last chapter, ‘Conclusion’ should be read by anyone interested in the Labor Split—or Australian political history.


Duthie was a Federal Member of Parliament, a minister of religion, and a member of the Federal Executive that investigated the Victorian ALP and the Movement in 1954. He relates some aspects of that investigation in interesting detail from notes he took at the time. He is not afraid to comment on the witnesses, including their truthfulness or otherwise.


This is another new and comprehensive book. It deals with the circumstance that led to the Split and the history of the National Civic Council and the DLP in the years that followed. It includes a study of the influences that shaped Santamaria’s beliefs—particularly his fixation that small peasant farms had a special value. It follows Santamaria’s life from boyhood through to old age.


This book deals to some extent with the Labor Split but it is mainly concerned with the relationship of Santamaria and his Movement with the Australian Catholic bishops. They supported Santamaria in 1945 but many of them became disenchanted. As did the Vatican authorities. Henderson tells the story in considerable detail, including the opinions and responses to the situation of individual bishops whom he names.


A partisan book but one that reveals the attitudes and feelings of one of the pro-Movement people involved in the Split.


The book consists of the presentations of a range of speakers at a ‘Cold War’ conference in Melbourne in 2001. Most, but not all, of the speakers were critical of the Movement.


This is a political autobiography and typifies McManus’s tactical style (possibly developed in his time as a competition debater.) He simply omits whatever might detract from his argument, and inflates the positive. It is, unintentionally, a revealing study of the person – whatever one may think of the material.


Overall it is a wonderful book but in respect to the Split and Dr Evatt, the author may have been influenced by the fashionable interpretation of the Split. It was the version that denigrated Evatt and overlooked the activities of Santamaria. This perception ignored the danger of Santamaria getting ‘the numbers’ at ALP conferences and drastically changing Labor policy.

*The Split* was the first major book about the Labor Split and gained a reputation as the ‘Bible’ of the subject. It contains a large volume of useful data on dates, events, and the names of those involved, but Murray was handicapped by the circumstance that the DLP possessed the Victorian ALP records. He had to work in the DLP office in close proximity to Movement activists—and the interpretations in the book are sometimes similar to those of his DLP mentors. This is typified in his judgmental descriptions of Santamaria and Evatt, as noted in the body of this paper.


The author’s father, Senator Jim Ormonde, was largely instrumental in persuading Evatt to publicly expose the Movement. In addition to a history of the events of the Split, Paul Ormone’s book includes accounts of the operation of the Movement by Catholics who knew the facts from first-hand experience. It also shows (in Appendix B) how the ALP rules were misused to ‘stack’ branches and manipulate selection ballots.


The book takes a hard look at the strengths and weaknesses, the personality and motives of Santamaria. It consists of the mature reflections of Catholics who disagreed with Santamaria’s attempts to influence Australian politics in the years leading to the Split. One contributor concentrates, not on the Split, but on Santamaria’s pro-war activity at the time of the Vietnam conflict.


Pringle came to Australia to become the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and held the position for five years in the 1950s and returned to the United Kingdom. He then wrote *Australian Accent* and included a perceptive chapter in which he describes the Movement, Santamaria and the Split in a way that would make a good introduction to anyone who wishes to learn about the subject from scratch—or has only a sketchy idea of it all.


The long second chapter is given the title ‘The Movement 1941-1960 – An Outline’ but it gives much more space to communism than to the Movement. Later chapters give his views on several important political matters including defence, migration and the relationship between religion and politics.


Santamaria was always a city person but this book shows he considered that farming life was more spiritually uplifting than city existence. This element of Santamaria’s beliefs receives attention by other authors previously mentioned—including Duncan, Fitzpatrick and Campbell.

—— *Against the Tide*, OUP, Melbourne, 1981.

This is Santamaria’s autobiography, dealing with his public or working life up to about 1980 and discusses the Movement, the Split, and politics in the decades that followed. When he wrote it Santamaria was still the very active leader of the Movement and the book gives away no secrets. It is by no means a relaxed story by a philosophical old man who might admit mistakes.


It is again an autobiography but is not simply a new edition of *Against the Tide*. Much of the previous book is included, some is omitted and the last part of the new book suggests a late change in Santamaria’s priorities – partly a return to some of the political convictions of his youthful years.

Endnotes

1. Bruce Duncan *Crusade or Conspiracy?* UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, 406-7
2. A typical example was the Melbourne *Herald* editorial of 6 October 1954, headed ‘An Angry Doctor’. It was published the day after Evatt’s statement and was entirely a personal criticism of Evatt. It did not mention the existence of the Movement despite that organisation being the most important element of Evatt’s statement.
3. Those present at the first meeting, according to Ross Fitzgerald, in *The Pope’s Battalions*, 57 were Santamaria, Cremeen, Frank Hannan and Stan Keon. In *Against the Tide*, OUP, Melbourne, 76, Santamaria writes that there were four people present ‘... two others in addition to Cremeen and myself’. (Santamaria may have been trying to protect Keon, who had blatantly lied to Federal Executive inquiry in 1954 by asserting that he knew nothing about the Movement).
5. ‘Joe’ Chamberlain, Federal vice president in 1954, stated afterwards that the evidence from the present author (Corcoran) influenced one delegate to change his mind and vote against the Movement; otherwise the vote would have been even and no action would have been taken. See Dandenong Journal, 11 July 1956, 10; Gil Duthie, I had 50,000 Bosses, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1984, 146; Paul Ormonde The Movement, Thomas Nelson, Sydney, 1972, Appendix B; Robert Murray, The Split, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1970, p. 202.

6. Duncan, Crusade or Conspiracy, ch. 5; Gerard Henderson Mr Santamaria and the Bishops, Studies in the Christian Movement, Sydney, 1982, passim.

7. A part of the pledge (printed in the Movement handbook, Into Thy Hands) are the words ‘I pledge myself not to disclose to any person whatsoever, not being a member of the Movement, any information concerning its existence or activities; either during my membership or subsequently should I cease to be a member.’ (This pledge may be the reason why historians and others have found it difficult to obtain information about the Movement’s activities from former members.) See also Bruce Duncan Crusade or Conspiracy? 103; Campbell, PhD thesis, 169; Edmund Campion Rockchoppers: growing up Catholic in Australia, Penguin, Melbourne, 1994, 107-8.


9. Ibid., pp. 171-2 and 177.


12. Duncan, Crusade or Conspiracy, 229-30.


14. Campbell, PhD thesis, 196-7. The letter is mentioned by several other writers, including Gerard Henderson and Gavan Duffy, neither being a friend of the ALP.


16. Campbell, PhD thesis, 192. In this 1948 letter Santamaria suggests that Catholic Action should become involved in ‘large-scale action in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres … ’ It is similar to his better-known 1952 letter and shows the ambition had been in his mind in the 1940s, if not earlier.

17. Gavan Duffy, Demons and Democrats, Freedom Publishing Company, North Melbourne, 13-14, mentions Santamaria’s letter to Mannix, and comments, in part, ‘However, given the nature of the letter, the character of the author, and the character of the person to whom it was written, it is submitted that there is nothing in it which should be of surprise to anyone’. (It would certainly have been a surprise to anyone who believed Santamaria’s assertions that he was not interested in politics).


19. Sunday Age, 19 November 2000. The letter was discovered by Bruce Duncan.


21. The Melbourne Herald, 6 December 1954, published a long editorial on the findings of the just-completed ALP Federal Executive inquiry without mentioning the Movement or Santamaria, despite they had been central in the Executive’s report and decision. This is a clear example of the policy of shielding Santamaria and the Movement from scrutiny and criticism, a practice the mass media continued for many years.

22. There had been no more than three or four minor items in the daily press before the time of the Split. Afterwards, when it would have been easy to interview people who knew about the Movement, very little appeared in the papers.

23. Andrew Campbell’s thesis includes much material about the inner workings of the Movement and, also, the influences during Santamaria’s youth that helped to mould his ideology.

24. In his review of Crusade or Conspiracy? Phillip Deery writes, ‘Duncan’s conclusions are authoritative because his research was prodigious’, Labour History, no. 81, 231-2.
Women campaigning for jobs in steel in Canada and Australia: a comparative study

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In 1980, 31 unemployed Wollongong women lodged complaints of sex discrimination with the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board and began a legal and political challenge against the corporate giant, BHP, in order to win jobs at its Port Kembla steelworks. Most of these women were migrants from Macedonia, Croatia, Turkey, Chile and Greece.

In 1979-80, at the same time that the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign was beginning, a parallel campaign by Canadian women – the Women Back into Stelco Campaign – challenged the Hilton Stelco steelworks at Hamilton, Ontario, to re-employ women as production ironworkers.

Most existing studies of women in non-traditional jobs have considered situations where women were hired during the early-to-mid 1970s at the tail end of a period of economic expansion when hiring was freer and there were labour shortages. However, like the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign, the Hamilton ‘Women Back into Stelco’ Campaign, occurred at a time of protracted economic stagnation and profound technological change. The steel industry in both countries was facing international competition and technological rationalisation. As a result, the relationship between the economic situation in steel, the women’s campaigns to challenge discriminatory hiring practices, and the long-term entry of women into the paid labour force was posed with particular sharpness.

In taking on BHP and Stelco, and eventually winning, the Australian and Canadian women campaigners challenged not only major employers but also the sexual division of labour fundamental to contemporary social relations and the ideologies of femininity and masculinity that reflect and reinforce it. Their fight to get jobs in the steel industry in their respective countries was also part of a larger movement – at least in OECD countries – to transform the organisation of work, the location of women in the economy and prevailing ideas about ‘femininity’. As Canadian feminist academic Meg Luxton has pointed out, ‘the struggle to get women hired in ‘non-traditional’ jobs is at once a struggle to redefine the characteristics of those jobs and to eliminate the notion that there are such things as ‘women’s jobs’ or ‘men’s jobs’.

The gendered division of labour

In Australia and Canada, as in other capitalist societies, the social and economic consequences of the sexual division of labour and its associated gender ideologies have been seriously detrimental, leading to a general impoverishment of women compared to men and reinforcing broader patterns of male dominance and female subordination, within marriage, in the workplace and in the public realm. Biological assumptions about physical and reproductive capacity and ‘natural’ affinities as well as the unsubstantiated presumption that most women are supported by breadwinner husbands and not responsible for any legal dependents, have been used repeatedly to justify the continuation of lower wages and different classifications for women and the undervaluing of women’s work in general. A report for the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board explains:

Segregation of workers by sex into certain occupations and industries is held largely responsible for the lower overall wage structure for female workers. Typically, females are crowded into industrial jobs which involve precision and dexterity. Traditionally, these jobs have been assessed by industrial tribunals as having a relatively low work value.

The gendered division of labour has been challenged most noticeably by women’s increased participation in the workforce. The increasing employment of married women since the 1960s has also led to at least a partial redistribution of work in the home, as husbands or defacto partners of women workers have been gradually persuaded to take a more active role in their children’s care and in other ‘feminised’ domestic chores like cooking and cleaning.
The disparity between women’s and men’s earnings in the paid workforce has been challenged to some extent by demands for ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ in so called ‘women’s jobs’. However in the context of a rigidly sex segregated labour force and the persistence of ideas that reinforce sexual inequality through the undervaluing of women’s work, interpretations of the slogan ‘equal pay for equal work’ (rather than ‘one rate for the job’) have had generally unfavourable consequences for women. Progress has been made since the majority of female workers received only 54 per cent of the male weekly rate before and during World War II.7 Yet even today in Australia at least, women’s average earnings are well below that of men’s and occupations traditionally seen as ‘women’s jobs’ such as in Hospitality and Retail areas remain the lowest paid.8

Women in ‘non-traditional’ jobs during World War II

Significantly, none of the conservative ideas about women as wage labourers have prevented women from being called upon to enter the paid workforce whenever economic or social conditions required an expanded labour force.

During World War II, tens of thousands of Australian women quickly learned how to perform jobs which had previously been considered beyond their abilities in a range of defence and civilian occupations hitherto regarded as male domains, including telegraph operating and munitions and aircraft manufacturing. At the peak of female employment in 1943, there were over 800,000 women in the workforce, an increase of 157,000 since the outbreak of war in 1939.9

While women were expected to fill ‘male’ jobs, the question of what rates they were to be paid was so contentious that a special Women’s Employment Board was appointed for the duration of the war to oversee women’s working conditions including the wages of women in non-traditional jobs. The Board awarded rates between 60 to 90 per cent of the male rate to between 80,000 and 90,000 women, provoking bitter opposition from employers10 and indicating that women’s productivity and capacity was considered relatively lower than men’s. The remaining 715,000 women employed in traditional female type jobs received wages set at about 54 per cent of the basic male rate before the war and pegged since the start of the war.11

In order to maintain the cheap and expendable source of labour provided by women, employers resorted to reinstating strict job segregation and squeezing out almost all the women employed in non-traditional jobs in favour of returned servicemen as quickly as possible after the war.12

Women as a reserve labour force

Whenever women have been required to augment the paid labour force, changes in the ideological promotion of the ‘working woman’ are clearly shown in advertising and popular magazines such as the Australian Women’s Weekly. As long as women were needed in the workforce, such as during World War II, the image of the ‘working woman’ became not only visible alongside her housewife counterpart, but also attractive and socially significant. As soon as the war was over, however, the ‘working woman’ ceased to exist for the Women’s Weekly and was replaced by ‘the bride’.13

In the 1960s, married women were specifically encouraged through the popular media to enter the paid labour force in unprecedented numbers when the developing service industries demanded extra labour. By 1971 women made up 31.7 per cent of the total labour force.14 However, during the economic recession dating from 1974, many married women in the workforce were driven out and back into the home once more by means of moralistic propaganda in which they were accused of depriving their own sons and daughters of jobs.15

These cyclical manipulations of women’s labour are an indication of the way in which women have been regarded as a (cheap) reserve labour force whose ‘natural’ vocation is in the home and whose unpaid domestic labour, if recognised at all, has been seen as merely incidental to the nation’s economy.16

Women in steel in North America during World War II

Accounts of North American women’s experience in non-traditional jobs during the war reveal a similar general pattern to that of Australian women, with the distinction that the steel industry in the United
States did not recruit women in production or clerical jobs to replace men until 1943 after women’s employment had already peaked in other industries.\textsuperscript{17} This was mainly because the government, employers and the media treated the idea of employing women in steel mills as undesirable.

The Women’s Bureau of the US Labor department, which had a similar brief to the Women’s Employment Board in Australia, believed that:

The heaviness of the raw materials, the weight of the steel products, the massive equipment, the spatial spread, the heat, fumes and hazards do not offer employment possibilities that would normally be considered desirable or attractive to women.\textsuperscript{18}

Only as a last resort, a ‘revolutionary’ measure in fact, could American women – characterised by \textit{Life} magazine as more ‘feminine’ than their English or Russian sisters – be employed as steelworkers.\textsuperscript{19}

Nevertheless, the American wartime propaganda machine produced ‘Rosie the Riveter’ and her Canadian counterpart, the ‘Bren Gun Girl’ as wartime icons of the women worker to encourage women into the steel and metal industries.\textsuperscript{20} In the Black American media, women war workers were similarly portrayed as cheerfully supporting their men, but because it was assumed that they would continue working after the war, they were represented as ‘trailblazers able to escape low-wage domestic service’ rather than as housewives on a ‘temporary’ mission.\textsuperscript{21}

Women’s employment in US steel production rose from less than one per cent in 1942 to between 8-12 per cent (more than 80,000) during 1943-45.\textsuperscript{22} In Canada, the Inglis ‘Bren Gun’ steel munitions factory in Toronto was the biggest single wartime employer of women with 10,000 female staff.\textsuperscript{23} (As there is little information available on Australian women’s wartime participation in the steel industry, further research on this question is part of this project).

\textbf{Aftermath of the War: loss of women’s jobs}

While many women in Australia and elsewhere were prepared to accept the idea that they were just working ‘for the duration’ of the war and relinquished their jobs once servicemen returned, others wanted to stay on, as ‘male’ jobs were among the best paid in the unskilled and semi skilled workforce.

Not all men who survived the war chose to return to their former jobs and some women put up a fight to retain their jobs. They particularly objected to being displaced by junior males with less seniority.\textsuperscript{24} In some cases, management resorted to other means to remove women from the industry. Management at one US steelworks, for example, had drawn up a list of tasks they considered women could not perform as well as men with the intention of forcing them out of the industry at the end of the war. These were based largely on ‘outdated stereotyped views of women’s abilities that contradicted their wartime experiences’ – such as deeming women generally unsuitable for ‘climbing’ and being ‘fearful of heights’ when in fact women working as crane drivers climbed ladders several times a day to reach their jobs. A revealing comment in one document stated that women could not move a ‘man-sized load’ in a wheelbarrow.\textsuperscript{25} To bolster the company’s position that women should go, management also raised the issue of the return of protective laws, which imposed restrictions on women’s hours and conditions of work, including a very low load lifting limit of 15 pounds, and which had been inconveniently lifted during the war.\textsuperscript{26}

It had become obvious during wartime that work performed by women that was usually regarded as ‘men’s work’ was ‘neither more arduous nor more skilled than much of the ‘women’s work for which women got less pay’.\textsuperscript{27} However, it should be noted that in Australia at least, women did not work in all the classifications available to men in the steel and metal industries and were specifically barred from certain jobs due to the operation of the weight limit restrictions under section 36 of the Factories, Shops & Industries Act, upheld by the Women’s Employment Board.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Use of the ‘weight limit’ to exclude women}

Although the Women’s Employment Board was dismantled after the war, the operation of section 36 of the Factories, Shops & Industries Act remained a constraint on Australian women’s employment opportunities in a range of male dominated industries such as steel.
Ostensibly designed to protect women from harmful work environments, an alternative interpretation of the ‘protective’ nature of such legislation, based on the historical explanation of its development, has suggested that section 36 was intended to exclude women from heavy manufacturing industry and protect men’s jobs from intrusion by women. In the years leading up to the introduction of the Act, there had been an expansion of women’s employment in factories. Between 1897 and 1910, the percentage of women in factories rose from 23.7 to 33.1 in NSW.\textsuperscript{29} The annual report on the Factories, Shops & industries Act in 1911 expressed a concern to restrict female employment.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, the possibility of section 36 acting as protective safety law has been limited by the fact that it has only covered industries where women are not often employed and not the industries where women commonly work, such as nursing and childcare.\textsuperscript{31}

It was this section of the Act that Australian Iron & Steel cited in their defence for the first time on 15 August 1980 at the one and only attempted conciliation meeting between the Wollongong women complainants and Australian Iron & Steel in the Anti-Discrimination Board’s former offices in Bent St, Sydney. Section 36 was never given as a reason for rejecting women when they applied for jobs. While the Jobs for Women campaigners went back to Wollongong to hold a protest outside the steelworks employment office, the then Counsellor for Equal Opportunity, Carmel Niland, initiated a study of the application of manual handling laws at Australian Iron & Steel to assist the investigation of the women’s complaints.\textsuperscript{32}

The results of the Anti-Discrimination Board study and other evidence produced at the hearings of the NSW Equal Opportunity tribunal between May 1984 and May1985 showed that restrictions on women’s employment at the steelworks were not due to the weight limit but rather to sexist attitudes of the steelworks’ management and poor employment practices. Such practices included repeatedly refusing to hire women as production ironworkers; placing women’s names on a separate waiting list for up to seven years while men were usually hired straight away; and labelling 98 per cent of jobs ‘men only’ when most of these jobs did not require lifting over the 35 pound (16 kg) specified in the weight limit law.\textsuperscript{33}

**Impact of the women’s liberation movement**

The growth and impact of the women’s liberation movement from the early 1970s called renewed attention to the marked sex segregation of the workforce and the inequalities experienced by women in terms of job opportunities, pay and promotion in Australia and in other OECD countries.

In the United States and Canada, following the displacement of women by men returning from the war, it took an affirmative action court order filed on 15 April 1974 before jobs would once again be opened up to women in the steel industry – this time on an equal footing with men.\textsuperscript{34} Nine major steel companies and the United Steelworkers Union of America agreed to establish an affirmative action program for many ‘male’ jobs. At the peak of their employment, women represented 14,500 of the maintenance and production workers in basic steel.\textsuperscript{35} However almost as soon as they were hired, the women were displaced again – this time by the ravages of ‘de-industrialisation’.\textsuperscript{36}

It was both to gain better paying jobs and to counter the repeated displacement of women in steel that the ‘Women Back into Stelco’ Campaign was taken up by unemployed women in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1979-80.

Nevertheless, the implementation of affirmative action legislation in the 1970s in North America has meant that a generation of women in those countries who’ve worked in underground mines, steel and metal manufacturing and a range of other non-traditional jobs are now retiring after 30 years in the workforce.

In Australia it would take another decade and another major campaign in the 1980s before affirmative action policies would be introduced in any fashion in the private industrial sector.

Slobodanka Joncevska and Rosika Tot, who later joined the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign in 1980, gained jobs as labourers at BHP’s Port Kembla steelworks following an earlier successful protest by women’s liberationists who, amongst other things, chained themselves to the steelworks gates in 1973.\textsuperscript{37} But the onset of the recession from 1976, combined with a lack of maternity provisions in
awards, the absence of anti-discrimination laws, and propaganda campaigns suggesting married women were depriving their sons and daughters of jobs, forced most of the women who had recently gained jobs, including Rosika and Slobodanka, out of the steelworks.

It was through the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign, begun in 1980, that women who’d been told ‘there are no jobs for women’ at the steelworks employment office found a political voice to express their needs and frustration and an organisational means to fight for their rights.

**Similarities and differences: towards a comparative study**

Due to the influence of the feminist movement in the late 1970s, the 1980s Jobs for Women Campaign was able to utilise a greater range of legal, political and even financial resources to empower its challenge to BHP than earlier attempts to open up steelworks jobs for women.

A common, crucial aspect of the initial success of both the Australian and Canadian campaigns was the fact that they were able to gain support not only from many women’s organisations, but also from a wide cross section of unions and labour organisations around the country. Significantly, both campaigns gained strong support from their local steel unions even though the women were unemployed and not union members at the time.

Other similarities include the fact that both Australian and Canadian groups of women built broad, community-based campaigns and lodged complaints of discrimination under their respective state’s equal opportunity provisions. The leaders of both campaigns were politicised women, active in trade unions and the broader labour movement as well as in the women’s liberation movement. Both groups of women won jobs not only for themselves but for many other women as well. Both groups of new women steelworkers had to deal with the realities of working in a male dominated and potentially dangerous industrial workplace; both groups of women had to face the threat of retrenchments and associated issues of a social, political and industrial nature.

However, while there are striking similarities between the two campaigns, there are also major differences and variations between them, contributing to some divergent outcomes. These differences have been shaped by the specific geographic, historic and cultural environment in which each campaign evolved and by the differences between the women themselves.

Amongst these differences is the fact that, unlike the Canadian campaign, most of the women in the Australian campaign were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Significantly too, BHP used the ‘weight limit’ laws as its defence and forced the Australian women to fight a lengthy legal battle through to the High Court to gain justice, whereas Stelco did not mount a further legal challenge once the Canadian women had won jobs.

It was only when I began to research and write the history of the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign as part of my current PhD studies at the University of Sydney that I realised that there was a parallel campaign in the form of the Hamilton ‘Women Back Into Stelco Campaign’. It is fortunate that Canadian academic researchers and writers like Meg Luxton and June Corman\(^9\) as well as Jennifer Penney\(^9\) have already written up some of the history of the Hamilton women’s campaign to get jobs in the steel industry.

As part of my research project, I am proposing to carry out a comparative study of these two campaigns, including oral history interviews of women from both campaigns if possible. The question is, how to go about doing this in terms of presentation in the thesis and of course in terms of physically being able to visit Ontario for the purpose of interviewing key people associated with the campaign and the recording of its history.

The stories of those who participated will no doubt provide a useful perspective on the contribution they have made to the history of both the women’s movement and the labour movement in Australia and Canada. A comparative study of the Australian and Canadian campaigns to win jobs for women in the steel industry is also likely to highlight some of the issues involved in women’s experience in non-traditional jobs and to raise questions about ways of organising for change.
Endnotes

8. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 2004 show women earn 84 per cent of male Average Weekly Ordinary Time Earnings (AWOTE) of $954.10 but only 65 per cent of the male figure of $862.60 for all employees’ total earnings. The latter difference reflects the inclusion of part-time employees. Highest AWOTE of $1,443.90 for males and $1,054.30 for females were in the Mining industry. Lowest AWOTE occurred in Hospitality: accommodation, cafes and restaurants ($674.30) and the Retail trade ($683.70).
32. *Ibid*.
How sustainable is mutuality?:
the case of two Australian credit unions

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With total assets of $25.4 billion, taken together, credit unions are the sixth largest financial institution in Australia, ranked after St George Bank. Credit unions with a collective membership of approximately 3.6 million now have more customers than three of the four largest banks.1 Despite this significant presence in the financial services sector very little has been written about the history and development of credit unions in Australia. Burrell reminds us that many organisational forms have been hidden from history. Citing the examples of anarchist and co-operative organisational forms he advocates the need to analyse the forces that impact on organisations with one eye on the past and the other on the future. He suggests that if organisational analysts are to assist co-operatives to grow and meet new commercial opportunities then those analysts need to be ‘historographers and field researchers … simultaneously archaeologists and genealogists of knowledge’. This paper adopts this approach and provides an historical overview of the general union movement and case study evidence from two credit unions that highlight the challenges facing credit unions today.2

As mutuals, credit unions are not-for-profit organisations and therefore not shareholder driven. Credit union management argue that it is their philosophy of mutuality and the discourse of ‘member not customer’ that sets them apart from other financial institutions. Originally, members of credit unions were linked by a common bond of association such as having the same employer, involvement in a social group or residing in a particular geographical area. Today most credit unions in Australia operate under an open bond of association. Members in many credit unions now come from a diverse range of backgrounds and are not bound together by a common employer, social or geographical connection. This opening of their bonds, together with the increasing deregulation of and competition within the financial services sector, has seen many of these ‘not-for-profit’ organisations rework the notion of mutuality. This paper provides a detailed examination of two credit unions as they seek to maintain a commitment to the philosophy of mutuality in the face of ongoing change. The paper highlights the way in which the meaning of mutuality in these credit unions has shifted across time and space.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the credit union movement and outlines the particular pressures it has faced in the Australian context. The subsequent section introduces the two case study credit unions and explains the methods used in the research. This is followed by a comparison of the different versions of mutuality that operate within the two case study credit unions. The paper concludes by drawing out lessons from the different approaches taken by the two credit unions to suggest a way in which credit unions might ensure their sustainability.

The credit union movement

The concept of financial co-operatives originated in 1850 in Delitzsch, Germany.3 A liberal Prussian parliamentarian, Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, responded to the hardship experienced by urban labourers and tradespeople during a severe winter of 1846 by establishing a number of co-operatives, including a credit co-operative society. Founded on notions of self-help and open membership, Schulze-Delitzsch’s co-operatives were the precursor to the European people’s banks. Friedrich Raiffeisen, a German burgomaster, adapted Schulze-Delitzsch’s ideas to the needs of his rural constituents and in 1854 established an independent farmer-based credit association, called the Heddesdorf Society.4 Raiffeisen developed the notion of ‘limitless liability, achievable through a bond of association, whereby a person’s trusted standing in the community and the knowledge co-operators had of each other acted as security in seeking loans from a community pool of funds’.5 By the end of the 1880s societies founded on Schulze-Delitzsch and Raiffeisen principles had spread throughout Europe.

In Canada, Alphonse Desjardins, a parliamentary reporter inspired by the Papal Encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), developed his own philosophy for credit unions. The first Canadian financial co-operative was opened in 1901 at Levis, near Quebec, and by 1914 there were 150 co-operative banks in Canada.
Credit unions developed on Desjardins’ model were founded in Massachusetts in the United States around the same time. By 1921 there were 1,999 credit unions in various parts of the United States.\textsuperscript{6} Crapp and Skully assert that the legacy of this rich history of development is ‘an emphasis on co-operation around a set of unifying principles and common identity’.\textsuperscript{7} Today these are reflected in the principles set down by the World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU) under which all credit unions operate. These principles include open and voluntary membership to all within the group accepted by the credit union, democratic control, non-discrimination, service to members, equitable distribution of surpluses, financial stability, on-going education to promote thrift and wise use of credit, co-operation among co-operatives, and social responsibility.\textsuperscript{8}

In Australia, the credit union movement was a product of the immediate post-war period. The first registered credit union in Australia, the Home Owner’s Co-operative Credit Society Ltd, was established in May 1945 and was sponsored by an existing building society to provide personal loans to its members.\textsuperscript{9} In 1946, Kevin Yates formed the Catholic Thrift and Loan Co-operative Limited (Universal Credit Union) in the Sydney Archdiocese and, as Lewis explains ‘many commentators consider this to be the first ‘true’ credit union (because) it drew funds wholly from members, functioned autonomously, and was launched specifically to develop credit unions as part of the broader co-operative movement’.\textsuperscript{10} The early credit unions relied on the zeal of the pioneers, the work of thousands of volunteers and the co-operation and donations of employers and church groups in order to stimulate the formation of new credit unions. This approach was successful and by 1975 there were 748 credit unions in Australia with 910,000 members; two-thirds of these were in New South Wales.\textsuperscript{11}

The restrictions to membership caused by the common bond of association and state regulation meant that credit unions did not normally compete with one another. The bond of association that a credit union had with its members extended to links such as; having the same employer, involvement in a social group or residing in a particular geographical area. These bonds of association and lack of competition between credit unions led to the establishment of peak associations which provided a wide range of financial, managerial and administrative services which the credit unions would have found expensive to provide on their own. These associations also enabled the smaller credit unions to provide a full range of services to their members. Today two national associations provide these services to credit unions in Australia. The Credit Union Services Corporation (Australia) Limited (CUSCAL) represents 81 per cent of credit unions; while the remaining credit unions are represented by the Queensland-based Credit Link. Credit unions have had to adapt to the increased competition that resulted from the deregulation of the financial services sector. Personal loans and consumer finance was the original market niche and it was not until 1974, with the introduction of Bankcard, that the banks began to compete actively for consumer finance business. In recent years the wider use of credit cards with high limits and home equity loans has eaten into the credit union’s traditional personal loan market.\textsuperscript{12}

Paradoxically, for credit unions, ‘deregulation’ of the financial services industry has been accompanied by increased regulation. In July 1992 the Australian Financial Institutions Commission (AFIC) launched the Financial Institutions (FI) Scheme. Under this scheme, non-bank financial institutions were required to comply with minimum prudential standards and uniform (State-based) regulations, implement and fund a national supervisory mechanism and contribute to state contingency funds and an emergency liquidity support scheme. Pressures were further increased when in 1994 the federal Labor government abolished taxation exemption for credit unions’ member-generated income. Most changes have been aimed at bringing credit unions in line with other retail banking institutions. In 1977 credit unions were given direct access to the cheque clearing systems and responsibility for credit unions was transferred from the State and Territory governments to the Federal government. Credit unions have also faced increased costs in recent years as they seek to comply with changing regulatory standards. In 2002 privacy legislation and changes to the Financial Service Reform Act have imposed additional costs on credit unions as they ensure that systems, processes and staff comply with the new requirements.\textsuperscript{13} Given these changes, and the pressures they have placed on smaller credit unions in particular, it is not surprising that credit union numbers have fallen significantly, from 549 in 1983 to 200 in 2002.\textsuperscript{14} Historically, credit unions have operated mainly by means of payroll deductions and having a direct workplace presence. More recently, they have relied on remote service options and have been innovators...
in the use of technology. Credit unions introduced the first 24 hour ATM in Australia in 1977 and, in 1981, the first EFTPOS services.\textsuperscript{15}

Throughout all this change there has been a stated commitment by the credit union movement as a whole in Australia to its historical legacy of mutuality. Central to the ‘credit union difference’ is the concept of the service recipient being a ‘member’ rather than a ‘customer’. Credit unions call their customers, ‘members’ because they are the ‘owners’ of the credit unions. In 2001, Steve Laue, the then Chief Executive of CUSCAL observed that ‘credit unions are owned by their members, for their members and are therefore accountable only to their members. There is no external pressure for profit growth’.\textsuperscript{16} This principle is encapsulated in the credit union motto: ‘Not for Profit, Not for Charity, But for Service’. While credit unions are ‘not for profit’ institutions, they must nonetheless generate surpluses to cover operating expenses, additional benefits when membership expands, prudential requirements, and the return of surpluses to members through better interest rates, products and services.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{A tale of two credit unions}

To facilitate an understanding of the philosophy of credit unions and how this sits with the pressures they face; this paper examines the case of two credit unions. The paper shows how the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union and Holiday Coast Credit Union (HCCU) have both reconceptualised the concept of mutuality in ways that reflects their history.

The NSW Teachers’ Credit Union (Teachers) is one of the largest credit unions in Australia. Teachers employ approximately 250 people as well as relying on a body of volunteer ‘workers’ in public schools. As its name implies its origins lie in providing retail banking service for teachers employed in the New South Wales State education system. The continued member commitment it receives from teachers and the advantages it gains from direct payroll deductions have given the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union a strong base from which to expand their membership. In addition, the ready network provided by State schools means that it has not needed to build up a branch network but has focused on offering service remotely since its inception in 1966. In contrast, Holiday Coast Credit Union, saw its original membership base dissolve due to industry deregulation and the demise of the manufacturing sector. Holiday Coast is a medium sized credit union employing approximately 100 people and has expanded its branch network from Port Macquarie in the north to Maitland in the South.

In order to gain an understanding of the history of credit unions generally and the development of these two credit unions in particular, interviews were conducted with 27 respondents including management and front-line service workers in the case study credit unions as well as representatives of the peak body, CUSCAL. A range of documentary material was also examined, including official company literature, such as promotional material, customer newsletters and marketing reports. This organisationally specific information was supplemented by media reports and published and unpublished reports produced by government departments, industry bodies and consumer associations. Analysis of these documents both informed and was informed by the interviews.

\textbf{Mutuality as equality}

The success of the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union (Teachers) can be attributed to the strong links it has been able to maintain with its original bonded group, teachers employed in the NSW State education system. While industry restructuring and privatisation of the public sector have meant that the majority of credit unions have had to open up their bond and expand their customer base, a small number of occupations, including teaching, have been little affected by such changes and the credit unions servicing these groups have been able to maintain a strong association with their original bonded group.

Teachers came into existence in 1966 as the Hornsby Teachers’ Credit Union. It has delivered its services remotely since its inception in 1966. The extensive informal network that schools provide for the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union, together with the development in technological service options, means that Teachers have never had to establish a branch network. In 1967 the name was changed to the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union and payroll deductions commenced. In 1976 the head office was moved from a house in Parramatta to its current location at Homebush and, almost ten years later, in 1984 the Rooty Hill office, which also houses the credit union’s call centre was opened. These are the only two branches of Teachers’ Credit Union.
The original objectives of the Credit Union were ‘to give members through a credit union, an attractive savings scheme, a way of obtaining personal loans and an opportunity to solve personal financial problems through co-operation’. Although members of the NSW Teachers’ Federation were involved in the credit union’s establishment, the link between the Federation and the credit union has never been formalised. One legacy of the credit union founders being union members is that all potential members of Teachers must be a ‘member of an appropriate industrial association where one exists’. This qualification applies to all potential members and persists despite the fact that senior credit union management has attempted on several occasions to have it removed as a condition of membership.

Membership of the Teachers Credit Union is not open to all teachers, rather, it is restricted to teachers within the public education system: primary and secondary State school teachers, TAFE teachers, and university academics. Throughout its history there have been five failed attempts to widen the base of Teachers to include teachers from private schools. The most recent attempt to expand the membership in this way occurred on 15 May 2002 when a Special General Meeting of Members was called to seek an extension of the Credit Union’s ‘Membership Rule’. The change required an alteration to the Constitution of the Credit Union and was put to a vote of the members. Under Corporations Law a majority vote of 75 per cent was required to bring the change into effect. Of the 19,229 votes cast (out of a total membership of 108,000), 71.4 per cent were in favour of the proposal, just short of the 75 per cent needed. The ‘no’ case was promoted by the NSW Teachers’ Federation which emphasised the historical links between the Credit Union and the Federation. Their main argument against opening up the credit union to private school teachers was that this would ‘dilute our original core membership (the public education bond) … because of this we will become one player amongst many without any distinguishing features’.

Even so, the membership has gradually been extended to include a broader category of ‘family’ members. At the Annual General Meeting on 12 October 2002 the definition of ‘family’ was expanded to include stepchildren, brothers and sisters. The extended definition of family under the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union Constitution is ‘spouse, parent, grandparent, child, stepchild, grandchild, brother or sister’. In addition ‘family’ members’ rights were extended to be the same as ‘prime’ (that is teacher) members’ rights, in effect allowing other relatives of existing ‘family’ members to join the credit union, whereas previously only family of ‘prime’ members could join. This has extended the bond of the credit union considerably.

For these reasons, the profile of the customer base of Teachers has changed considerably in recent years and family members now make up the majority of members. As at September 2002, 47 per cent of members of the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union were ‘teacher’ members and 53 per cent ‘family’ members. Despite the fact that ‘family’ members are in the majority, credit union management still see the organisation primarily as a credit union that services teacher members. As the Human Resource Manager observed: ‘One of the good things about having a close bond is that we know that we are providing a service to teachers. So everything we do is based around that; so while there are family members our main bond is teachers’.

The emphasis on marketing to teacher members is evident in the fact that all the Credit Union’s wider activities are related directly to the work of public schools. It has supported the Primary Schools Sports Association (PSSA), the Combined High School Sports Association (CHSSA), and Stewart House for many years, and more recently the showcase concerts for public schools held at the Opera House. Further, the influence of ‘teacher’ members is reflected in the name of the magazine used to communicate with members – Chalkboard.

This focus on its teacher members and the emphasis on ‘members as owners’ drives the organisation’s commitment to high levels of member service and has resulted in high levels of member satisfaction. In an ACA survey conducted in 2000 the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union’s customers reported higher levels of satisfaction than did customers of any other financial institution. The notion of mutuality is central to the approach taken by the NSW Teachers’ Credit Union and the provision of excellent customer service. As the Assistant General Manager, Marketing and Member Service, observed: ‘The fact that we are mutuals does give us the foundation to drive service. That is probably where the strength comes: not so much from the member, but more with the way staff deal with the members’.
Teachers has been able to maintain a commitment to the core credit union philosophy of mutuality in large part because of the strong ties it retains with its original bonded group, public sector teachers. In this way they continue to emphasise the past in order to ensure their profitability and sustainability in the present.

**Mutality as mutual obligation**

Holiday Coast Credit Union (Holiday Coast) is a regional credit union, employing approximately 100 people. Holiday Coast reflects the pressures experienced by many credit unions as their member bases ‘disappeared’ due to industry deregulation, demise of the manufacturing sector and the pressure on smaller credit unions to merge with larger credit unions due to increasing regulatory requirements. Holiday Coast today is the result of the merger of three credit unions. Hastings Rural Credit Union was established in 1967 and serviced the staff and suppliers of the Hastings Dairy Co-operative based in Wauchope. In 1977, following deregulation of the dairy industry, the Credit Union moved to an open bond, changed its name to Hastings Credit Union and opened a branch in Port Macquarie. In 1996 the name was again changed to Holiday Coast Credit Union to reflect the expansion of the credit union’s branches throughout the mid-north coast. In 1999 Holiday Coast merged with Maitland Community Credit Union (MCCU). MCCU was originally called Bradmill Employers Credit Union Ltd formed in 1970 and later changed to Maitland Industrial Credit Union. In 1980 it became called Maitland Community Credit Union. Manning Local Government Employees Credit Coast Union, a small credit union with only 300 members that also began operations in 1967, merged with Holiday Coast in 2001.

Holiday Coast now services a large number of townships within the mid-north region of NSW. The branch network is divided into three regions: the Northern Region with branches at Port Macquarie, Kempsey, Wauchope and Laurieton; the Central Region, with branches at Taree, Nabiac, Wingham, Tuncurry and Old Bar; and the Southern Region with branches at Buladelah, Gloucester, Gresford, Hawks Nest, Maitland and Stroud. The Southern Region has three of the six branches established under the CreditCare program and the two branches they took over when they merged with MCCU.

The original members of the three credit unions shared an ‘industrial’ bond of association. Research commissioned in December 1999 by Holiday Coast management showed that current members do not have a bond of association with the credit union. This research, conducted by the Financial Research Company, involved seven focus groups of Holiday Coast members. One of the key findings was that participants believed that the concepts of ‘membership’ and ‘ownership’ were not relevant to their relationship with Holiday Coast.

As a member you had direct ownership of not only the credit union but your own liability. With only 400 members all working in the same workshop you were more unlikely to default on your loans because of the pressure of owning that responsibility back to 399 people. You weren’t [so much] a number as a customer. You were a member of a group.

Holiday Coast management is nostalgic about a return to a closer bond with their members and discussed being able to do this at the branch level by establishing ‘bonds’ with the local towns they are located in. In an attempt to recreate that sense of ownership amongst its 33,000 members, Holiday Coast’s customer relations strategy is focused on the idea of belonging to a ‘community’ and creating a bond of association through ‘communities of interest’. However, Holiday Coast management has found that creating a bond of ‘community’ is particularly problematic where services are being provided to diverse socio-economic regions within a wide geographic area. These problems are exacerbated by the different histories of the credit unions and the differences in the industries they originally served.

In addition Holiday Coast’s own strategies would appear to be at odds with the return to a ‘bond of association’ and the philosophy of mutuality. Holiday Coast launched its new strategy in 1997 under the name ‘Servisim 2000’. Ironically the focus of ‘Servisim’ was sales. It was aimed at expanding Holiday Coast’s product market and moving beyond offering simply a transaction service for members. This meant the introduction of fees and charges on Holiday Coast accounts for the first time.
They have also introduced policies which discouraged members who could only be ‘transactors’ and introduced member segmentation practices that differentiated between ‘low value’ and ‘high value’ customers.

This member segmentation is exactly in line with the customer segmentation the large retail banks have focused on for a number of years. Indeed it seems to go further than the strategy of the large retail banks and seeks to exclude people who will not commit to being more than ‘transactors’ when they come into open an account.

Member segmentation and the active discouragement of ‘transactor-only’ members would seem to contradict the wider principles of set down by the World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU) and set out earlier in this paper. Holiday Coast management sought to defend the contradiction between their member service strategy and the principles of the credit union movement by arguing that their approach did conform to the credit union principles of ‘mutuality’. For instance, the Maitland Branch Manager argued that:

\[\text{The original philosophy behind the credit union was to be mutually beneficial to each other. [Our approach] is not that far removed, there is a slight change in that original philosophy and now it is mutual benefit between the member and organization.}\]

Put simply, Holiday Coast does not want members who cannot benefit the organisation financially. The original credit union concept of mutuality was mutual benefit between members. For Holiday Coast, the objective is now mutual benefit between members and the organisation. The Executive Manager, Branch Operations, went as far as to say that the notion of the credit union as a ‘not for profit’ organisation was outmoded and that profitability was important in ensuring a ‘mutual benefit’ between the member and the organisation.

Holiday Coast is keen to return to the benefits of a closed bond of association with their members. They have sought to create a bond of ‘community’, however, the wide geographical spread of the credit union branches, their different histories, and the narrowness of their customer segmentation and sales strategies contradicts not only their stated commitment to ‘community’ but to the principles of the credit union movement. Most notably the concept of mutuality as mutuality between members has been reworked to mean mutuality between an individual member and the organisation.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This paper highlights the importance of viewing an organisations current practices and strategies through the lens of history. This study of the credit union movement in general and two credit unions in particular reminds us that organisational forms are ‘historically rooted’. The pioneers of the Australian credit union movement envisaged a ‘harmonious society characterised by decentralised, autonomous co-operatives collaborating with other democratic institutions in an equitable ‘Co-operative Commonwealth’.

However, since the 1980s, most credit unions have opened up their bond of association and this has placed the core credit union principles under considerable pressure and led many to question the sustainability of mutuality. Comparing Holiday Coast and Teachers credit unions has highlighted two contrasting approaches to change in the credit union sector. The two credit unions have reshaped the discourse of mutuality in very different ways. Teachers through a commitment to high levels of customer service underpinned by the notion of members as equals and Holiday Coast by recasting the idea of mutuality as mutual benefit between members to a more modern day conceptualisation of mutual obligation.

A comparison of Teachers and Holiday Coast within a broader historical context goes some way to providing some answer to this question. While it needs to be acknowledged that Teachers has a special market position because of the strong links it has been able to maintain with its original bonded group, the case of Teachers suggests that a way forward for credit unions is not through embracing the strategies of the large retail banks but by maintaining a commitment to their historical legacy. It is their history and their original commitment to the principles of co-operation and social responsibility that provide them with a sustainable form of mutuality.

In contrast, Holiday Coast, despite their not-for-profit status have begun to embrace what du Gay and Salaman have identified as a ‘discourse of enterprise’ with its emphasis on ‘market forces’ and
‘entrepreneurial principles’. Within the credit union context this adoption of a ‘discourse of enterprise’ is characterised by the privileging of ideas of competitiveness and individuality over the traditional credit union values of co-operativeness and mutuality. Encompassed within this new approach is an emphasis on self-reliance and individual responsibility. This runs contradictory to the traditional values of the credit union movement which emphasised co-operation amongst members for the mutual benefit of all. A discourse of enterprise with its individualistic moral agenda directly contradicts and has the potential to dismantle a discourse of mutuality within which ‘our fates are linked with others’. Certainly, in interpreting enterprise discourse in relation to their particular circumstances, management of the Holiday Coast credit union have redefined mutuality as mutuality between members and the organisation, rather than between members. This new form of mutuality more closely resembles neo-liberal ideals of mutual self-help than it does the co-operative movement’s ideals of equality among members.

Consulting firm KPMG have identified the notion of a ‘bond of association’ as a key way for credit unions to differentiate themselves from other financial service providers. The past is very much before the credit union movement and it is through a return to their original principles and a rekindling of the bonds of association that their continued future relies, not through attempts to reshape those original principles into economic rationalist discourse and strategies drawn from large for profit organisations.

Endnotes

5. Ibid., p. xxi
6. Ibid., p. xxi.
9. Crapp and Skully, Credit Unions for Australians, p. 20.
10. Lewis, People Before Profit, p. 15.
12. Crapp and Skully, Credit Unions for Australians.
13. G. Lewis, Laughing All the Way to the Credit Union, Accord, Sydney, 2001, p. 3; KPMG, Building Society, p. 5
14. KPMG, Building Society, p. 4.
15. G. Lewis, People Before Profit, p. xvii.
22. Email correspondence with Human Resource Manager, 4 September 2002.
23. Interview with the Human Resource Manager, NSW Teachers Credit Union on 18 March 2002.
25. Interview with Maitland Branch Manager, Holiday Coast Credit Union on 7 January 2002.
27. Interview with Maitland Branch Manager, Holiday Coast Credit Union on 7 January 2003.
28. Interview General Manager, Holiday Coast Credit Union on 5 September 2002.
29. Interview with Maitland Branch Manager, Holiday Coast Credit Union on 7 January 2003.
30. Interview with Executive Manager, Branch Operatons, Holiday Coast Credit Union, 6 January 2003.
32. Lewis, People Before Profit, p. 338.

36. KPMG, Building Society, p. 6.
Sisterhood and solidarity: Annie Golding, Kate Dwyer and the NSW ALP

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Annie Golding and Kate Dwyer claimed a central place for women within the New South Wales Labor Party. They struggled to ensure that women’s participation in the Party was supported structurally, linked to leadership, valued and rewarded. To understand their priorities and their persistence, this struggle must be viewed in the context of their personal histories, prior political activities and professional careers. As the advent of universal suffrage created expectations of a new dawn for all women, whatever their class background, a personal quest for social standing fed the Golding sisters’ unique contribution to collective organisation and action.

We do not intend to sever our connection and withdraw. We have worked too hard and for too many years to let it be divided. Of course we consider the women were shamefully treated at the last [Labor] conference … However, we aim at securing what ‘our L. Movement stands for Equal Opportunities for all regardless of sex’. We must have an outlet for our women other than forming outside bodies.¹

Annie Golding and her sister, Kate Dwyer, were the daughters of Celtic-Catholic immigrants. Their father was an enterprising man, who came to New South Wales to try his luck on the goldfields. However, Kate recalled that her mother was the dominant influence.² Kate’s granddaughter-in-law recently told me a story about the Golding sister’s mother. Mrs Golding took her girls to Church every week. One week, the priest decided to give a sermon on the sin of calumny. He lectured at length on the evils of gossip, which he portrayed as an exclusively female failing, and as one of the worst of all possible sins. Mrs Golding became more and more agitated. Finally, when the priest proclaimed that ‘the road to hell was paved with women’s tongues’, Mrs Golding could take no more. She stood up, motioned for the girls to do likewise, and walked out of the church. After the service, she confronted the priest with these words: ‘Father, the road to hell may be paved with women’s tongues, but its rooved and walled with men’s misdeeds’.

Paul commanded: ‘woman, be silent in church’. Mrs Golding kept within the letter of this law, but completely contravened its spirit. She voted with her feet. She took the priest’s words, and turned them back upon him, to expose the hypocrisy of his position. The priest might have expected her to remain obediently in her pew, but Mrs Golding did not know her place. She claimed her own pulpit. Her daughters learnt the lesson well.

Elizabeth Faue has recently argued that we need a better understanding of ‘the range and malleability of class identity and experience’ – flexible ways of talking about class, to enable us to investigate its transformations and contradictions. Faue offers the term ‘social distinctions’, as one that ‘encompasses class phenomena more complex than fixed positions within social hierarchies, to show the shadings and gradations of status and honour, money and power’. I prefer the term social standing, because it directs attention to the connection between class feeling and class politics.³

These shifts in language help us to understand the important roles played by individuals who straddled class boundaries, particularly female Labor activists such as the Golding sisters, whose professional and political work also spanned the divide between a masculine public world, and a feminine private sphere. The Golding sisters are not important simply because they had talents and opportunities that other women lacked. They occupied a liminal social and economic position. This position left them sensitive to social distinctions, and vulnerable to social exclusion. Their preoccupation with social standing drove their search for solidarity and legitimacy, their quest for a party and a platform.

Kate Dwyer was the first president of the Women’s Central Organising Committee of the New South Wales Labor Party (henceforth referred to as the Women’s Committee). At the Committee’s inaugural meeting in 1904, 300 women unanimously elected Kate to the Presidency, a position which she retain unopposed for 12 years.⁴ She remained the most prominent woman in the Labor Party until the late 1920s.
In 1914, the Women’s Committee presented Kate with a portrait to commemorate Labor’s recent ground-breaking electoral successes. The Premier, William Holman, gave a speech that ‘eulogised the work performed by Mrs Dwyer, and fittingly acknowledged the debt the movement generally was under to its women workers’. Ada Holman, the Premier’s wife, said Kate could bequeath the portrait to her descendents, so that they might emulate her example, for her political activities were ‘but another phase of her philanthropy’. The Worker marked the occasion by interviewing Kate, reporting with delight that she was happily married, did her own housework, and was proud of her children.

Kate’s older sister, Annie Golding, was also lauded in the press as a woman whose only aim was to use her vote to make the world ‘brighter and happier’. Headmistress of a large public school, dedicated to her elderly mother, readers learnt of the pleasure Annie took in the company of her sisters, nieces and nephews. Those close to her knew, that Annie had covertly written most of her sister’s speeches in the pre-war period, when civil servants were barred from political activity. During the war years and the 1920s, Annie’s profile within the Party rivalled her sister’s.

Suffrage activism, professional careers, philanthropy and conventional family values, these were the foundation for Labor women’s activism. It was a familiar story, full of reassuring images, hat contained female activity within the bounds of respectability. But there were complex motivations to Kate and Annie’s politics, and their participation in the Labor movement, welfare reform, and feminist organisation, brought them time and time again into conflict with those who sought to keep the sisters within acceptable bounds; to keep them in their place.

The Golding sisters wanted to refashion Labor politics in women’s interests. In 1904, under Kate’s leadership, the Women’s Committee submitted a raft of policies for the Party’s consideration, and requested that special provision be made for women’s representation. They gained rules all but guaranteeing conference votes for women. As a result, several dozen women generally attended Labor conferences in NSW, whereas in other States, there were only ever a token few.

However, it was not long before some men in the party began to question this generosity to ‘the ladies’. Some complained that women’s influence was conservative, others that it interfered with the rights of core constituencies, like unions. Then as now, those who benefited from a narrow definition of the authentic Labor stalwart sought to cast Labor women as an adjunct to the Party, not its heart.

In response, Women’s Committee organisers emphasised that women’s voluntary work received less recognition than the contributions of other stakeholders, and threatened to go on strike. As Kate put it:

> If the [industrial] organisations put money into the movement they secured the plums. There were no plums for the women, and they were kept out of parliament; there was no place for them there. … They went about with the rolls in one hand and a collection box in the other but the women were getting tired of that.

The Women’s Committee did support reforms aimed at holding politicians accountable to the Party machine, but not at the cost of women’s interests. When Labor Party militants attacked women for ‘pandering’ to politicians, and condemned ‘the promiscuous election of the executive from conference floor’, they betrayed a hostility to women’s presence that went further than disagreeing with women’s politics.

Men were uncomfortable with women’s hands on the levers of the Party machine, but comfortable with Labor’s women’s welfare reform work. State Labor conferences readily adopted policies submitted by the Women’s Committee on matters such as child welfare, and State Labor governments appointed Labor women to the boards of public charities. However, leading philanthropists questioned the propriety of some of these appointments, including Annie’s appointment to the State Children’s Relief Board in 1911. Precedent dictated that such decisions be made on the basis of charity work and religious affiliations, but Labor women rejected the established ethics of philanthropy.

Labor women wanted the rights of welfare recipients to be codified, and those administering relief to be politically accountable. They felt that the State Children’s Relief Board treated widows and deserted mothers in a miserly and judgemental fashion. Women’s Committee policy demanded:

> Amendment to the State Children’s Relief Bill to provide that the mother of a State child should receive for its maintenance an amount equivalent to the maximum allowed a foster-mother.
The first Labor government in NSW implemented this policy, overriding vehement opposition from the Board.\textsuperscript{17} The change involved substantial additional expenditure, and was an important precursor to the Lang government’s Widow’s Pension Act, the first of its kind in Australia.

As well as organising to secure welfare reform and to get women onto the Party’s Executive, the Women’s Committee sought to organise women into unions and to raise wages. These activities brought them into direct conflict with non-party women’s organisations.

Labor women, including Kate and Annie, served on the Organising Committee of the Labor Council in the pre-War period.\textsuperscript{18} State Labor governments supported the Women’s Committee on some critical industrial policy issues, including the regulation of domestic service,\textsuperscript{19} which leading non-party feminists opposed.\textsuperscript{20} After the War, both sisters gave evidence to several minimum wage inquiries. Much of this evidence was about the standard of clothing required for female workers and the wives of working men. For Annie and Kate, dress held more than just material significance. Annie argued that it was a matter of personal dignity, like opportunities for leisure and self-improvement.\textsuperscript{21} And personal dignity was a right, not a charitable concession.

In 1920, Kate gave evidence to the Royal Commission into the Basic Wage. She said that workers’ wives were entitled to such things as lace on their underwear. The National Council of Women sent representatives to the Commission to contradict such ‘extravagant’ claims. Kate called a meeting of women’s unions at Trades Hall:

\begin{quote}
The meeting condemned the Council for ranging itself on the side of ‘affluent women’ by ‘sending single girls on good salaries to the Basic Wage Commission to dictate to married women with children what they should wear’. The meeting decided to inform the Council that ‘the working woman who has been ignored in the past, has arrived, and has come to stay’.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

When Kate and Annie demanded that governments appoint women to industrial tribunals,\textsuperscript{23} clearly they did not mean the ‘single girls on good salaries’ from the Council. Many of the Council’s affiliates were women’s organisations with philanthropic aims and for the Golding sisters, charity was no substitute for a proper system of work and wages. They identified with working class women who aspired to ‘a respectable life, a comfortable life, a life that is worth living’.\textsuperscript{24}

The Golding sisters had a history of conflict with the leadership of the women’s movement that pre-dated their involvement in the labour movement. In the 1890s, the Womanhood Suffrage League had welcomed them for their skills as organisers and public speakers. Maybanke Wolstenholme, then President of the League, would later recall:

\begin{quote}
we spoke at drawing room and public meetings wherever we were invited. I did so sometimes two or three times a week. Miss Dickie, Miss Golding and I were a debating team and we never lost a debate. I remember only one fight. It was in Newtown Town Hall, and only a few chairs were broken.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

However, the same skills that made the Golding sisters good debaters also made them difficult members for the leadership of the League to control. Rose Scott, the Secretary of the League, wrote in 1901: ‘Had it not been for an attempt last year on the part of a Branch, to oust the central Treasurer, a most efficient & faithful worker, and substitute a branch member in her place, the central members would not have seen fit to alter their rules’.\textsuperscript{26} Needless to say, the branch in question was run by the Golding sisters in Newtown, and the faithful Treasurer was a supporter of Scott’s. When the Golding sisters took this dispute to the press, the League responded by expelling the rebel branches.\textsuperscript{27} The Golding sisters had not understood their place in the League. Never made to follow, never born to lead.

Little wonder that Kate prevented Scott from addressing the 1905 Labor conference. When Ada Holman protested that Scott was as good as a Labor woman, Kate responded:

\begin{quote}
‘as good as a Labor woman’, who, after a hard day’s work, tramped the highways and byways, in all weathers, badly clothed and often badly fed, in the interests of the Labor candidate. These voluntary workers were not paid or regaled on tea, toast and jamroll like the plutocratic workers.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Labor women also alleged that Scott had described them as ‘camp followers of a corrupt system’.\textsuperscript{29} It seems male unionists were not the only ones to suggest that Labor women were neither politically, nor sexually, as pure as they ought to be.
Pure or not, the Golding sisters did not lack political fortitude – or political conviction. They demanded the respect of both their sisters in the women’s movement and their brothers in the Party. Their passion for politics and their identification with the ‘working woman’ derived from their life experience.

Kate and Annie both began their adult lives as schoolteachers, but Kate’s career was cut short by marriage. However, Kate recognised that she was more fortunate than most married women. Her work as a ‘public woman’ gave her an alternative vocation, albeit a voluntary one. Kate acknowledged that her public life was only possible because of the wholehearted co-operation of her husband and children, and understood the burden of domestic labour. In response to the idea that mothers could save money by making their children’s clothes, she told the Basic Wage Commission that women without servants had too little time to themselves already.

Annie stood up to those in authority from the beginning of her teaching career. For example, she reported her supervisors at the Randwick orphans school for failing to prevent the physical abuse of their charges. Despite her challenges to the authority of her superiors, Annie progressed steadily through a rapidly expanding public school system. The State needed teachers with her talents and dedication; but not enough, of course, to want women teachers after they married – an injustice Annie and Kate fought all their political lives. Nor did the State value talented women teachers when the 1890s Depression made cutbacks necessary. Female teachers and headmistresses bore the brunt of retrenchment. The experience led Annie to fight the sexism of the Education Department through the Public School Teachers’ Association. She did not confine her efforts to remedying the immediate grievances of headmistresses. Annie fought for the rights of women at all levels of the teaching service, and to improve the vocational prospects of her female pupils.

Annie Golding’s professional life was marked by opportunities but also by obstacles and setbacks. Her determination to make sure State government superannuation provided for female employees bespoke an awareness of inherent insecurity. As she put it to the Minister for Education: ‘If women are pushed out of the Department, they go to lower paid professions, and tend to initiate a system of sweating in other avenues of employment’. She knew that the gulf between female teacher and factory girl was not so very great.

When the Golding sisters advocated the cause of ‘the working woman’, their motives were not philanthropic. They stretched this category from the sweated seamstress to the headmistress, and from the destitute mother who struggled to keep her children to the respectable wife who juggled household affairs without servants. The sisterhood that they envisaged challenged the nascent solidarities of both the women’s movement and the labour movement. They sought to appropriate and manipulate the rules and the rhetoric of those with power over them. In the process, they helped to articulate the grievances of working class women, but they also sought revenge on their social superiors and the Labor party power brokers for letting them only half way in; for not treating them as equals. The complexities of their social standing help to explain both their achievements and the limits to their success, as well as the hostility that they aroused. Just like their mother, they did not know their place.

Endnotes

1. Kate Dwyer to Sara Lewis, 28 August 1916, in Women’s Central Organising Committee (WCOC.) Correspondence, 30 April 1912-25 October 1942, ALP Victorian Branch Women’s Central Organising Committee, ALP Series, Tom Merrifield Collection, MS 13045, Box 107, Item 1, Latrobe Library, State Library of Victoria.


10. The Worker, 17 August 1911, p. 7.
14. In May 1911, George Beeby, the first Labor Minister for Public Instruction, appointed Annie Golding and A.W. Green to the State Children’s Relief Board to replace Mrs Thomas Hughes and W.J. Trickett, a conservative M.L.C, Report of the State Children’s Relief Board for 1911, p. 5, NSW Parliamentary Papers, 1911 (Second Session). Both sisters were appointed as directors of the Lady Edeline Hospital for Sick Babies when it was first established in 1914, Report of the Director General of Public Health of New South Wales for the Year Ended 31st December, 1914, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1915, pp. 141-143. Dwyer was also appointed by Labor to both the Board and the House Committee of the Benevolent Society of NSW in 1911.


22. The words are Annie’s. Inquiry into the Living Wage for Adult Females, 1919, p. 782, in New South Wales Board of Trade, Transcripts of Proceedings, Kingswood 2/5770, State Archives, NSW.
23. Interview in the Daily Telegraph, 21 April 1915, quoted in Oldfield, A Gift or a Struggle, p 88.
24. Honorary Secretary’s notebook in Rose Scott Papers, Womanhood Suffrage League, Miscellaneous Papers, 1892-1902, ML MSS 38/36.
25. Sydney Morning Herald, 26 June 1902, p. 3; Minutes of the Womanhood Suffrage League, 25 March 1902, 26 June 1902, 22 July 1902 & 26 August 1902.
26. Contributions from Scott, Dwyer, Ada Holman and Arthur Rae were published. Dwyer’s and Holman’s letters can be found in The Worker, 4 March 1905, p. 5. Other letters can be found in The Worker, 25 February 1905, p. 5, 11 March 1905, p. 5. The debate at Conference was reported by The Sphere, 15 March 1905, pp. 1-2, under the heading ‘The Curse of Party. Non-Party Woman Refused a Hearing’. and by the Evening News, 10 February 1905, under the heading ‘At the Labour Council. A Woman’s Debate. About Hearing a Woman’. The Evening News report can also be found in Holman Collection, and Ada Holman was probably the author of the report.
27. The Worker, 18 February 1905, p. 6.
28. The Worker, 29 January 1914, p. 9.
32. Undated typescript evidently written or dictated by Kate Dwyer in the 1940s and entitled ‘The Golding’s Story’, in a box of the personal records of Kate Dwyer belonging to her granddaughter-in-law, Mavis Dwyer of Northbridge, Sydney.


34. Transcript of a deputation to the Minister for Public Instruction, 14 March 1914, p. 7, p. 23, p. 29 in Department of Education subject files, Teachers’ Classes and Associations, K/w 20/13276, State Archives, NSW.
The 1979 Commission of Inquiry into self-employed contractors in the NSW housing industry: was it the last hurrah?

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Attempts by Labor Governments to provide protection for self employed owner-drivers and ‘bailee’ taxi drivers through amendments to the (NSW) *Industrial Arbitration Act* in 1943, 1951 and 1957 were frustrated by employers through legal action. Certain groups of workers were deemed employees through the 1959 introduction of ss.88E into the *Industrial Arbitration Act*. 1940 (the Act), whilst ss.88F enabled the Commission or Conciliation Committee to vary any contract or arrangement it found to be unfair, against the public interest or avoided the provisions of an award. The Transport Workers’ Union (TWU) unsuccessfully applied for an award for taxi drivers through the provisions of s.88E but was foiled due to its non-coverage of ‘deemed employees’.

The Industrial Commission of NSW in 1967 commenced an inquiry into the operation of s.88E and, in its 1970 Report, rejected its deeming provisions as ‘too susceptible to evasion through the niceties of legal argument’. The Report was not acted upon until 1979 when the NSW Government amended the Act by creating special contract regulation tribunals. Also in 1979, at the time the Bill was being discussed in Parliament, an inquiry was established by the Government into employment in the Housing Industry in New South Wales. The Inquiry was at the request of the union movement – but principally of the Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia – NSW Branch (NSW/BWIU) in which that Union referred to its agreement with Head Contractors to the Housing Commission as support for its hopes for standing under s.88F and for the ability to seek an award to cover labour-only self-employed subcontractors in the housing sector of the building industry.

**The Housing Commission agreement**

During World War II, the day labour force of the Civil Construction Corps (CCC), with which all building tradesmen were required to register, had built the Housing Commission cottages. To attract union support, the Federal Government encouraged union membership within the CCC. After the War, the NSW Public Works Department (PWD) took over all government works in NSW including the construction of houses for the Housing Commission of NSW. The PWD day-labour force was strongly unionized, as it comprised many former members of the wartime CCC.

In 1946 the Master Builders Association of New South Wales (MBA/NSW) raised its concern at the apparent intention of the Housing Commission to operate with day labour, and to offer contract work to a limited number of builders. The MBA/NSW advised the NSW Government that it was opposed to restricted tender lists and that it believed ‘that all Government work should be thrown open to public tender regardless of the urgency or otherwise of the work’. Unmoved by those objections, the Government’s Public Works day-labour force that operated from a depot at Villawood continued to carry out Housing Commission works. The majority of works for the Housing Commission was carried out by day-labour until the mid-1950s, however, its works outside the metropolitan area were generally put out to tender. During the early post-war period the operations of the Housing Commission caused the MBA/NSW membership a number of problems including its use of bricks and roof tiles initially intended for the private sector of the building industry, however, this paper will focus on the effects on the former day-labour force of a change in PWD policy.

In the mid to late 1950s, due to increasing demand for housing and the development of large tracts of land for public housing, the PWD commenced putting more of the Housing Commission works out to tender. This led many of its day-labour force being retrenched and a number tendered as labour-only contractors for such work. These contractors were union members and looked to the New South Wales Branch of the Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia (NSW/BWIU) for support. This was a situation that was not favoured by many other state branches of the BWIU. At that time, representatives of the NSW/BWIU attended a BWIU federal conference in Melbourne to speak on the need to organise ‘labour-only subbies’ in the face of opposition from the secretary of the BWIU Victorian Branch.
Ron Monaghan, whose brother-in-law had been apprenticed to the PWD at its Villawood depot, stated that the Victorian Branch’s position was supported by many within the BWIU as they were:

Against the sub-contract system and believed that workers who acted as subbies had no place in the union, however, I saw them as members of the working class who were trying to get a job and make ends meet.  

The NSW/BWIU encouraged its labour-only subcontractor members to consult the union about their contracts and, later, the union presented a ‘prototype contract’ to a mass meeting for endorsement – ‘with any new designs to be subject to variation to the template tender’. Initially, the union operated carefully in the Housing Commission area and intervened only when asked by its members. Labour-only subcontractors engaged for Housing Commission work were concentrated in large numbers, many with little business or entrepreneurial skills as they were really ‘displaced workers’ from the PWD. Labour-only subcontracting was not a new phenomenon to the housing sector of the building industry, as Monaghan discovered a Bricklayers’ agreement for piecework rates that operated in 1913-14.

In 1958, Monaghan and representatives of four other building unions conducted a two-day inspection of the Housing Commission project at Seven Hills under the auspices of the BTG. They discovered instances of underpayments by subcontractors to their employees; unfairly low rates paid under a verbal contract to a labour-only plastering subcontractor; sweating of labour-only subcontractors in bricklaying and carpentry; long hours being worked over a six-day week; and, a complete absence of amenities. They called on the Minister for Housing and officers of his Department to ‘vigorously police and enforce the Conditions of Contract of the Housing Commission for these are in line with Union Conditions and policy’. They also called on the Minister to ensure that the Housing Commission enforced the 40-hour 5-day working week, as it was a policy of the Government and ‘of the Commission regardless of what officers of this Department say’. The union representatives concluded with the observation:

[T]he sub-contractor is working hard and long hours for a miserable return, breaking down his awards and conditions in the process, while the main contractor has no worries, and is just scooping in the ‘cream’ without any exertion. These main contractors are busily engaged in under-cutting each other, and passing these cuts onto the sub-contractors, who are paying all the time, by the steady whittling down of their meager prices.

The MBA/NSW leadership stated that labour-only subcontracting was an aberration to the contracting system and a cause of falling apprenticeships and agreed to support the unions’ approach to the NSW Government to implement ‘amendments to s.88B of the Industrial Arbitration Act’. It is likely that the MBA/NSW had little appreciation of the possible long-term consequences of their support as in 1959 the Industrial Arbitration Act of NSW was amended by the introduction of two new sub sections: 88E and 88F. Put briefly, self-employed workers who were contracted to carry out certain works were deemed by s.88E to be employees. Subsections 88E (1) (a) (b) (c) and (g) covered contract drivers of taxi cabs, omnibuses and hire cars; contract deliverers of milk or cream from any vehicle; contract deliverers of retail goods by motor lorries; and, contract deliverers of Bread by vehicles, and ss.88 (1) (d) dealt with contract cleaners – ss.88 (1) (e) and (f) dealt with those carrying out contract carpentry or joinery or bricklaying or painting work other than to work on existing residences. Sub-section 88F provided the Industrial Commission with power to intervene in any industry where a person carried out work under a contract that was unfair; harsh or unconscionable or was designed to avoid the provisions of an award or provided a total remuneration that was less than he or she would have earned as an employee. It had, the Minister stated, initially been introduced to cover ‘some of the so-called self-contracts where a man is engaged to do carpentry, painting or bricklaying for a payment which would be less than the award rate and under conditions inferior to those laid down in the appropriate award’.

In 1962, after receiving persistent complaints from its subcontractor members on Housing Commission projects, the NSW/BWIU directed Ron Monaghan to act on behalf of all trades covered by it. Later that year, after convening meetings between builders and subcontractors on various Housing Commission sites, Monaghan achieved an agreement initially on behalf of self-employed carpenters and then for bricklayers – an agreement that was to be renewed on many occasions.
In 1967, the Industrial Commission of NSW conducted an inquiry into ss.88E after a serious dispute involving the TWU:

In November, 1967, at the height of the battle between the State TWU and the employers in the transport industry, the Minister for Labour and Industry in New South Wales, pursuant to sec. 35 (1) (o) of the Industrial Arbitration Act, directed the Industrial Commission to inquire into whether sec. 88E ought to be continued in force or amended.

The Industrial Commission in Court Session conducted an extensive investigation into the problems of the industry, hearing submissions and evidence from employers, employees, employer groups and the State TWU. The hearing extended over 102 sitting days …

In its report published on 23 February, 1970, the Commission in Court Session reviewed the operation of the section, its meaning, and its application to the circumstances of the transport industry. Among its many comments, the Commission said that, as a legal and practical matter, the concept of ‘deemed’ employment was not a satisfactory means of regulating industrial relations in the industry. It would their Honours said, be better to deal with such persons ‘in their true colours’.  

No action was taken until the proposals were incorporated in the Industrial Arbitration (Amendment) Act 1979 under which Contract tribunals were established for taxicab and hire car drivers and lorry owner-drivers in lieu of the previous general deeming character of s.88.

During the 1970s, the NSW/BWIU embarked on a number of campaigns to implement unregistered industrial agreements covering the private housing sector of the industry – for example it achieved an agreement with Moniers covering contract roof-tilers in 1975 that became the bench-mark for the rest of the industry. However, its attempt to obtain regulation of rates and conditions for self-employed fencing workers, those who erected fences around houses, revealed various technical barriers to the use of s.88E in that regard.

In a letter dated 28 June 1977, the NSW/BWIU referred to problems of the self-employed contractor that were developing ‘toward anarchy and various anti-social attitudes’ and sought a meeting with the Minister for Housing, the Hon. R.J. Mulock. On 2 August 1977, Mr J.P. Ducker, the Secretary of the Labour Council of NSW, followed up on discussions that had been held by requesting the establishment of an Inquiry into the nature and terms of employment of persons engaged in the housing construction industry. That Inquiry was established and commenced its hearings in April/May 1979 under retired NSW Industrial Commissioner G.A. Burns, ‘at just about the same time’ as the Industrial Arbitration Act was amended to create Contract tribunals for the transport industry.

There were nine (9) Terms of Reference upon which the Burns Inquiry were to investigate and provide commendations, however, this paper will focus on the third, fourth and fifth Terms of Reference only – they were acknowledged by the Commissioner to be ‘the most important part of this whole exercise and mean much more if taken together …’. The Commissioner then set out the three Terms of Reference in the order that he saw ‘as relating to their true purpose, and the sequence in which they should most properly be dealt with’:

Reference 5:

The need or otherwise to ensure that a contract worker receives a remuneration at least equal to that which would be received if he were an employee at law.

Reference 3:

Whether existing practices within the industry call for the provision of safeguards to protect the position of genuine subcontractors who conduct their affairs in a traditionally acceptable manner.

Reference 4:

The effects of the labour only or substantially labour only contract system on the Housing Industry and particularly on workers within the industry.

The Commissioner believed he had an obligation to determine what the Fifth Term ‘really says and implies’. He discussed the submissions of the NSW/BWIU in which the contract worker, save for the manner of his payment, was compared to a piece-worker employee and concluded:
This boils down to the proposal that the present ‘labour-only or substantially labour-only contract system’ should be replaced with a system of piece-work employment --- and whether the effects of the ‘labour only or substantially labour only contract system on the housing industry and particularly on workers within the industry’ (Reference No.4) are so undesirable that that system should be replaced with a system of piece-work employees.16

In considering Reference No. 4, the Commissioner was critical of the opposing parties, the NSW/BWIU and the MBA/NSW as ‘the tone of their contributions suggested that they were fighting over the subcontractors and they gave little indication that either side was battling for them’. He was however impressed by an appraisal of the system by the Building Research Division of the Commonwealth Scientific Investigation and Research Organisation (CSIRO), and concluded that the self-employed subcontracting system had evolved naturally, worked well, and should have no changes imposed on it.17

The MBA/NSW argued, ‘those who aren’t able to make a living at subcontracting are probably inefficient and should never have entered the subcontract field’,18 and that any aberrations in the labour-only subcontract system were those tradesmen seeking to commence a business and having neither the building skills nor the business skills to make a go of it – ‘they have no business being in the contracting business in the first place’.19 The union on the other hand submitted that the ‘contract worker’ – a union term found inappropriate and misleading by the Commissioner – had to take whatever the Head Contractor offered him on a take-it-or-leave it basis.20 The Union claimed the contract worker needed the protection of regulated rates and relied very much on the alleged success of the agreement between the NSW/BWIU and the association formed in 1948, the Housing Commission Builders Association (HCBCA)21 – an agreement that the MBA/NSW claimed to the Commission added 25 per cent to the costs of building. The Commissioner regarded the MBA/NSW claim as apocryphal and referred to public statements ‘in the run-up to the inquiry’ by the MBA/NSW that ‘the union aimed at a result from this Inquiry which would increase the price of houses in the private sector by 25 per cent’. The Commissioner then, somewhat wistfully, observed:

We had television cameras outside the conference room and all of the trappings. Had NASA’s Skylab not chosen the same time for it’s [sic] landing much would probably have been heard of this contest.22

Ultimately the Commissioner saw little relevance in the Housing Commission agreement as:

In the first place [the Housing Commission] is not a commercial undertaking. In the second place, it is not so fragmented as the private sector and is more easily policed and controlled and finally [it] is a very different kind of customer. The customers for cottages constructed in the private sector are legion and completely independent. The Housing Commission is a single customer and, surely, it is not unfair to say a captive customer.23

On the other hand, the MBA/NSW referred to successful NSW/BWIU industrial campaigns to secure rates for self-employed contractors in the areas of ceramic tile-laying and timber floor-laying and requested the inquiry not to regard those successes ‘as an indication of any need to expand the protection provided by Sections 88E and 88F of the Industrial Arbitration Act of NSW’.24

The Commissioner noted the ‘long history of litigation’ in which ‘the unions have tried to achieve something under s.88F which is not available to them … it seems that the Unions have spent enormous amounts of money and time pursuing this objective’. He referred to the unsuccessful attempts of the NSW/BWIU before Justice Liddy to achieve an award for self-employed fencing contractors and stated:

The scenario put forward by [the NSW/BWIU] which, it would seem, would result in the making of a retrospective award applying to that employer and his seven employees [in the Fencers Case] would, I think, lead to chaos in the industry. I suppose that eventually there might be enough of these awards made to lead to some overall regulation one way or another but I am afraid that the Industrial Commission would preside over some sort of industrial Bedlam in the meantime. 25

However, the Commissioner stated that it was ‘not for that reason that he declined to entertain the proposal that the sections be amended’, but it was on what he saw as ‘a threshold issue’ – the fact that the Industrial Commission of NSW, ‘a very senior Court’, had rejected s.88F by ‘as a means of regulating terms of employment in a general sense’ and had introduced an alternative system for the transport industry. He then went on:
Mr McDonald [the BWIU advocate] indicates that this Act with its system of Contract Prices Tribunals similar to Conciliation Committees in many ways is not what the Unions, the BWIU at any rate, want. He asks that this Inquiry – a lay inquiry – should say that regardless of the views of the Industrial Commission of NSW on the subject, the section should now be amended in accordance with what appears to be what the Unions were seeking before the Commission in the first place when the Inquiry was set up.

Surely this Inquiry is being asked to accept the role of Court of Appeal against one of the most carefully considered decisions of the Commission. I cannot entertain the idea.

I must confess to some surprise that the BWIU’s legal advisers went along with this proposition. Whilst Commissioner Burns handed down his Report in mid-1981, the provisions of s.88F remained until it was replaced by s.275 of the (NSW) Industrial Relations Act 1991 – an Act of the Greiner Government – which continued the power of the NSW Commission sitting in Court Session to declare void or vary any contract for the performance of work it was unfair, harsh or unconscionable, or against the public interest.

The Carr Government’s (NSW) Industrial Relations Act 1996 expanded the original powers of s.88F by providing the Commission with the power in regard to orders for the payment of money ‘in connection with any contract declared wholly or partly void, or varied, as the Commission considers just in the circumstances of the Case’ [s.106 (5)]; and, by investing the Commission with power to deal prospectively with such matters [ss.107 (1)]

The definition of ‘contract’ [s.105] was broadened to include ‘arrangement, or any related condition or collateral arrangement’ which led the Commission to interpret its jurisdiction in this context as including agency and partnership agreements, and other benefits such as share option plans that are related to professional and white collar workers.

The true successor to ss.88F was contained in Division 3 of Part 9 – Unfair Contracts; in that ss.110 addresses [at 110 (1) (a)] building work. After all, to repeat the words of the Minister of the time, s.88F was:

[I]ntroduced to cover ‘some of the so-called self-contracts where a man is engaged to do carpentry, painting or bricklaying for a payment which would be less than the award rate and under conditions inferior to those laid down in the appropriate award’.

The debate continues

The unfair contracts provisions of the 1996 Act attracted those denied access to the unfair dismissals provisions of Part 6 of the Act by the remuneration ceiling imposed by ss.83 (1) (b) and by Regulation 5B, and Sally Gibson referred to trade union criticisms at the amount of time devoted by the Commission to hearing s.106 claims of affluent individuals who did not qualify under the unfair dismissal scheme. Gibson’s article was in response to the Industrial Relations Amendment (Unfair Contracts) Bill 2001 through which the NSW Government sought to limit the breadth of the jurisdiction exercised by the Commission in unfair contracts. She regarded the proposed Bill as flawed and designed to undermine the very purpose for which s.106 was developed, and exampled the ‘removal of share option arrangements from the purview of the Commission’. Gibson also complained at the obtuseness of proposals that placed stringent jurisdictional thresholds on employees and concluded:

[T]he importance of fairness should not be undervalued in any relationship of employment, irrespective of the salary of the employee involved.

The Industrial Relations Amendment (Unfair Contracts) Act 2002 introduced s.108A which excluded those earning over $200,000 per annum from making s.106 claims and limited, to within 12 months of termination, the time in which such claims could be made [s.108B]. Whilst s.109A is intended to overcome the problem of dismissed employees using the unfair contracts remedy when denied access to Part 6 of the Act due to their remuneration being in excess of the prescribed limit, the Commission has found ways in which to bypass that provision where it has believed such course is warranted.
The recent history of s.106 application drew expressions of concern from a Partner in the legal firm, Clayton Utz, whilst a Senior Counsel, after analysing six 2004 decisions of the Court of Appeal, concluded:

[U]nless the High Court intervenes soon and in a definitive and comprehensive manner (or unless the Parliament decides to intervene) to restore clarity to the jurisdiction, it is likely to be a very long time indeed before practitioners will be able to advise their clients with confidence as to the true width of the Commission’s jurisdiction and powers under s.106 of the act.

Another barrister, after noting the recent legislative ‘measures to pare back the operation or coverage’ of s.106, also commented on the ‘pro-active role of the Court of Appeal in the past 2 years’ but observed that further legislative restrictions may ensue should the High Court criticise ‘the Commission’s role in exercising its section 106 jurisdiction’.

It is suggested that there is little relevance in the above debate to the position of those former employees who have been forced to act as labour-only contractors due to the withdrawal by their employers from the traditional employment relationship. To borrow the term used by the NSW/BWIU during the Burns Inquiry, the underpaid contract worker – many of whom have had that role thrust upon them – are virtually unprotected. Whilst ss.5 (2) of the (NSW) Industrial Relations Act, 1996 states that ‘a person is not prevented from being an employee only because’ (a) ‘the person is working under a contract for labour only, or substantially labour only’, and (b) ‘the person is an outworker’; various classes of persons are deemed to be employees by Schedule 1 of the Act. Those for whom ss.88F was originally intended are included, as are outworkers in the clothing trade.

Roza Lozusic refers to the (NSW) Industrial Relations (Ethical Clothing Trades) Act 2001 and to the creation of an Ethical Clothing Trades Council and a mandatory code of practice, and to a Senate Committee Report of December 1996, each of which designed to address the notorious plight of outworkers in the textile industry. She comments on consistent efforts over the past decade to raise public and media awareness of the problem of outworker working conditions and concludes by quoting an article from the April 1999 edition of the Alternative Law Journal:

[L]egal protection is insufficient in these circumstances, and more is needed if a practical protection is to be afforded. It is necessary, therefore, to look beyond the legal framework for ways to address the problems of outworker exploitation.

After 1 July 2005 the Liberal Party will control of the Senate and the position of the contract worker is likely to worsen as the draconian industrial policies of the Howard Government become law later this year with no effective House of Review. The President of the Industrial Commission of NSW, Justice Wright, wrote the Foreword to a recent booklet: ‘There has rarely been a time when citizens need greater knowledge of their employment rights and responsibilities’. The booklet provides a chart to assist an individual ascertain his or her employment status vis-à-vis that of an independent contractor. Later in the booklet is an explanation of rights in relation to unfair contract claims:

[A]n unfair contract claim involves more formal and expensive proceedings … You should seek independent legal advice before commencing an unfair contract claim, as the losing party usually pays the costs of the successful party, which can be substantial.

**Conclusion**

In light of the foregoing, it is clear that the ability of contract workers to achieve a remedy is both complex and expensive. It is also apparent that current debates over the unfair contract provisions ignore the contract worker whose position is likely to further deteriorate due to foreshadowed actions in the federal area by the Howard Government. There is an urgent need for public debate over this class of worker and to revisit the unsuccessful attempt of the NSW Government to pass the Industrial Relations Amendment (Independent Contractors) Bill 2000.

In his Second Reading Speech, the Hon. Jeff Shaw MLC, Attorney General and Minister for Industrial Relations, referred to the exposed position of independent contractors and to the often vague and uncertain ‘artificial division’ at law between an employee and an independent contractor. He stated that under the proposed Bill, and on the application of the Minister, a State Peak Council or an industrial organisation, a Full Bench of the Industrial Commission of NSW would be able to make an order
declaring a class of persons who perform work as independent contractors to be employees. Another subject for debate would be the option of awards for former employees who have been forced into contract worker status.

**Endnotes**

4. MBA/NSW, Minutes of General Meeting, 18 August 1945.
13. Ibid., p. 19.
14. Ibid., pp. 86 and XIII.
15. Ibid., pp. 5 and 19.
16. Ibid., pp. 21 and 22.
17. Ibid., pp. 119 and 120.
18. Ibid., p. 67.
23. Ibid., p. 64.
25. *Report*, pp. XVIII and XIX.
26. Ibid., p. XIX.
27. Elder and Twyford, p. 560.
29. Ibid., p. 262.
35. Ibid., p. 32.
Muriel’s engagement: Muriel Heagney and the struggle for equal pay in Australia

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The gendered construction of Australian society is thrown into sharp relief in the debate over the rate for women’s wages compared with that of men’s. From the late nineteenth century in Australia when it was clear that women formed a permanent part of the industrial labour force, earning lower rates of pay than men, members of the trade union movement, which historian Marilyn Lake and others have described as a ‘men’s movement’, designed to protect the conditions of male workers against the exploitation of the Capitalist system, attempted to exclude women from paid work as much as possible. In the early twentieth century most Australian women regarded paid labour as at best an unfortunate necessity before marriage. Women workers nonetheless represented a source of unfair competition where employers exploited their cheaper labour, particularly in industries such as clothing and textiles. A solution to the problem of women’s cheap labour was to grant them equal pay, but unions instead managed to restrict them to a narrow range of employment, denying them access to most trades.

The Harvester judgement of 1907, which Justice Higgins, president of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration delivered, established the basic wage as a family one, based on the needs of a man, wife and three children. This decision made it difficult for equal pay advocates to argue that women, with supposedly no dependents, were entitled to equal pay with men. Secondly, Higgins’ 1912 judgement in the Fruit pickers case, entrenched the sex-segregated nature of the Australian workforce by categorising some jobs as male and others as female, with women’s jobs attracting lower rates of pay, approximately 54 per cent of the male basic wage. If women worked in jobs defined as male, however, they earned the male rate as a means of protecting men’s jobs from the threat of low paid women workers. The major obstacle to overcome, however, was the construction of sexual difference, expressed as the family ideology, which categorised the male as breadwinner and female as homemaker, with women subordinate to men in the workplace and in the home. The acceptance of masculine privilege as the norm was to prove a concept difficult to dislodge from the Australian culture.

This paper explores the role of Muriel Heagney, a woman who challenged the dominant labour discourse on women’s place in society and in the labour movement in the struggle for equal pay in Australia and sets that struggle within an international context. Heagney’s international perspective, gained through her travel and work overseas, informed her approach to the question of equal pay for the sexes. It traces the origins of her uncompromising, single-minded commitment to the achievement of ‘the rate for the job’. Consistent with her democratic socialist principles, she co-operated with communists and feminists to achieve her goal despite the fact that at times her efforts met with indifference and outright hostility. I argue that her uncompromising stance enabled her opponents to brand her as too difficult and too radical and effectively sideline her in the equal pay struggle, made more intense during World War II by the war-time imperative of an increasing demand for female labour. For Heagney, the key to women’s economic independence lay in the achievement of ‘the rate for the job’. Her faith in ‘the unity of labour’ as ‘the hope of the world’ meant that she did not forsake the labour movement even when she did not achieve her goal.

Although Muriel Heagney’s activism in the struggle for equal pay, particularly in her capacity as secretary of the Council of Action for Equal Pay, has been the subject of published articles, she has not been the subject of a major study. This paper makes a contribution to the larger project of a biography of Muriel Heagney on which I am engaged. In an attempt to evaluate Heagney’s role in the battle for female equality, Jenny Bremner has argued that her belief that the achievement of equal pay would solve the problems of women’s oppression was at best naïve. On her death, Elizabeth Jackson and Elizabeth Reid each paid tribute to her loyal commitment to the labour movement and lamented the fact that she died alone and in poverty with her sustained contribution unacknowledged. Marilyn Lake has referred to Heagney’s feminist perspective within the labour movement and argues that the genesis of the first Australian Anti-Discrimination Act in 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act in 1986 lay in Heagney’s publication of *Are Women Taking Men’s Jobs* in 1935.
Heagney was born in Brisbane on 31 December 1885 into a solid labour family of Irish heritage. By 1900 the family had moved to Melbourne and Heagney joined the Victorian branch of the Political Labour Council (PLC), of which her father Patrick was a founding member in 1902, in 1906. The PLC (later the Australian Labor Party) accepted women members in a subordinate role as supporters of policy and the organisation, not as participants in the decision making processes of the party. Elected as a delegate to the Women’s Organising Committee (WOC) in 1909, Heagney attended the first Victorian Labor Women’s Conference in July of that year at the Victorian Trades Hall. Her involvement in the fight for equal pay began in Victoria in 1913 when, at the instigation of women members, the Victorian branch of the ALP held an Equal Pay Convention in Melbourne where male delegates defeated the motion for equal pay.7

Heagney’s working life and her socialist principles confirmed her belief in the importance of earning equal pay, especially when as a teacher she was paid only four fifths of the male rate for performing the same tasks as a male colleague. As a clerk in the Defence Department during World War I, she earned the male rate and also in her position as an investigator on the Royal Commission for the Basic Wage from 1919-20. She thus set the pattern for the rest of her working life.

Her employment as general secretary of the Australian Relief Fund for Stricken Europe from 1921-23 created the opportunity for her to travel and work overseas.8 After the fund closed in 1923, Heagney travelled to England and Europe where she performed relief work with the Society of Friends in Eastern Europe, and gained valuable insights into the social and political conditions at the time. She spent two months in Russia at the beginning of 1925, when the new Economic Policy of Lenin was beginning to take effect and thus observed at first hand the early stages of the communist experiment in that country. Her work at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva as a research officer for two months and her attendance at the International Labour Conference in the same year expanded her knowledge of working conditions around the world. Australia was one of 45 founding members of the ILO when it was established in 1919 in close association with the League of Nations to ensure decent working conditions for workers in all countries. Heagney returned to England to attend the British Labour Women’s Conference in Birmingham and the British Commonwealth Trade Union Conference in Scarborough. She represented Australia at the first British Commonwealth Labour conference held at the House of Commons in July 1925. Attendance at these conferences provided her with an insight into international labour and socialist movements and gave her an international perspective on labour issues.

On her return to Australia in November 1925, her presentation of a series of lectures entitled ‘Facts about Soviet Russia’ in Melbourne attracted the notice of Australia’s security service. Intelligence officials confirmed that Heagney worked at the London offices of the Labour Research Bureau, ‘an organization which contains some of the most dangerous members of the revolutionary movement in England.’ Secret correspondence showed that ‘Miss Heagney has now become potentially dangerous and is providing certain Australians with letters of introduction… from which it may be inferred that she has not only become a trusted communist, but possibly an intermediary’.10 Nevertheless by 1926 the surveillance officers deduced that she was not a communist as members of the Communist party did not take her seriously.11 Her file was kept active until 1962, although by then it was clear that she had never been a member of the Communist party, describing herself as a ‘pure socialist’.12

By the 1930s Muriel Heagney was a well-known and respected figure in Labour circles in Victoria despite her reputation as a ‘rather aggressive too- busy- to- waste- time on nonsense labor woman’13. She appeared as a witness in 1927 in an unsuccessful equal pay claim for the Amalgamated Clothing and Allied Trades Union of Australia. In this application she expressed her socialist views, quoting Frederich Engels and arguing that economic equality was a necessary pre-condition for women’s liberation.14 Her capacity to represent women workers in international forums was again acknowledged in 1928 when she attended the Pan Pacific Women’s Congress held in Honolulu in August of that year as a Trade Union delegate and presented a paper entitled ‘The Trade Union Woman’. She had served on the Labor Women’s Interstate Executive in 1929 and in 1930 assisted in alleviating the effects of unemployment as a consequence of the Great Depression on female workers by establishing the Unemployed Girls’ Relief Movement, sparking criticism from members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) who attacked her work as that of a social fascist and a work of charity.15

Although Heagney eschewed feminists, she worked with them when their common interests drew them together. As a foundation member of the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of
the Woman Worker (ODI), an organisation established in Berlin in 1929, she was required to work with feminists. It emerged out of the Open Door Council, which was established in London in 1926 to ensure that a woman’s right to work and to protection at all stages of her life were the same as those for a man. At the request of the Equal Status Committee of the Victorian branch of the ODI she researched and wrote the publication entitled *Are women taking men’s jobs?* in 1935 to confront the ‘current propaganda against women in industry implying that women and girls were taking men’s jobs and thereby becoming a contributory factor in general unemployment’. Heagney proved conclusively that women were not taking men’s jobs and that they did not enjoy equal status, equal opportunity or equal pay in the work place. Her publication gained an international readership and a copy is currently available in the ILO library in Geneva.

In opposition to the social construction of sexual difference, with the female the economic dependent of the husband in a marriage, to which the majority of Australians subscribed, Heagney as a single woman argued that a woman had the right to economic independence, as every worker had the right to enjoy the highest possible standard of living in her own right and not merely share in the pleasures and comforts through the beneficence of her menfolk. In her conclusion to *Are women taking men’s jobs*, Heagney wrote that ‘women are entitled to freedom of choice in the matter of employment equally with men, and the interests of all workers can only be safeguarded by the acceptance of equal occupational rates based on the nature of the job irrespective of the sex of the prospective worker’. She cited the USSR as an example ‘where occupational rates and equality of opportunity operate, women have succeeded in almost every sphere of work, without detriment to the men with whom they work’. Heagney considered that the issue of equal pay was ‘the most momentous question that has confronted the women of all races for generations!’ She believed that occupational rates would achieve economic emancipation, which would in turn liberate women socially and politically.

Muriel Heagney had a clear view of her goals for women workers in Australia when she arrived in Sydney from Melbourne in 1936 to take up a position as travel organiser for the Queensland Tourist office. She was 52 years of age with considerable experience in the industrial arena and the ALP. As a result of the research she completed for her book, *Are women taking men’s jobs?* her knowledge of the working conditions of women in Australia and internationally was unsurpassed. She adopted the stance of the ODI in relation to equal pay and to protection for women workers. On her arrival in Sydney she was co-opted on to the Clerks’ Union Equal Pay Committee.

The decision to form the Council of Action for Equal Pay (CAEP) was taken at an equal pay conference initiated by the New South Wales branch of the Clerks’ union held in Sydney in May 1937. Members of the organising committee of the CAEP included communists, feminists and trade unionists. Jessie Street represented the United Associations (of Women) (UA), Eileen Powell the Australian Railways Union (ARU), Muriel Heagney and John (Jack) Hughes the Federated Clerks’ Union, Ruby Rich the Feminist Club, Lloyd Ross the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) members and ARU secretary, and Lucy Woodcock the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation (NSWTF).

The inaugural meeting of the CAEP, the first organisation in Australia to lobby solely for equal pay for the sexes, was held on 14 July 1937 at 8.00 p.m at Sargents meeting rooms in Market Street Sydney. Its organisation included a joint male and female president, secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer and four commissions, organisation, finance, publicity and research. Muriel Heagney initially held the position of joint president and represented the Clerks’ union on the research commission. By 1939 she was secretary and retained that position until the organisation lapsed in 1948. Jessie Street served on the organisation commission with Eileen Powell as the convenor. Powell later became joint president with Robert Day.

The CAEP set out to lobby state and federal governments to introduce legislation to increase the adult female base rate, which was 54 per cent of the male rate, to equality with the male rate. A clause B made provision for the gradual increase in the female base rate, if ‘the rate for the job’ was not implemented immediately. In September 1937, the CAEP joint presidents at the time Heagney and George Weir advised the prime minister Joseph Lyons of its existence and expressed its intention to send a delegation to the government to press its claim for equal pay. On the advice of the secretary of his department, who obviously disliked Heagney, the prime minister declined to meet a delegation, but requested a written argument. Robert Menzies, who assumed the prime ministership after the death of Joseph Lyons in 1939 adopted the same approach.
Heagney was an independent forceful person who believed she could gain sufficient support in the federal parliament for the legislation to be passed. A contemporary of Heagney remarked that ‘she was a fighter, Muriel, she had ability and she was tough. She was a character too. She wasn’t tall, but plumpish and never fashionable and her cigarette holder was never out of her hand, it was like a part of her body. And she’d have a drink with you. She was a doer’. Constance Lamour described her as ‘redoubtable’ explaining that she liked to meet and argue with men on equal terms and that she often won was a cause of much exasperation.

The motives of those groups who established the CAEP were mixed and were to lead to tensions within the organisation. All members accepted the goal of ‘the rate for the job’, but some unionists like Eileen Powell and feminists such as Jessie Street were prepared to adopt a more gradual approach to the achievement of equal pay. Only those unions with a large number of female workers were interested in the issue at all. Out of over 360 unions existing in Australia in 1937, 53 organisations affiliated with the CAEP. As Penny Johnson has demonstrated these differing attitudes were to create problems for the organisation in the achievement of its long term goal.

The UA withdrew from the CAEP after Jessie Street decided that a gradualist approach to the implementation of equal pay was preferable and the UA maintained its right to act independently of the CAEP on the issue of equal pay. The first source of tension arose at the 1937 application to the New South Wales Industrial Commission on behalf of the Public Service Association for an equal minimum wage for men and women. The CAEP assisted in the case and Nerida Cohen appeared for the UA arguing for a gradual percentage increase, which would be easier for industry to absorb. The CAEP Executive disapproved of this apparent public difference on the implementation of equal pay and the CAEP annual conference in 1939 rejected the UA policy. The UA temporarily withdrew from the CAEP to put its own case in the newspapers and ultimately withdrew its affiliation from the CAEP in November 1939. The UA then decided to intervene in the Basic Wage hearing in Melbourne in November 1940 before the Arbitration Court without consulting the unions. The Arbitration Court refused to admit them, but the two women Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen gained much publicity. Heagney described their action as ‘stupid’, claiming that the unions intended to put the case for equal pay in one step and that the UA had weakened the unions’ case. Others have argued that the unions had no such intentions and that the UA’s intervention gained valuable publicity for the equal pay struggle. Nonetheless, women’s wages were not mentioned at the hearing.

The issue assumed greater urgency on the declaration of war on 3 September 1939 and men began to enlist in the Armed Services, thus creating demand for women to enter industries previously unavailable to them. The government initially resisted CAEP demands for equal pay, but it was aware that by 1941 the issue was gathering some momentum. Harold Holt, Minister for Labour and National Service in 1941 referred to the active campaign of the CAEP. He noted that the ALP federal platform included equal pay as one of its objectives and that a conference of 24 federal unions with women members requested the ACTU to present a case to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court to raise the female basic wage to that of the male. He understood too that the Federal Government as a large employer of female labour, had a substantial financial interest in the question and had to set an example to industry in its treatment of female employees by adopting a consistent approach, but left the regulation of women’s wages to the Arbitration Court.

On John Curtin’s elevation to the prime ministership after the resignation of Robert Menzies in August 1941 and the fall of the replacement Fadden Government in October of the same year, the equal pay campaigners believed they were ‘on the eve of victory’. As Opposition leader John Curtin had committed the ALP to implementing equal pay. When questioned on the issue before the federal elections in 1937 and 1940, he had stated that the Commonwealth Labor Party ‘acknowledges the absolute equality of giving to women the same wages and status to those of men in respect of occupations generally’ and said that ‘it is our intention to take the necessary steps to amend the law so that such discrimination as is now practised may no longer subsist’. Muriel Heagney counted John Curtin as a friend, and had known him from his youth in Melbourne. With a Labor Government in Canberra and the support of the ACTU, the CAEP could confidently predict that the ‘rate for the job’ would be implemented. They had however underestimated the power of the employers who were generally strongly opposed to the implementation of equal pay, and the approach of the ACTU Executive. An article in the journal
Manufacturer, in September 1941, argued that the ‘issue of equal pay strikes at the very foundation of that structure which we call Australia’s system of Industrial Arbitration…Departure from the principle of the family wage was ‘profoundly revolutionary in character’. It became clear too, that the ACTU Executive wanted to marginalise Heagney’s influence in the equal pay struggle.

The ACTU’s wartime policy stated that when women were employed in industries that usually engaged men, equal pay should be implemented to ensure ‘that men may be reinstated on such work when available’. The only exception to this rule was if a period of training was considered necessary for the ‘efficient performance of skilled work’, then a conference of relevant employers and employees organisations would determine the rate of pay. The ACTU Executive believed that paying equal wages could best protect men’s jobs.

In October 1941 Muriel Heagney travelled to New York to attend the International Labour Conference to be held in November 1941 unaware of the ACTU Executive’s intention to with draw her credentials to speak at the conference. She went as a technical Advisor to assist Albert Monk, the ACTU and the Victorian Labor Party president and workers’ representative at the conference. On learning of Heagney’s appointment, the ACTU executive insisted that as the ACTU had not elected her as a representative, her credentials should be revoked. The government succumbed to ACTU pressure, which meant that Heagney was effectively gagged, leaving Monk to present the ACTU arguments on the issue. Monk omitted Heagney’s contribution in his report, but Heagney submitted her own to the prime minister and to the parliament.

Heagney, showing no public disappointment at her altered status, reported that Monk had dealt with equal pay at her request and affirmed ACTU support for the principle. Her attendance at the conference enabled her to renew friendships she had made in Europe in 1924 and 1925 and at the Pan Pacific Women’s Conference in Honolulu in 1928 and accepted invitations to visit labour, university and women’s organisations. Heagney was one of two women present at the ILO New York conference apart from the American delegate Frances Perkins. The New York Times interviewed Heagney and Miss Graciela Mandujano, Government Advisor in the Chilean delegation, and reported the interview under the headline of ‘Two Women here for ILO Parley – both widely known’.

On Heagney’s return to Australia in December 1941, the equal pay issue remained unresolved. With the commencement of war in the Pacific in December 1941 the Australian War Cabinet on the recommendation of the Man-power authorities decided to pursue a policy of replacing males in industry with females as the need for male personnel in the Armed Forces increased. The policy presented problems, which included the fixation of an equitable wage, the desires of the trade union movement to reserve for males as many occupations as possible, and the effect on the trade unions of opening to females occupations hitherto reserved for males. Lastly there was the admission of females into those positions under the direction of industrial tribunals, which were committed to the female wage of 54 per cent of the male rate.

The establishment of the Women’s Employment Board (WEB) addressed those difficulties. It was established as a wartime tribunal by National Security Regulations promulgated on 25 March 1942. The WEB aimed to encourage and regulate the employment of women in work usually performed by men to aid the war effort. It was to determine the hours of work and the maximum daily and weekly hours of the women employed, and to set the pay scales for these women in essential industries. The pay was to range from between 60 per cent and 100 per cent of the male rate of pay. The WEB met with strong opposition from employers who saw it as a means of gaining equal pay surreptitiously and challenged its legality in the High Court of Australia, and from unions such as the NSWTF and the Rubber Workers’ union who condemned it for not awarding the male rate.

With the establishment of the WEB in March 1942, the expectation of victory in the equal pay battle wavered. Heagney stated that ‘the position of equal pay is very precarious. When representatives of the ACTU and Government agree to such conditions as those agreed in Canberra, I see little hope of achieving equal pay in the near future’. The existence of the WEB posed problems for the CAEP as the Executive was critical of it from its inception, while other affiliates accepted it as a workable solution to the problem of women’s wage rates when females took up positions previously occupied by men. The CAEP had to contend with dissension in its own ranks whilst still trying to agitate for equal pay.
The executive’s attitude to Jessie Street and the Council for Women in War Work (CWWW), which Street established in 1943, indicated that there was to be no co-operation with that organisation.

John Curtin explained that the WEB was neither an equal pay nor a ‘cheap labour’ board. Much to Heagney’s dismay and disappointment the Government did not adopt the principle of the ‘rate for the job’. She declared that the full male rate should have been awarded, and failing that, the onus of proof should have been placed on the employer and that the principles of wage determination adopted by the WEB, those of comparative efficiency and absenteeism, were industrial irrelevancies. She was not prepared to accept the regulation merely because it was put in place by a Labor government. This statement demonstrated her frustration with the Government as she realised that the interests of working women were not high on the ALP’s list of priorities. She remarked to her friend Alf Wallis that when she attempted to broach an issue of importance to women, she began half a mile behind the starting point in a mile race.

Heagney was not alone in her disappointment with the decision. The CAEP Executive criticised WEB decisions when it awarded 85 or 90 per cent of the male rate rather than the 100 per cent. Heagney’s forthright approach displeased other affiliates of the CAEP, who considered the WEB the best solution possible under the circumstances. Carmel Coleman, a member of the CPA and Clerks’ Union delegate and Doris Beeby, the Sheet metal Workers’ union delegate believed that the Government wanted to implement equal pay, but was constrained by the wartime emergency and the pegging of wages. They felt obliged to support the WEB while the employers were hostile to its existence.

Zillah Bocking and Lucy Woodcock of the NSWTF argued however, that the CAEP should not support a body that was only serving a temporary need and legislated only for a section of women workers. Eileen Powell had taken a more sympathetic view of the WEB and was subsequently rewarded with a position in the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service, a position to which Muriel Heagney aspired. In her opinion Eileen Powell ‘sold out’ on equal pay.

Heagney was unemployed for 18 months after the Queensland Government Tourist Office closed in 1942 for the duration of the War until she found employment as organiser for the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1943. She had unsuccessfully sought the assistance of the prime minister John Curtin in her search for an appropriate position. In a letter to her friend May Brodney in 1942, she confided that ‘I dare say I should have found a job ere this if I had sold out on equal pay as others have done, but I simply can’t do that and now I am deeper in the fight than ever’. Heagney realised that the opposition of the Communists, ‘on whom I want to spit whenever they come near is telling against me in some places. They have set up a Women’s Committee in the Legal Rights Committee to cover the same ground as the CAEP’. Heagney’s opposition to the WEB made her a target for the Communist members of the Clerks’ Union who supported the WEB. She was defeated as a Clerks’ union delegate following Coleman’s report to the Council, which objected to CAEP statements in publications which criticised the WEB. Coleman challenged Heagney’s right to hold the position of secretary-treasurer of the CAEP in 1943 when Heagney was unemployed and criticised her stand over the CWWW.

Despite the internal dissension the CAEP continued to encourage individual unions to make claims for equal pay and lobbied the Government to legislate for equal pay. By 1944, however, certain unions withdrew their affiliations. As Heagney explained to May Brodney, in 1944 ‘the Coms have completely boycotted us’. The WEB was disbanded in October 1944 with the responsibility for women in industry reverting to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The WEB had determined the wages of between 80 and 90,000 women out of a total of 800,000 women employees. It awarded the full male rate to nine categories of employment. In Heagney’s view the ‘WEB has not left a single judgement that could be used to substantiate a claim for complete sex equality’.

Heagney’s disappointment and bitterness at the lost opportunity were expressed in correspondence with May Brodney. She felt that the ‘reactionary elements’ of the trade union movement, Mel Cashman, Eileen Powell and Doris Beeby, ‘are preparing for another onslaught on equal pay and equal status’. She indicated that the CAEP would take up the challenge, ‘but it is heart-breaking to have to face up to the dishonesty, ignorance and prejudices of the most vocative ACTU men and the women officials such as those mentioned above’. She noted that Powell had been appointed to the Women’s Employment Committee of the ILO. Her assessment of Powell was revealing. ‘She is essentially the private secretary...
type and acted as such for years for Lloyd Ross. She lacks judgement and initiative so is not as helpful as she might otherwise be’.53

Although the CAEP had ceased operating by 1948, Muriel Heagney presented the case for an equal basic wage before the Arbitration Court in 1949. Judge Foster awarded 75 per cent, an improvement on 54 per cent, but still refused to accept the principle of ‘the rate for the job’.54 This was to be Heagney’s last official act in the struggle for equal pay.

In conclusion, Heagney, as the major spokesperson for the CAEP was single-minded in her pursuit of ‘the rate for the job’. She was confident that her goal could be achieved through legislation, but once the WEB was established as a temporary war-time measure to regulate the wages of women who were working in industries previously reserved as male, the moment was lost. Nevertheless her own class prejudices were reflected in CAEP policy, particularly with regard to Jessie Street, the UAW and the CWWW. Unfortunately she was to suffer the fate of other women in the labour movement who did not realise the strength of the resistance to equal pay as it overturned the ideology of the family wage, thus undermining the structure of masculine privilege. She underestimated the conservatism of the ACTU under Albert Monk’s leadership in relation to women’s position in the labour force. The employers strongly resisted the implementation of equal pay. In Powell’s view Muriel Heagney ‘was dedicated to equal pay in a way nobody else before or since has been and I always likened her in my own mind to Mrs Pankhurst with votes for women, she just let nothing else deflect her from her objective and she wanted it whole and immediately, but things do not work that way’.55 Muriel Heagney spearheaded the fight for equal pay in Australia and even in old age continued to assist those who were actively engaged in the fight during the 1960s. Reflecting on the struggle in 1962, she was philosophical about her efforts in 1941. ‘The luck of the game went against us and reliance on the wrong means of implementation, particularly the WEB robbed us of success’.56

Endnotes

8. ‘Muriel Heagney –Labor activist for over fifty years’, notes by Muriel Heagney on her life history, MS 9106, Box 1145/1(a), Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria ((Hereafter SLV).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 12.
13. Evening Sun, 19 August 1924.
18. Clothing trades Union Claim for Equal Basic Wage for men and women, 1927. Cost of Living memorandum by Muriel Heagney. Heagney papers, MS 9106, Box 1159/19a, Manuscripts Collection, SLV.
20. Ibid., p. 11.
21. Ibid., p. 185.
24. Minutes of meeting of Organising Committee, 9 June 1937, Heagney papers, MS 9106.
33. Equal Pay Policy Statements by Party leaders, 18 October 1937.
35. Resolutions carried by Meeting of ACTU Full Executive, 15, 16, 17 Dec 1941; 3rd Session, 3 Feb 1942, NBAC/ANU, ACTU, N147.
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44. Minutes of CAEP Meeting, 21 April 1942. CAEP Minute Book 1940-1942, Heagney papers, MS 9106, Box 1166/1. Manuscript Collection, SLV.
45. Letter, Muriel Heagney to Alf Wallis, Secretary, Amalgamated Clothing Trades Union 2 July 1943. Heagney papers, MS 9106. Correspondence Box 1169/3.
51. Letter, Heagney to Brodney, 26 June1944, Brodney papers, Heagney file 10882, Box 7, folder 18 (ii), May Brodney papers, SLV.
56. Letter, Heagney to J.S. Luckman, 3 February 1962. Heagney papers, MS 9106, Box 1147/4(b).
Re-connecting with the history of labour in New Brunswick: historical perspectives on contemporary issues

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This project builds on contemporary debates about the ‘presence of the past’ in contemporary life. The most significant conclusion in those discussions is that despite frequently expressed concerns about the adequacy of historical knowledge among Canadians, history remains a cultural resource of considerable value to citizens in the clarification of personal identity and public issues in the present-day world. In this context it is important to ensure that there is adequate access to relevant information and analysis concerning the past. In this case we are proposing a program of research, study and activity focusing on the need for an informed public memory on issues related to the experience of work in the Province of New Brunswick. We welcome the opportunity to establish a collaborative working partnership among academic researchers, heritage institutions and labour organisations. We share a concern that the contributions of working people and labour unions in provincial development require more concerted attention in scholarly research, heritage preservation and public discussion.

The research program will use the methods of labour studies and labour history to place contemporary challenges facing New Brunswick workers in historical perspective. This approach builds on the idea that historical knowledge may in several ways be a source of empowerment. An understanding of the origins of particular social issues and of responses to such conditions over time will contribute to an ability to analyse and respond to contemporary situations. We approach this program as well with the view that historical knowledge can be activated in constructive ways to train researchers in historical and analytical methods, to build relevant historical collections in public institutions, to enhance the problem-solving and decision-making capacities among academic and community partners and to participate in the development of an informed public knowledge. This approach will contribute specifically to the expressed needs of heritage institutions and labour organisations to enhance the recognition of labour history within their individual mandates. It will shed light on the development of the social reform agenda in the province by examining the role of organised labour in shaping public policy over the past century. It will also contribute to an enrichment of the economic, social and cultural capital of the province by emphasising the world of work as one of the major shared experiences in the development of provincial society in the past 100 years.

This is a bilingual project, which will function under both English- and French-language working titles. New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province, and the program involves scholars from both English- and French-language provincial universities. Four of the team members are anglophones, and three of the team are francophones. We have met regularly and interacted in both languages. Training of graduate students and undergraduate assistants will be undertaken at both the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton. The community partners are public institutions and social organisations working in both languages. In dissemination, such outcomes as websites, workshops, exhibitions, visual projects and publications will be presented in both languages.
Detailed description

New Brunswick does not loom large in accounts of Canadian labour history or contemporary labour issues. Although the pioneer labour historian Harold Logan long ago identified the New Brunswick Federation of Labour as one of the first provincial labour centrals in Canada, the provincial story remains virtually invisible in standard accounts of Canadian labour history. Moreover, the contributions of workers and labour unions are rarely mentioned in discussions of the New Brunswick identity, which tend to focus on founding moments in the eighteenth century. In recent decades there have been efforts to improve this situation. A project of oral history was undertaken by industrial relations specialists in the 1970s. A survey of secondary sources related to labour history was produced by labour historians in the 1980s. Moreover, in 1990 scholars and academics collaborated in the organisation of a New Brunswick Labour History Workshop. The present application is a successor to these initiatives. It draws together the leading practitioners of labour history in the province, located at the two provincial universities, as well as three major public institutions dedicated to heritage collection, the professional associations of both French- and English-language teachers and several of the largest and most influential labour organisations in the province. Our program of research will produce a significant body of resources, research, information and analysis concerning the experience of work and labour organisation during the course of the past century.

The inquiry addresses a prevailing malaise in New Brunswick about the social, cultural and economic future of the province. Demographic growth is at a low level, and the province attracts relatively few immigrants. Levels of employment are a source of anxiety, especially outside the major urban centres. There is concern among younger citizens who are unsure of their prospects in a province where employment standards and other legislated rights are weaker than in most Canadian jurisdictions. There are continual controversies over labour standards, public services, pay equity, work-load, health, safety and compensation, the subcontracting and privatisation of services and other issues. Labour organisations have a perception that the general public, and possibly the government, lack an understanding of the social contract between workers, employers and governments that has been one of the principal social reforms of the 20th century. This is a particularly critical issue at a time when resource and industrial sectors are undergoing renovation, the public sector is often engaged in restructuring and the digital revolution is producing new sectors of employment. In this context, our inquiry is based on the idea that the present moment is part of a larger history and that historical knowledge can be activated constructively to enhance public understanding of contemporary challenges.

At the general level, the program advances a major research question that seeks first to identify the changes in the working lives of New Brunswickers over the past several generations and secondly to examine the role of labour movements at all levels of provincial society in contributing to the process of social change. In the first instance we seek to document the experience of work as a shared identity among the people of New Brunswick, and in the second instance we seek to analyse the activism of those who participated in one of the major social movements of the twentieth century. By framing the question in this way, the research program seeks to incorporate both the social history and institutional approaches to international labour history that have been common in recent decades.

Our methodologies draw on the traditional resources of the social sciences and humanities, including the use of archival collections, government documents, contemporary publications and secondary works. In addition to identifying and utilising resources currently held in libraries, museums and archives, we will seek out resources currently held by organisations and individuals and encourage that they be placed on deposit in the collections of major institutions, such as the Provincial Archives, New Brunswick Museum and Centre d’études acadiennes. Beyond this, one of the goals of the project is to enrich the documentation of the provincial experience by using the methods of oral history to assist in recovering as far as now possible the lived experience of previous generations in the workplace and in labour organisations. Oral history is well established as a method of historical research with recognised professional and ethical standards. As a method of historical investigation, oral history is especially appropriate to the themes of our project, for it plays an important part in democratising the practice of history. In the first place, it involves the creation of a durable historical record where traditional sources have been inadequate or have not been preserved. Secondly, it involves active collaboration between historically informed interviewers and informants in recording memories of accumulated personal experience.
In the context of this project, two streams of fieldwork are planned, one under the title ‘Working Life in New Brunswick’ and the other under the title ‘Labour Leadership in New Brunswick’. In the first stream interviewees will be recruited through the encounter method at public events held at seniors’ residences and public libraries in the several parts of the province. Questions will focus on the ‘récits de vie’ or ‘life-history’ approach that will enable the interviewee, by responding to a series of life-stage questions, to provide an open-ended account of his or her working experience in (and, as is often the case, beyond) New Brunswick. Our initial focus will be on the most senior generation, and particular attention will be paid to ensuring appropriate representation of regional, occupational, gender and linguistic backgrounds among participants. In the second stream participants will be identified through the labour councils, individual unions and professional associations with a view to interviewing key actors in the developing provincial labour relations system during the past half-century. The questions in this stream will focus more sharply on major events and themes in the development of organised labour with a view to understanding the evolution of these institutions and their role in the public life of the province. In designing the oral history research strategy, we have taken a broad approach that will substantially enhance the provincial oral history collections. Material collected will often be relevant to several of the inter-related project themes. The potential is amply demonstrated in the work of prominent oral history practitioners. We will draw on the practical experience of oral history archives at several institutions as well as relevant international experience reported in the major oral history journals.

We are fortunate that our partners at the Provincial Archives and the Centre d’études acadiennes have long-established oral history programs and relevant expertise in the field, both at the technical and conceptual level; in particular, Dr Ronald Labelle of the Centre d’études acadiennes is one of the leading oral history scholars in Canada and a former editor of the journal *Oral History Forum/Forum d’histoire orale*. The oral history research constitutes a major element in our activity; it will involve the training and employment of research workers and student assistants, both at the University of New Brunswick and at the Université de Moncton, and working in both English and French. The oral history approach will be a priority in launching the work of the project and will be utilised in all five of the thematic areas. The labour organisation partners will assist in organising local events, identifying informants and establishing focus groups. Our initial video productions, and several website features, will be used as tools in the oral history process. Subject to the agreement of informants, recordings and transcripts will be deposited at the Provincial Archives and the Centre d’études acadiennes and will thus not only be utilised in fulfilling the research objectives of this project but will also form a permanent part of the historical record in the province. In accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, ‘Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans’, the various procedures, instruments, questionnaires, letters and forms associated with this work are subject to ethical review and approval by the Research Ethics Boards at the academic institutions.

The project is organised around five major research areas that correspond to shared interests and concerns of the academic researchers, the heritage institutions, the professional associations and the labour organisation partners. Because these themes are closely inter-related, all of the partners have an interest in all five themes, although it will also be the case that some themes bear very directly on the expertise of individual researchers and the experiences of individual partners.

The five thematic areas have been identified as follows:

1. Provincial solidarities

New Brunswick has a long history of labour organisation, including one of the first federations of labour in Canada and some of the earliest public sector unions. For much of the twentieth century New Brunswick had a reputation for effective labour leadership and progressive labour legislation. The objective here is to establish an understanding of the historical record of unions in the province in representing members and influencing public policy. This will be undertaken in a study tracing the structure and evolution of the organised labour movement in New Brunswick from the early twentieth century to the present, with attention to both local, independent, provincial, national and international organisations. In the earliest period, the consolidation of labour councils and the establishment of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour (1913) marked a major point of departure for organised labour; the subsequent evolution of the Federation provides one important narrative line in the study, and the personnel and policies of this organisation will be closely examined.
The appearance of additional labour central bodies, either local (such as the New Brunswick Farmer-Labour Union on the Miramichi) or provincial (such as the New Brunswick Council of Unions prior to the 1956 merger that created the Canadian Labour Congress) will also be examined, as will the limited presence of Catholic unionism. Major unions in the private sector such as the International Longshoremen’s Association, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees, the United Mineworkers’ of America, the United Steel Workers’ of America, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers’ Union (and its predecessors) will receive attention, as will major public sector unions such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the New Brunswick Public Employees’ Association and the New Brunswick Nurses’ Union. This history of labour organisation constitutes what has been called a process of ‘accelerating solidarity’ within the province, and has been manifested most recently (2004) in the creation of a broad-based Coalition of New Brunswick Unions.

An important part of this history has been the growth of state intervention in labour relations, and our study will consider the origins and evolution of employment standards, workers’ compensation, the minimum wage, human rights, equal pay and pay equity provisions. Major turning points in the emergence of ‘industrial legality’ have included the Labour and Industrial Relations Act (1938) and the Public Service Labour Relations Act (1968), which established the basis of the contemporary labour relations regime; the circumstances surrounding the enactment of these laws and their subsequent enforcement and amendment will also be studied.

While this approach uses an institutional and legal framework of investigation, such ‘older’ questions in labour history cannot be properly understood without attention to the ‘newer’ social history that places working-class experience at the centre of the investigation. For instance, the major developments over the course of the twentieth century require an appreciation of the changing structure of the provincial economy, including the rise of new resource sectors, technologies, skills and divisions of labour; similarly, the study requires attention to the enormous expansion of public sector employment, the changing place of francophones in labour activity and the transformation of women’s work within the provincial economy. At each stage, workers, organisations and governments have been forced to recognise and respond to economic, social and cultural changes of considerable significance, though not without the social tensions and public debates that are the locus of historical change. As we proceed through new periods of restructuring in the 21st century, the experience of previous generations in addressing change in ways that accommodate the balance of economic development and social justice promises to prove instructive. Accordingly, the project seeks to demonstrate how this process of challenge and adaptation was experienced by individuals and organisations in the context of New Brunswick conditions over the course the past century.

2. Le travail en Acadie

The history of work in Acadia is directly related to issues of community survival, regional depopulation and access to employment. These are characteristic themes within the larger Canadian political economy and have received attention in studies of various parts of the Atlantic Region. However, they are especially significant in understanding the social and economic history of the Acadians in New Brunswick. The themes of working experience and union activity have been neglected in studies of Acadian history and society, and we aim to increase the understanding of the economic contributions and working lives of Acadians.

One major aspect of the inquiry will concern the participation of Acadians in national, international and independent unions as well as in local labour councils and provincial federations. In analysing the participation of Acadians, we plan to evaluate the emerging recognition of the French language in unions and labour organisations in the province. In addition, the relative lack of interest in Catholic unionism compared to the neighbouring province of Quebec poses relevant questions to be studied. In the history of labour activism during the twentieth century, Acadians have been most prominent in struggles in the resource economy, particularly in the forest, mining and fisheries sectors, where their efforts have contributed to the struggle for social and economic security in Acadian New Brunswick. Significant examples of Acadian union activism include the founding of the Syndicat des bûcherons de Restigouche in 1949, the first union of woodworkers in New Brunswick, and the creation of l’Union des pêcheurs des Maritimes in 1977, the most successful union of inshore fishers in the Maritime Provinces.

The militancy of Acadian workers has also been visible in numerous disputes in the base metal mining
operations of northern New Brunswick since the 1960s and in the recurring campaigns against local underemployment and inadequate government programs in this era. The long-term exodus of Acadians towards urban centres, sometimes referred to as ‘une deuxième déportation’, raises questions about the role of economic forces in the assimilation of Acadian society and the extent to which issues of identity have remained important to the increasingly urbanised Acadian worker. The arrival of a new economy based on public sector and service employment, including those based on bilingual skills and digital technologies, appears to represent a new historical development in cities such as Moncton.

In addition to utilising traditional sources to explore these themes, our research will also undertake interviews with workers in the major economic sectors and activists in leading organisations in order to establish a substantial body of evidence concerning the working life and social activism of Acadians in twentieth century New Brunswick. Among those already identified for in-depth interviews in connection with this theme are Rolland Blanchette (vice-president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour in the 1950s and 1960s), Léopold Arsenault (an important organiser for the Canadian Union of Public Employees during the 1960s), Mathilda Blanchard (a pioneer activist in the 1970s with the Union canadienne des pêches et des travailleurs affiliés in the Acadian Peninsula), Andrée Boudreau (founder of the Conseil des foyers de soins of the Canadian Union of Public Employees), Maurice Clavette (an officer of Local 29 of the Canadian Paperworkers’ Union and later secretary-treasurer of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour) and Aurèle Ferlatte (a veteran merchant seaman of World War II who became secretary-treasurer of the Canadian Paperworkers’ Union in the 1970s and 1980s).

3. Contested territory: transformation of the woods

The primary industries in the New Brunswick forestry, fisheries, mining and agricultural sectors have long formed the backbone of the New Brunswick economy. These industries, and particularly the vital role of rural labourers and primary producers, have been under-represented in the academic and public history of twentieth century New Brunswick. Over the course of the century the resource sector has experienced dramatic changes in technology, markets, state policy and resource depletion. Such changes as the decline of small scale mixed farming, the rise of pulp and paper as the dominant industry in the forestry sector, the reorganisation of the fisheries along industrial lines and the advent of large scale mining operations after World War II produced a constantly shifting set of productive relations for the rural economy of the province. Workers responded in traditional and innovative ways to promote, resist and shape the timing and content of these broad structural changes. The organisation of unions among the growing class of wage labourers constituted one response, especially in the lumber and pulp mills situated in smaller industrial towns throughout the north of the province, where they formed the basis for the emergence of organisations such as the Canadian Paperworkers’ Union, now part of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers’ Union, the largest single private sector union in the province. However, unionisation was not always the most appropriate or most available option for many workers in the forest economy. Rural workers also promoted such organisations as marketing boards and co-operatives to strengthen their position in the market and employed traditional religious, agricultural and cultural institutions in the struggle to maintain resource based communities.

In the context of this project the theoretical framework of ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ responses to structural economic change will be applied to a major case study on the forestry sector, where the labour force has embraced tens of thousands of workers from the small farms and lumber camps of the interior to the downstream sawmills and pulp and paper operations. Analytically this structure can be understood as an integrated provincial ‘économie agro-forestière’ that includes a variety of class relations and social movements. The impact of technological change in the forest sector will be documented not only through the use of manuscript collections, but also by utilising the visual and sound resources at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, the New Brunswick Museum, the Centre d’études acadiennes and other institutions. The existing collections of the PANB film archives will be used to create a short film on the important technological changes in the harvesting and processing of wood during the decades after World War II. Following the model pioneered by Edward D. Ives and his oral history collaborators at the University of Maine, a short video film on this theme will be produced as a tool for labour history workshops. The film will raise awareness of the place of woods work in the New Brunswick experience and will help us in seeking cooperation from workers who lived through this era of technological change in creating a collection of oral history narratives.
These accounts will provide the basis for a more complete understanding of the participation of New Brunswickers in the forest economy in the twentieth century, especially in the period of rapidly changing productive relations in the period after 1950.

The more visible role of labour in the single-industry towns will be enhanced by an emphasis on the interface between the rural economy and the role of the small producer in supplying wood for the mills. Their responses to long-term and cyclical changes in the forest sector will provide the basis for a fuller appreciation and analysis of the contributions of workers to the New Brunswick resource economy.

4. Women’s work: focus on caring

The work of women has been hidden and undervalued as a contribution to the provincial economy, both in the formal and informal work worlds and in areas such as the delivery of healthcare services where female employment has predominated. As recent studies by scholars such as Kathryn McPherson have noted, it is surprising that few researchers have approached nursing from the analytic approach of labour history. Our aim is to document the activities of individuals and organisations involved in nursing in New Brunswick over the last half century within a framework that encompasses labour history, women’s history and the social history of medicine.

Within this framework, a major case study will address women’s work in care-giving with a particular focus on the work of nurses and their professional and union activities. Over the course of the twentieth century, nursing became one of the most highly regarded occupations in the province; its organisations figure prominently in discussions of public policy, including issues of health care, workload and pay equity. With the cooperation of our partners, the Nurses’ Association of New Brunswick, the New Brunswick Nurses’ Union, the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick and the New Brunswick Museum, documentary and oral sources will be collected, organised and utilised to create an historical portrait of women’s care-giving activities, the challenges faced by women professionals and their campaigns for recognition and improved working conditions. This will include the identification and organisation of existing records, a task begun by Gillian Liebenberg and Arlee Hoyt McGee in *A Guide to Health Care History Materials in New Brunswick* (1998) and by McGee in maintaining the Nursing History Centre located at the Nurses Association office.

In addition, a series of approximately 50 interviews with retired and working nurses, former union officials and activists representing both English and French areas of the province will be conducted. While partnering with the organisations listed above, the project will also draw on expertise from the academic community, in particular nursing faculty from around the province. Penny Ericson, retired Dean of Nursing at the University of New Brunswick, has been an invaluable source of names of contacts within the province, as have Roberta Clark in Saint John and Anne Rheume and Anne Marie Arsenault at the Université de Moncton. A number of these individuals have an established interest in the history of nursing and some may be potential interviewees. Other individuals identified as potential interviewees include: Madeleine Steeves (NBNU, retired), Yolande Cyr (former president, NANB), Sister Ouellette (Director, Foyer Saint-Basile), Linda Silas (former NBNU president), Chantal LaFleur, Edmundston activist), and Lucille Auffrey (national president, Association of Nurses; former president, NANB). In close cooperation with our partners the project will generate a variety of outcomes which include not only academic papers but also shorter pieces suitable for labour education workshops, oral histories, website material and a major travelling exhibit, mounted by the New Brunswick Museum, to name some of the planned outcomes. Through the use of traditional documentary sources, oral interviews and newer technologies for teaching and learning, the history of nursing in New Brunswick will be presented as an instructive case study of the expansion of women’s work in the twentieth century.

5. Labour landmarks

There is a growing international body of work in the history of public commemoration that raises important questions about the selective nature of historical memory and its representation in the public sphere. Much of this literature has taken the form of an ongoing critique of the particular class, gender, ethnic, ideological, nationalist and other social biases embedded in the process of commemoration, whether by official agencies or independent initiatives. Our purpose, however, is a more modest one.
Although much of the literature points out that the place of the worker in such commemorative activity is limited and that other themes have dominated the discourse, it is also the case that the working-class presence has received some attention in the past and that it is receiving increased recognition in recent years. Our objective here is to identify, document and bring increased visibility to those labour landmarks that currently exist within the provincial landscape. Examples of such sites include Claude Roussel’s monument to the fishermen in Escuminac, the burial site of the legendary woodsman Peter Emberley on the Miramichi and the plaque commemorating the coal miners at Minto. In more recent years labour organisations in New Brunswick have established several memorials in connection with the annual 28 April Day of Mourning; the firefighters’ union has been especially active in this field. Other projects, such as the installation of the longshoremen’s bell in Saint John and the restoration of union banners, have also been undertaken as reminders of local labour heritage. Each of these sites has its own history, both as a sign of contemporary interest and as a signifier that points to historical context.

Our approach is consistent with the initiatives of international scholars such as Archie Green, who emphasise the pervasive presence of such sites of memory within the contemporary environment. This model defines the labour landmark broadly enough to incorporate not only memorials and monuments but also forms of material and visual culture such as significant public buildings, industrial heritage sites and public art such as murals and stained glass windows. In identifying and documenting such sites of memory, we will draw on the knowledge of local informants; questions regarding labour landmarks will be included within our oral history surveys, and the theme will be introduced in labour history workshops and other public events that are held in the several parts of the province. At the same time, traditional archival research methods will help illuminate the meaning of such sites by researching relevant historical contexts, for in material history the object does not always ‘speak for itself’; for instance, academic research reveals that the events commemorated at the Minto site involve a little-known reference to a Supreme Court case concerning workers’ compensation for rescue work.

This theme holds particular value for our partnerships with social studies teachers and will provide material for field trips, walking tours or other class activities. The same applies in the case of the local labour councils in the province, who through their affiliation with the New Brunswick Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress have taken active responsibility for promoting community awareness of labour’s heritage in New Brunswick. Similarly, our partnership with the Heritage Branch of the Province of New Brunswick will help bring this theme to wider attention. In the case of this theme, the outcomes will include an evolving interactive website that will incorporate photographs, location maps, documentation, resources, links, suggestions and comments. In general terms, by seeking out and shedding light on what cultural theorists sometimes refer to as ‘recessed identities’, this element in the program will contribute effectively to the general goal of highlighting the place of workers and their heritage within the provincial identity.
Networking labour studies: the ITH experience, 1965–2005

Winfried R. Garscha

Internationale Tagung der Historiker der Arbeiterbewegung

The International Conference of Labour and Social History was founded in 1964/65 as Internationale Tagung der Historiker der Arbeiterbewegung (ITH), ie ‘international conference of historians of the labour movement’. In September 1964 some 40 scholars, specialised in the history of Central European social movements, met in Vienna in order to prepare the implementation of labour studies into the program of the twelfth International Congress of Historical Sciences to be held there in the following year. The outcome of the meeting was that the presence of a considerable number of historians from communist-ruled countries at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in 1965 should be used for organising a special conference about labour history in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its successor states. For organisational reasons the conference was organised outside Vienna. This convention of East and West European labour historians turned out to meet a general interest in exchanging results of research into a then highly politicised topic like labour history across the ‘iron curtain’. Therefore the participants agreed upon the instalment of the conferences annually in mid-September, before the academic year starts at most of European universities.

The conveners had chosen the provincial capital of Upper Austria, Linz on the Danube, an industrial town some 180km west of Vienna, for their conferences. The Upper Austrian chamber of labour offered a convenient educational facility there: the ‘Jaegermayrhof’, a former inn on the top of a hill outside the city, where already Franz Schubert had given concerts, and later on workers had held their meetings – until February 1934, when the site became a centre of the fights during the civil war between the labour militia ‘Schutzbund’ and the government with its fascist ‘Heimwehr’ auxiliaries. Thus the conferences have been held on a historical site with special reference to the ‘heroic’ side of the history of Austrian labour movement.

After the death of Stalin, and Khrushchev’s revealing of the Stalinist falsifications of the history of the communist movement at the twentieth and twenty-second Congress of the CPSU, labour history became a major field of research in communist-ruled countries in East and Central Europe, thoroughly controlled by the party officials though. As the communist movement justified its existence from the ‘treason’ of social democratic party leaders, not only the ‘own’ history, but also the development of social democratic movements were tackled with remarkable keenness. And as the communist governments derived the establishment of the ‘people’s democracies’ in Europe from the role of communists during the anti-fascist resistance movements in those countries, also the history of fascism/Nazism became a crucial issue of both political education and scholarly research. Huge institutes were created, and apart from the edition of the works of the ‘classics’ (Marx-Engels, Lenin, and national communist leaders) research into labour history on both national and international level had been the main task of those institutes of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ until 1989. Part of the public performance of those institutes was the publication of academic journals like the East Berlin monthly Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (since 1959).

West European social democratic parties answered the challenging communist publication activities on the field of history by the creation of own research institutions in the 1960s (or the extension and political upgrading of existing institutes) and many academics close to the social democratic movement devoted their scholarly research to the refutation of communist interpretations of labour history in general, and especially to the disproving of Stalinist falsifications. After social democratic parties came into power in West and Central Europe (after 1968) they discovered the potential of the implementation of labour history as part of the national history for gaining hegemony in the civil society. Exhibitions, documentaries, new museums, and series of scholarly and popular publications depicted numerous aspects of labour and social history, and generations of students turned to labour studies.

Whereas in Scandinavia those institutes have been close to the (social democratic) unions, in Italy the communist movement offered facilities for research and publication also outside the ‘party line’. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, communist and millionaire, who had founded a library in Milan devoted to the study of contemporary history and social movements, edited a yearbook (Annali) since 1958, which was open to all currents of the labour movement.
In the English speaking world labour studies had never been thus politicised and became part of social sciences, dealt with by the academia since the early 1960s. Already 1956 the most important archive and library for labour studies, the Amsterdam based International Institute of Social History (IISH), started a pioneering journal, the International Review of Social History (later on published by Cambridge University Press). 1960 the British Society for the Study of Labour History followed with its Bulletin in 1960 (three issues a year, like the IISH journal, renamed Labour History Review in 1990) and the New York University with its quarterly Labor History. Since 1962 the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History has been publishing Labour History twice a year, the Scottish Labour History Society, followed up with its Journal in 1965, renamed in Scottish Labour History in 1967. These journals, understandable to a large scientific community, provided an exchange of ideals and research results even without any networking activities.

In Central Europe labour history remained one of the central ‘battlefields’ of the East-West conflict even after the replacement of the Cold War by the policy of detente in the 1970s. This applied most of all to the two Germanys, because there the common language facilitated the exchange of ideologically led interpretations of the common labour history (often enough ‘spiced’ with coarseness). The leading scholarly institution for labour studies in West Germany, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, had existed already before World War II. Dissolved by the Nazis it had been re instituted in 1947. Since 1961 the foundation has been publishing a renowned yearbook, the Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte. Since the 1980s the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung have been opening an increasing number of bureaus in up to now 33 countries around the globe including all former communist-ruled countries and China, and is employing almost 600 staff members. Although the main task of the foundation is aiding the implementation and reinforcement of democracy, it still deals with labour history, maintains a special library with more than 700,000 items, holds the largest labour archive in Germany and sponsors labour study related activities, among them the annual ITH conferences.

By the creation of the ITH East German historians got the opportunity to meet those authors on the other side of the ‘iron curtain’, whose books they had reviewed before in a scathing way, for the first time personally – and vice versa. Normally East German scholars had no opportunity to attend conferences in the West, because they hardly got exit permits, and to West German scholars it was strongly recommended not to take part in any way in the academic life in communist-ruled countries.

Austria as a neutral state between the two blocks could host such meetings. The main organiser of the Linz conferences was Herbert Steiner, an Austrian communist scholar with close contacts to social democratic leaders in the West and to dissident communists in the East (the Czechoslovak secret service refused him entry visas for that reason). From 1970 Austria was ruled by the social democrats, and in the 13 years of Bruno Kreisky being federal chancellor of the Republic, labour studies both taught at the universities and conducted by grass root associations received considerable public subsidies. The ITH conferences got additional support by the chambers of labour and the unions. An important contribution to the financing of ITH’s activities has been the annual fees of the member institutes: ITH was conceived as an umbrella organisation of institutions and associations. The full fee of around $A600 had been paid by both social democratic and communist party institutes. University institutes and labour history associations pay a reduced annual fee of around $A300. In Austria until the end of the 1980s the ministry of education paid the membership fee for the university institutes being members of ITH. The Linz conferences were open to representatives of member institutes only, because it was their annual membership fee which secured the maintenance of the organisation. But no scholar who wanted to participate had been rejected: they were adopted by member institutes. Some member institutes even looked for such ‘freelancers’, if they had no expert for the respective conference topic. The opening of the organisation to individual membership in the late 1980s did not attract additional members, because the ITH wanted the Linz conference to be open for all scholars (subject to the available places – the prerequisite of registration in advance still applies).

Until 1989 ITH’s ‘diplomatic’ function remained the main task of the organisation. In the early 1980s, after almost two decades of sharp tensions between the Chinese and Soviet communist parties, labour historians of both countries used a Linz conference for a first reapproach, and also one of the first face-to-face dispute between Chinese and Japanese historians about Japanese colonialism in China took place in Linz – during the twentieth ITH conference (1984) which dealt with the attitude of labour
parties and unions towards the colonial policy of their respective countries. (By the way, it was this Linz conference, which opened the organisation to members in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where only Japanese labour historians had been involved into the network until then).

The negative side of this ‘diplomatic’ function was a certain neglect of the scholarly function of the conferences. Boring papers without any contribution to the development of the topic of research had been accepted when they fitted into the ‘diplomatic’ pattern. On the other hand the recording and publication of the discussions in the conference papers (‘ITH Tagungsberichte’ have been published almost annually since the end of the 1960s) provides a valuable source for the study of the history of labour historiography and its role in the East West conflict.

But in addition to their ‘diplomatic’ function the Linz conferences offered for labour historians from different (non-communist) European countries the possibility to meet, to exchange information about new research projects and recently published books and articles and to discuss methodological problems.

With the end of communist rule in East Europe the ‘diplomatic’ function of ITH had expired. The organisation tried to redefine its mission statement – to be one of some forums for international exchange of research on the field of labour studies. The peculiarity of Linz was its history and therefore its close ties to historians in former communist-ruled countries. Young colleagues of those countries had little sympathy for plans to dissolve ITH after the fall of communism. They regarded the Linz conferences as an opportunity to get familiar with current discussions among West European and North American social historians. Additional advantages of the conferences for young scholars have been the low conference fee (around $A140 for conference papers, meals and – though moderate – accommodation) and a specialised team of interpreters (English/French/German).

The twenty-seventh Linz conference (1991) discussed ‘Labour Movement in a world that had changed’ – the contributors tackled with ‘blank areas’ in the history of communism, and one could feel that for some of them it was like a ‘day of reckoning’. Most on them – both from West and East Europe – had already been contributors to previous conferences. Only six of the 26 papers were given in English, none of them in French.

The central theme of the first Linz conferences after 1989 might be described as ‘changing identities’. Topic of the 1990 conference was ‘Labour Movement – Church(es) – Religion’ (a bilingual [English/German] edition of the conference papers was published in 1991), subsequent topics were gender, nation, and rites & symbols.

Whereas the 1991 conference was in some way like a relapse into the early days of the organisation, the 1992 conference was in many respects a new experience: To this conference on ‘Gender – Class – Ethnicity’ for the first time on a large scale scholars who did not represent ITH member institutes had been invited. By the way, one of the invited scholars at this conference was Lucy Taksa from the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. Organiser of the conference was Gabriella Hauch, who was to be elected ITH president in 1999.

Also the next conferences followed this mode of inviting internationally renowned experts in their respective field of research in order to make the conferences more attractive for young scholars, because most of the member institutes continued to delegate the same persons over the years which led to an aging process of the audience during the conferences. This mode of invitation applied for the conferences about ‘Labour Movement and National Identity’ (1993), ‘Labour Movement and Migration’ (1995), ‘Sources and Labour Historiography after the Collapse of ‘Real socialism’ (1996) and ‘Rites, Myths and Symbols – Labour Movement between ‘Civil Religion’ and Popular Culture’ (1997). After each of those conferences a trilingual (English/French/German) edition of the papers had been published in the subsequent year.

The thirtieth Linz conference in 1994 was dedicated to the ITH itself. The title of the conference reader was ‘The International of Labour Historians’. An Austrian (Josef Ehmer) and a Japanese (Masao Nishikawa) historian analysed state and perspectives of labour historiography 30 years after the foundation of ITH. The ‘grand old lady’ of German social democratic historiography, Susanne Miller, told the audience about outstanding figures of the last 30 years. Among the contributors was the Polish Jewish historian Feliks Tych, who depicted ITH’s influence on the emergence of new tendencies in labour historiography in East Europe.
Also the thirty-fourth Linz conference in 1998 (‘New Departures – the Labour Movement and Social Movements in the 1960s’) happened to become a nostalgic event: Despite interesting political and sociological analyses, eg of the Anti-Semitic policy of the leaders of the Polish communist labour party in the late 1960s, the discussion was – at least party – focussed on the personal experience of the participants during the student’s ‘revolt’ in 1968. Some of the conference papers had been published in journals for contemporary history later, but the organisers were not able to produce the traditional ITH conference volume.

Although the Linz conferences had become scholarly conventions of remarkable quality, it became evident that the dwindling interest for labour studies in most European countries and Japan also affected the ITH as organisation. Former ITH member institutes had been either dissolved or renamed in a way that the word ‘labour’ was eliminated. The thirty-fifth Linz conference (1999) consequently asked: ‘What means ‘Labour Movement’ at the End of the Twentieth Century?’ The publication of the conference papers was called: ‘The Labour Movement – a Failed Project of Modernity?’ In 2000 even the Linz conference avoided the dealing with genuine labour issues: subject of the thirty-sixth conference was a theme which fitted well in the topical discourse on politics of memory, which gained much more interest among students and scholars than labour studies: ‘Memory of Dictatorship and Persecution in International Comparison’. It was high time to organise a conference which showed the potential of labour studies. This was done by Helga Grebing (Germany) and Josef Ehmer (Austria) in 2001. The thirty-seventh Linz conference dealt with ‘History and Future of Labour’, the trilingual publication is one on ITH’s best books, because the different papers had been compiled in a coherent manner that make the volume much more than an edition of conference papers.

For 2002 (thirty-eighth Linz conference: ‘Sexuality, the Working Classes and Labour Movements’) the preparatory group published, for the first time, a call for papers – with an overwhelming result: more than 50 proposals were seriously discussed by the organisers, but in the end less than one third of the submitted papers could be invited to be presented at the conference. Although the edition of the conference papers has only a German title (‘Sexualitaet, Unterschichtenmilieus und ArbeiterInnenbewegung’, which means ‘Sexuality, Lower Class Milieus and Workers’ Movements’) and contains a considerable part of French texts, including the preface, a lasting interest in the volume can be observed also on the part of English speaking historians.

By attracting a remarkable number of participants who never had heard from ITH and also were not interested in other issues than the conference topic, the 2002 conference showed the fundamental dilemma of an organisation like ITH: A precondition for any network is the interest of those whose activities are to be linked. But why should people be interested in networking labour studies, who only want to attend a conference dealing with ‘their’ respective topic of research? On the other hand only such conferences can fuel a constant interest in the organisation among the academia. The majority of social historians have no more perspective to become staff member in an academic institution some day. And the existing institutes suffer from diminishing public subsidies. Therefore a reduction to a network of member institutes only, ie periodical conventions of representatives of scholarly institutions and associations without attractive topics of discussion and/or prominent invited speakers, risk to turn into meetings of old friends and colleagues with little scholarly output.

A solution might have been the creation of a stronger secretariat – since the late 1980s the ITH staff has been one part time employee over the year and some 3-4 assistants during the conferences; all other duties have been done by volunteers.

But the constant fall of financial supplies did not allow an expansion of the secretariat activities. The only improvement was the creation of a website (in 1999) which has been updated every second or third month since (http://www.ith.or.at). In the 1970s and 1980s several academic institutes and scholarly associations in Austria had supported ITH’s activities by assisting the preparation of the Linz conferences and taking care for the publication of the conference papers. Also the mere presence of scholars during preparatory meetings aided the small staff. Since the decline of labour studies in Europe in the 1990s no such assistance had been given, hardly any member institute is interested in contacts between the conferences, only some four or five member institutes are contributing regularly to the newsletter which is published three times a year.
At the annual general meeting of the organisation in 2003 the former ITH president, Helmut Konrad, proposed to the representatives of the member institutes the dissolution of ITH. Until the next annual general meeting the member institutes should decide the following alternatives:

1. Continuing the Linz conferences as long as the financial means allow that (ie until 2009 or 2010), because otherwise topics like labour history and history of social movements disappear from public discourse, or

2. Evaluation of ITH’s activities in more than four decades of existence at a great final conference 2005 or 2006 and closing the secretariat by then.

Only a few member institutes took part in the discussion between the annual general meetings 2003 and 2004, but among them were such important members like the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Dutch International Institute of Social History. The outcome of the discussion was that ITH will continue to hold the annual Linz conferences. Member institutes are encouraged to organise conferences or workshops on special topics in addition to the Linz conferences, the secretariat will provide the ITH network and, although on a moderate level, financial support for the preparation of such additional conventions. The annual general meeting during the 2005 Linz conference will discuss structural reforms, a new direction (president, general secretary) will be elected.

Despite this interior disputes the ‘normal’ activities continued. At the thirty-ninth Linz conference (2003) invited papers on ‘Labour and New Social Movements in a Globalizing World System’ were discussed, a bilingual (English/German) edition of the conference papers is available since 2004. For the fortieth Linz conference (‘Mercy or Right’ – Development of Social Security Systems) a call for paper was launched, almost 50 per cent of the proposals could be accepted; for the first time since the 1980s staff members of Austrian labour organisations took part in the scholarly preparation of the conference, among them Brigitte Pellar, director of the research institute for the history of unions and chambers of labour. The meeting of the international preparatory group was held at the Viennese chamber of labour. A trilingual edition of the conference papers will be published in September 2005. The forty-fourth Linz conference (15-18 September, 2005) will discuss ‘Labour Biographies and Prosopography’, the preparatory meeting in January was held in Paris, because the main organiser of this years’ conference is Bruno Groppo, a French professor with close ties to Latin America, who has been contributing to the organisation of the conferences since the mid-1980s.

The ITH experience shows that a precondition for a functioning international network is the existence of a national network of people labour interested in labour history or a group of academics dealing with labour studies. Although it is possible to organise international conferences on a regular basis, to publish the papers and to maintain a website also without such a local support, this cannot be regarded as a functioning network. This might provide only a framework for more efficient networking activities in the future.

Certainly, it would have been a failure to dissolve that framework as long as it is supported by public subsidies and the annual membership fee of a group of scholarly associations and institutes around the world. But without a remarkable input from outside it is likely that ITH will not survive.
History repeats itself: Bruce and Howard compared

Bob Gould
Sydney

This paper looks at John Howard’s attempts to repeat the industrial relations changes of Melvin Stanley Bruce and how the labour movement may well be able to repeat the successful defence of useful industrial relations systems.

The second time around in reforming the Australian industrial relations system, there are big dangers for the labour movement and the working class. This paper compares industrial relations in the eras of Melvin Stanley Bruce and Howard, and looks for significant lessons for the labour movement on how to combat Howard’s industrial relations changes.

The 1920s was a period in Australia not unlike the period from the late 1990s to the present. Labour movement radicalism of previous eras had declined and the workers’ movement had retreated a bit in conditions of the ostensible boom of the 1920s.

The ‘reactionary monocle-wearing Tory’, Bruce, seemed to be entrenched in power. In 1926 he had the brainwave of trying, by referendum, to transfer state industrial powers to the Commonwealth.

Initially, the federal Labor leader Matt Charlton supported the move on traditional Labor centralist grounds, as did some peak leaders of the trade unions. NSW Premier Jack Lang and several other Labor premiers opposed the move on states rights grounds.

Albert Willis, the NSW leader of the miners’ union, took the initiative of calling the first national meeting of unions, which became the predecessor of the ACTU, formed a year later. At this meeting, despite pleas from Charlton and some federal union leaders, the transfer of industrial relations to the federal arena was overwhelmingly rejected.

In the subsequent referendum, Bruce’s proposals were defeated, although they won a small majority in NSW despite Lang’s opposition. Subsequently, in 1928, Bruce tried again in a slightly different way, trying to introduce federal legislation to abolish arbitration entirely, an attempt not unlike Howard’s current industrial legislation proposals.

Bruce’s wily opponent in conservative ranks, the Labor renegade Billy Hughes, organised a revolt in the conservative caucus and the legislation was defeated. The Bruce government fell and was annihilated in the subsequent 1929 federal election, losing to the ill-fated Scullin Labor government. Bruce lost his seat to the secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council, E.J. Holloway.

Recounting these events, which are described in some detail by Lang in his book, The Great Bust, underlines the similarities between then and now.¹

The lessons from then, for now, in my view are the following. In Australian politics and industrial life, both militancy and the exploitation of legal openings and possibilities are both important from a working class point of view. The current relative defeatism about Howard’s legislation by some sections of the ACTU leadership is not at all warranted. The cautious commitment of the Labor states to strenuously oppose the transfer of industrial relations in the High Court has to be stiffened up. A combined educational, militant industrial and legal opposition to the Howard proposals is required.

The legal challenge is important because it will go on until the run up to the next elections, providing the necessary public focus to the issues and a certain space for the required industrial mobilisation. It will provide some space for the required public political campaign as well.

Win or lose, the legal case will contribute to the industrial and political climate necessary to defeat the Tories in the next election and kill Howard’s industrial proposals.

Endnotes

The longest ‘Third Period’ in history

Bob Gould
Sydney

This paper looks at how the Democratic Socialist Perspective, one socialist sect, has maintained ‘Third Period’ opposition to labourism without the direct pressure from Moscow that sustained the Communist Party’s well-known ‘Third Period’ experience in the 1930s.

The longest leftist Third Period in history is happening and being heavily theorised in Australia.

At the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the Communist leader in the USSR, J.V. Stalin, imposed on the Communist section of the world labour movement the concept of a Third Period in which a the Social Democrats internationally were said to have become social fascists. This Third Period continued until about 1934, when it was followed by the so-called Popular Front strategy of Stalinism.

Leon Trotsky, in particular, in his writings on fascism, polemicised sharply against the Third Period ultraleftism of the Comintern. The deleterious impact of the Third Period concept on Australian Communism was extensively researched by the late Barbara Curthoys, using material from the Soviet archives, which were opened in 1991.1

In 1984-85, a significant then-Trotskyist group, now known as the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP, then the Socialist Workers’ Party) swung over to the politics of Stalin’s Third Period, with some modifications, and has doggedly stuck to this position, and even deepened it, ever since.

This is of some significance because, although the far left is considerably less powerful in Australian politics than the Communist Party was in its time, nevertheless the DSP represents possibly 40 per cent of the far left. Other far left groups such as the International Socialists, Solidarity, and a number of smaller groups, oppose the DSP’s Third Period approach, and generally favour a more united front strategy towards Labor and intermediate electoral formations such as the Greens.

The DSP’s ultraleftism and opposition to a realistic united front towards Labor has deepened theoretically in the past couple of years with the publication of several pamphlets developing the thesis that the Labor Party is just a reactionary bourgeois party. In a new book, DSP secretary John Percy says the formation of the Labor Party was a reactionary step.

The political shift of the DSP, which is actually a rather inward-looking, conservative political sect, is not driven so much by the developments in the labour movement as the desire to urge its members to totally devote their energies to build the sect, undistracted by the kind of political corruption that the DSP leaderships perceive their members might be subject to if they make too much contact with the broader labour movement.

The DSP’s extraordinary 20-year Third Period posture has been a significant factor in the decline of the influence of the Marxist left in Australian politics and labour movement.

Endnotes

1. A major article based on the research of Barbara Curthoys is available at:
Titanic memorials in Australia: the myth and the message

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In memory of my great-grandfather,
William Edward Bessant,
a stoker who perished in the Titanic sinking

Given the catastrophes and large-scale bloodletting that have pockmarked the twentieth century, it is a little extraordinary that the Titanic’s story has defied categorisation as just another tragic shipwreck, instead retaining, perhaps even magnifying, its power and vitality. For scholars, a new and fascinating literature about diverse cultural interpretations of the Titanic has emerged, which examines the social and political myths and messages that have been woven around the physical sinking of the ocean liner. From a range of perspectives, authors such as Biel, Heyer and Howells have argued that further examination of the ‘mythical’ Titanic can lead to greater understanding of the societies that produced and propagated these ideas and why the sinking has become what Heyer terms ‘a moral tale of mythic proportions’.1

Biel details the ways in which critics of a growing independence for women, characterised by rising divorce rates and demands for female suffrage, seized upon the paternalism inherent in ‘women and children first’ in order to promote the Titanic sinking as proof of the universal rightness of public and private patriarchal governance.2 ‘Wowsers’ of various hues, too, saw the Titanic tragedy as a useful platform. In the view of some evangelists, Puritans and Progressives, the pursuit of wealth, luxury and pleasure on the Titanic had mocked God’s demand for propriety and humility and that those who sailed in her had received a timely rebuke from the Almighty that should stand as a warning to others. Along similar lines, it was alleged that the Titanic’s sheer size and invincibility (more below) demonstrated humankind’s arrogant defiance of the laws of nature, and that the ship had been doomed as a divine lesson in who was still boss. On a different note, numerous stories about the ungentlemanly behaviour of some non-white passengers and crew were grist to the mill of eugenicists around the world whose belief in racial hierarchy found confirmation of white superiority on Titanic’s first-class decks.3

Myths were also employed to cover the distinctly class-based events of the sinking. Howells has shown that the ‘unsinkable’ tag applied to the Titanic came into being only after the sinking in what I maintain was a useful excuse for insufficient life boats. The survival statistics revealing the distinct benefits of travelling first-class inspired blanket coverage of first-class male heroism [despite the fact that 31 per cent of them survived] and horrendous examples of victim-blaming where those who drowned were said to have preferred the safety of the ship to the precariousness of a lifeboat on the North Atlantic.

But the myth that most concerns this paper is the widely-held belief that the band played music to calm the passengers while the ship went down which, of all the Titanic myths, is possibly the one most easily proven untrue.4 While the bandsmen surely deserve the same sympathy as other victims, it is notable that they, above all others, have been hailed as heroes, for exhibiting exceptional bravery and remaining at their posts to the last. At the time, George Bernard Shaw was one of a very small number who railed against what he called the ‘sentimental idiots’ who attributed heroism to an act over which the majority had no choice. Certainly, the captain ‘went down to the depths’, he wrote in a piece entitled ‘Beating the Hysteries’ for the Daily News, ‘but so did the cat’.5

In the years immediately following the sinking, there were three Titanic memorials erected on Australian soil – in Ballarat, Broken Hill and Kadina – each town dominated by the mining industry and all three erected to commemorate the Titanic bandsmen. Questions are immediately raised about how the Australian Titanic memorials are to be read, and for whom, and to whom, they were intended to ‘speak’. Did these memorials represent the community of the international working class, global in aspect and so immune from identifications with place? Did also the lack of site (it was not until 1985 that the location of the sunken vessel was known) allow local communities with few tangible connections to the ship to appropriate the disaster and attach their own meanings to it? Also as these monuments were erected through local subscription, did they more reflect local struggles for identity and political meaning? Or were they representative of more national and international issues?
Hamilton and Ashton argue that memorials are frequently invoked as a representation of a sense of community and ethnicity, although certainly an ‘imagined’ one. Their research suggests that many memorialising projects, supposedly subsidised by donations from all sections of the community, are often ‘heavily supported by relatively small numbers of well-to-do individuals’. I suggest that the Australian Titanic memorials were erected by conservatives and far more likely aimed at workers, rather than erected by them. It is my contention that the story of workers remaining at their posts was extremely attractive to elite interests in these towns as a moral message that unionised miners should show the same dedication to duty. Certainly, the Australian memorialisation process reflected an amalgam of ideas promoted through the Titanic sinking to uphold notions of local and national social cohesion and a sense of shared tragedy. But these ideas were not consumed without contestation. In Broken Hill there is evidence that the Titanic memorial was not supported universally and instead reminded working-class locals that similar efforts to commemorate lives lost on the mines had not been forthcoming.

Endnotes

4. Of all the memorials to the Titanic sinking in 33 countries worldwide, it is Hartley and his band who are most frequently memorialised – of the 1,028 known memorials, gravestones and plaques that make mention of the Titanic, there are 18 memorials to Hartley alone, many others to the bandsmen more generally, and only nine to the ship’s captain, E.J. Smith. B.J. Ticehurst, ‘Titanic’s Memorials, World-wide: Where they are Located’, 23rd reprint of monograph, in possession of author, Southampton, p. 2.
Emerging from the silence: a history of women as adult educators in Australia

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In 1974, at the height of the Second Wave women’s movement, Derek Whitelock published the only major history of adult education in Australia. The reason I juxtapose Whitelock’s work with my comment on the timing alongside the women’s movement is that the book, *The Great Tradition: A history of adult education in Australia*, almost completely omits the contribution of women to the field apart from a token section of a chapter at the end of the book.¹ Not only does Whitelock use masculine referents or gender-neutral language throughout, his few references to women are often disparaging and frequently do not refer to Australian women anyway. After using this book while studying for my recently-acquired Graduate Diploma of Adult Education and Training I felt so incensed by Whitelock’s omissions that I resolved to attempt to right the wrong by any means in my power.

As one consequence of that decision I have this year embarked on my candidature for a PhD with the University of New England. In so doing I am answering the call of, among others, Jean Barr, a British feminist writer who contends that we must learn how to see women’s silence not as deficiency, absence or lack but as a political act with subversive potential, indicating, sometimes, active resistance rather than passive compliance.²

I am conscious that my work must also reflect the diversity present within the category of ‘woman’, a diversity often previously ignored, particularly by male historians as well as policymakers in adult education. Today’s recognition of that diversity in Australia includes Aboriginal women as members of the indigenous population, other women of colour, women from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, differences in sexual preference and, in focusing historically, on the question of class, particularly working class. All of these women have been further marginalised in the past from white middle and upper class women. Feminism, as a site of social action, has won advances in recognition for oppressed women, although accusations of ‘matriarchy’ continue to be made, especially in academia.³

This consideration of feminist diversity brings into play another debate – that of postfeminism and ‘the death of the feminist’. Am I therefore approaching this argument too late, have all the battles been won and the victorious warriors gone home? Not according to Hawkesworth, who titled her paper in a recent issue of *Signs*: ‘The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age’. She sees these ‘recurrent pronouncements of feminism’s death’ as indicative of the community’s desire to rid itself of a ‘perceived danger in need of elimination’. According to Hawkesworth then, the death and burial of feminism in the public mind will ‘erase the activism of millions of women around the globe who are currently struggling for justice’.⁴

Other recent writers also discuss the current status of feminism and its activity, particularly that of the young feminists in the ‘Third Wave’, who differ considerably from those feminists termed ‘Second Wave’. So it is obvious that feminism is alive and well and I am thus exonerated from the charge of trying to resurrect a corpse to challenge Whitelock’s omission. Barbara Merrill writes as recently as this year of advantages to be gained through feminist action, in a challenge to academic feminism she terms ‘dialogical feminism’, that radical feminist adult education ‘is distinctive within the field of adult education’, bringing to the forefront through social action the voices of marginalised women.⁵

Whitelock, in fact, is not the only author guilty of the silencing of women in history. Many years later in the United States a historian has written of a gender bias in adult education history and that ‘(h)istorians of the field have marginalised or written women out of the historical narrative’.⁶ Sue Shore, writing about the field of adult education in Australia, wrote in 1997:

Women make up over 75 per cent of the Australian adult community education (ACE) sector as workers and learners. However, much of the literature ignores this fact, painting a gender-neutral picture of adult learning and adult learners as implicitly male (and white).⁷
Women’s history as a whole is already recovering women’s voices, a fact which is attested to by the shelves of any bookshop or university library. The same cannot be said of the history of women in adult education, not only because of the silencing of women, but also because of the paucity of history of the field. For this reason there has been no other major historical overview of adult education in Australia since Whitelock. Regarding this history and the silencing of minorities, a current Australian adult education historian, Bob Boughton, writes:

What my critical reading of Whitelock seeks to demonstrate is that historians of educational institutions should be careful not to write the people they consider ‘the losers’ out of their stories, or treat them as marginal, insignificant, bit-players on history’s stage. Educational institutions… growth out of their societies. Consequently, for as long as class, gender and racial conflicts divide those societies, those conflicts need to be acknowledged in any story about how institutions rise to prominence in their fields.\(^8\)

There have been many areas of conflict in adult education’s past, just as there have been in any field of human endeavour. Boughton has pointed out other misrepresentations in Whitelock’s work, such as his narrow view of adult education as being restricted to the liberal tradition, and his refusal to countenance any but his own conservative political viewpoint. During the period covered by Whitelock’s text a very active radical tradition of adult education was in process, according to earlier research by Boughton.\(^9\) If one considers the scope of adult education to be much broader than Whitelock’s narrow liberal view, there are many more individual histories available of organisations which are educative in outlook. The radical element would include trade union and political party histories, some focusing on women, as does Damousi’s *Women Come Rally*.\(^10\)

Boughton discusses the vibrant radical adult education movement during a time which Whitelock describes as inactive, and which, according to Boughton, included a strong role played by women, who were, he says, among Australia’s most active early radical educators.\(^11\) Amongst these women were the members of the ‘First Wave’ feminists and the suffragists, some of whom published journals and distributed them widely, as did Louisa Lawson her *Dawn* and Maybanke Wolstenholme (later Anderson) the *Woman’s Voice*.\(^12\) Social action is a form of education which has widespread possibilities to educate, as Griff Foley has elaborated, arguing in his introduction to *Learning in Social Action* that ‘people learn, as they live, through their experiences, in their struggles’.\(^13\)

A prominent form of political and social action in Australia has been the movement for Aboriginal land rights, as well as struggles to correct the many other inequities in the lives of indigenous people. Women such as Ruby Langford Ginibi, Evelyn Scott and Faith Bandler are educators in the fullest sense of the word, despite much of their teaching being outside a conventional classroom.

As a consequence of the time elapsed since publication and the limited scope of Whitelock’s more than 30-year-old text, it is well past time for a new history to be written. This new history would celebrate the triumphs of a field of education which is under siege from economic rationalists who are determined to exclude all but vocational education and training. Ironically, the success of market-driven forces could well see the death of Whitelock’s beloved liberal education outside academia.

As it is seen by many of its practitioners today, adult education is a vast field. Women have greater opportunities of leadership in the formal areas of the discipline, although equality of promotion remains a long way off. Community colleges, TAFE and private commercial institutions are by no means the extent of adult education. The Country Women’s Association includes within its scope a wide range of interests and activities, and many women’s guilds, such as The Quilters’ Guild, Embroiderers’ Guild and the Lace Guild have extensive education programs which cover far more than simple leisure pursuits. No longer content with being restricted to ‘the gentle arts’, however, women are, and indeed have long been, involved in teaching and training in the world of medicine, in engineering, technology, policing and legal professions, in commerce, the media, publishing, the church and, in fact, in any field of human activity. Positions of leadership in all professions are a different story, however, and the presence of women at higher levels has always been in the minority. In many histories women have not even been recorded as participating in everyday life to the fullest degree, nor has their position been valued outside the domestic sphere, if there. Paradoxically today, in a situation which could be called ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, the wheel has turned to such an extent that women who choose to stay at home to care for their children are devalued, even derided, by some of their sisters.
So, the task of a revisionist historian is not an easy one. To recover histories which are hidden or unwritten requires toil in many archives which hold women’s personal papers, or digging into Education Department boxes in the State Records centres where the stories of men are superimposed on those of the women who may have done much of the work. There is a greater tradition than that which has been written as ‘The Great Tradition’, that of the majority who have been marginalised by older histories, and it is there to be found. I hope that time and diligence will call those others worthy of recognition out of the silence.

Endnotes
5. Merrill, ‘Dialogical Feminism’.
This paper examines the nature of the Commonwealth arbitration process through the exchanges between Justice Henry Bourne Higgins and witnesses that appeared before him in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in the period 1907-20.¹

Studies of Higgins’ decisions and the role of arbitration focus on the Court’s impact on trade unions and employers, an approach typified by the recent publication of Isaac and Macintyre’s *The New Province for Law and Order.*² Such institutional studies neglect the rich and complex history of Australian working class experience and business enterprise as revealed in the transcripts of the Court’s proceedings.

The paper explores the forensic, interrogative approach adopted by the Court under Higgins leadership, with a focus on exchanges between Higgins, witnesses and counsel in the Harvester proceedings, and cases in the boot trades, pastoral, clothing and fruit picking industries.

Focusing on the transcripts of evidence may significantly alter the interpretative perspective and challenge prevailing assumptions about the nature and influence of Australian arbitration.

The 1907 Harvester judgement clarified Higgins’ intention to use the Court to play a role in Australian nation building and to uphold managerial prerogative while acknowledging a selective range of rights for a predominantly male workforce and their union representatives. The transcript of the Harvester proceedings reveals that Higgins was compelled to overlook key evidence of working class men and women which contradicted and contested his construction of a breadwinner basic wage of seven shillings a day.

Evidence presented from skilled workers who earned more than seven shillings a day, and household budgets provided by the wives of skilled workers, all powerfully indicated that it was virtually impossible to feed a working class family on seven shillings a day. No unskilled workers – who would theoretically benefit from Higgins’ minimum – gave evidence in the case.³

Evidence presented in the 1911-12 Riverina Fruitpickers case challenged Higgins’ unwillingness to grant equal pay for women in the industry, a decision which established the precedent of gender wage inequality in Australian arbitration. Higgins was confronted with powerful claims for wage equality from women employed in the industry, and strong union submissions in support of their claim, particularly from a spirited and lengthy submission by William Guthrie Spence, the president of the Australian Workers Union and a member of the Commonwealth Parliament.

Spence argued that while he did not wish to encourage the employment of women in what should be ‘distinctly men’s work’, he also acknowledged that equal pay ‘is a universal idea now and they [women] will not rest … till they secure [it]’. Spence urged Higgins to recognise the problems facing unmarried women, who required a higher wage than men. ‘I think it costs more to clothe a woman than a man’. An unemployed woman was particularly handicapped by virtue of her gender: ‘A young man can sleep under a tree or anything but a woman cannot’. Spence concluded that ‘I do not think there has been a sufficient allowance for a woman’s needs in any award’. To which Higgins replied: ‘it is new to this court’ – so novel that Higgins only tersely acknowledged Spence’s submissions in his subsequent judgement.⁴

In the 1909 ‘Whybrow’ case Higgins defined the principle of managerial prerogative that had guided his judgements since Harvester: ‘I conceive it to be my duty to leave every employer free to carry on his business on his own system, that he may make the greatest profit within his reach, so long as he does not perpetuate industrial trouble or endanger industrial peace’.⁵

The Whybrow proceedings also provided a detailed study of the labour process in the Boot Trades industry, an enquiry which did not always comfortably sit with Higgins’ defence of managerial prerogative – as Higgins himself tacitly acknowledged in interventions from the bench, as he expressed concern over the treatment of apprentices and high speed production methods. The Whybrow case illustrates Higgins respect for skilled work, and his desire to comprehend the fine points of skill, yielding crucial evidence of the nature of work in the early twentieth century.
The Whybrow evidence also indicated that women represented a substantial minority of industry employees, although both Higgins and the Federated Boot Trades Employees Federation chose to overlook the implications of this evidence in terms of wages and union coverage. Significantly, while no evidence about the employment of women was tendered by the union or sought by the court, details about the nature and extent of women’s work in the boot trades periodically infiltrated the court’s proceedings.

The court and counsel periodically felt compelled to acknowledge evidence from male employees about women’s work which – if only to dismiss it as insignificant. As George Beeby, representing the Boot Trades Federation observed in passing: ‘No claim is made for females … the women are not organised to any large extent, and make no claim’. Neither Beeby nor Higgins acknowledged that the Court’s procedures – favouring male-dominated union or employer applications – effectively prohibited applications from women workers, who may well have wished to lodge a claim.6

An ardent supporter of a White Australia, Higgins rarely expressed his views on race in his judgements. The transcripts provide some insights into how his racial views nonetheless influenced his judgements. In the 1911 Pastoral industry proceedings Higgins accepted the Australian Workers Union’s prohibition on the enrolment of Chinese as AWU members, and the marginalisation of aboriginal workers. Evidence from a cook employed at Cordillo station in South Australia vividly illustrated the power and racial hierarchies in the pastoral industry.

The cook observed that of the employees at the station, there were ‘seven whites in the government house’ – the worker’s description of the station manager’s house, ‘where the bosses live’. About 20 ‘black fellows’ and ‘gins’ worked in the wool scour. He cooked for an average 12 ‘black fellows’ and 12-15 whites; asked by Higgins ‘did you feed the blacks the same as the other people?’ the cook replied, ‘No. All they get is boiled or baked meat – a piece of meat and a bit of bread and quart pot of tea and piece of brownie cake’.7

The transcripts of these and other cases provide a detailed picture of Australian business enterprise in the early twentieth century, and the difficulties business experienced in domestic and global competition. From the evidence tended, and his own workplace inspections, Higgins reflected on the importance to the nation of the Sunshine Harvester works and the Riverina fruit industry, and stressed his sensitivity to protecting the ability of the enterprises to function profitably – including their ability to fund wage increases. As Higgins told Spence in the fruitpickers case, working in the Arbitration Court had impressed him with the difficulties faced by employers.

Higgins’ judgement were driven by a desire to acknowledge the role of workers and their representative unions in the important task of nation building, while allowing business the managerial space to develop their productive enterprises. In order to privilege nation building Higgins selected a narrative of work, gender, race and enterprise from the evidence presented to him, to which he struggled to reconcile the competing needs of business and labour.

**Endnotes**

1. This is an edited version of a paper to be delivered at the Ninth National Labour History Conference, University of Sydney 30 June – 2 July. The paper should not be reproduced in part or whole without the permission of the author.
7. Transcript of proceedings 1911 Pastoral Industry Award, Noel Butlin Archives Australian National University N117/541, pp. 233-4.
Mateship – its secret world: re-visiting the Australian identity

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In *The Australian Legend* Russell Ward argued that ‘a specifically Australian outlook grew up first and most clearly’ among Australian bush workers and that this outlook then spread outwards to the whole Australian community where it had a ‘completely disproportionate’ influence.¹

He was wrong. Not about the impact, but about the source and nature of what he called ‘the Australian legend or mystique’.

Bolton & Hudson writing in 1997 pointed out a major gap in Australia’s historical record: many Australians had hidden or covert identities hard to guess from their public personas.²

Note the words, ‘hidden’, ‘covert’, and ‘hard to guess’. Bolton and Hudson are not the first to suggest that, like the fabled Inland Sea, there is something missing at the heart of Australians’ understanding of themselves. In this case, however, the feeling is backed up by evidence. It is the secret story of Australian mateship which fills the gap to which Bolton and Hudson are referring and which is missing altogether from Ward.

In *The Australian Legend* Ward argued that both ‘the myth of the typical Australian’ and the historical reality on which it was built had one central element: (Above) all, (he) will stick to his mates through thick and thin.

When he came to the question of ‘mateship’ directly, Ward allowed that it had appeared earlier than the 1890’s, and not in the interior:

> [The] effect of the outback environment was perhaps not so much to ‘reform’ those who went thither, as to accentuate and develop certain characteristics which they brought with them. Take for example, the strongly egalitarian sentiment of group solidarity and loyalty which was, perhaps, the most marked of all convict traits. This was recognised as the prime distinguishing mark of outback workers fifty years before Lawson and others wrote … about mateship.³

Whether ‘accentuated’ by outback environment or not, the ‘mateship’ of the convicts and of the broad Australian population subsequently, had its origins and developed its distinctive ‘shape’ in the northern hemisphere. The evidence of its ‘arrival’ and its spread throughout the continent has been available to Australian historians for some time, but it has been ignored, neglected and in some cases deliberately covered up. Immediately after their initial assertion (above) Bolton and Hudson proceeded to suggest what would fill the gap:

> Many men joined the Freemasons, a body whose…influence in Australian society has been grossly neglected by historians…Lodges, such as the Druids, the Rechabites, the Buffaloes and the Oddfellows, provided support systems of considerable strength and durability. Catholics had their own religious orders and lay sodalities. (Their) diversity and importance for…Australian political and cultural life is little studied.⁴

Their speculations, here, are quite accurate, including that these fraternal associations have been ‘grossly neglected’ and ‘little studied’. Bolton and Hudson made no attempt themselves to follow-up their own insight, though the manuscript they were compiling when they made these points was called *Creating Australia*, and thus such research would appear to have been central to their work.

Ross Terrill, writing in 1987 similarly failed to follow up on a crucial element of his own hypothesis on Australian identity, and which, if he had might have brought him to the same place as Bolton and Hudson. He wrote: ‘Protestant fear of Rome had made Australia a secular society’.⁵

He was, of course, short handing the Roman Catholic Church, when speaking of ‘Rome’, but again, such a major claim, with no analysis, no follow-up! The essentials of his larger quote surrounding this ‘grab’ are:
Robert Holt, President of the ALP in Victoria, former Minister in a State Labor government, was a Mason [ie a Speculative Freemason] who had come to hate the Catholic forces that had split the Labor Party…Protestant fear of Rome had made Australia a secular society…There was something irrationally fierce about our sectarian hostility, as if religion were being made to carry hidden psychological baggage. Many Catholics believed Masons carried out barbaric rites with goats and naked men. Many Protestants were hostile to alcohol chiefly because Catholic assumption of beer proved the sinfulness of drinking.

I make no observations here about the truthfulness or otherwise of Terrill’s assertions. I only underline Terrill’s use of the words ‘hate’, ‘irrationally fierce’ and ‘hidden’, and repeat, if so important as to merit such words and such claims, why no research.

Hogan, in 1988, similarly writing about one of his own central organising concepts failed to carry out and thus to profit from any of the appropriate research. He merely asserted: ‘Part of the mythology of Australian social history…has been the importance of the rivalry between Catholics and Protestants’. Apparently describing it as mythology because he believed the degree of actual hostility had been exaggerated, he nevertheless asserted:

* that the mythology was ‘rarely written about’ but accepted without question by many citizens;
* that a definitive history of the sectarian battles after 1918 has yet to be written;
* that a similar neglect has occurred with regard to sectarian discrimination; and:

(more) importantly, what has not been generally recognised in historical surveys of twentieth-century Australia is the structure of rivalry…

Why he locates sectarian rivalry in the 20th century is unstated. He concludes this section with this:

The party system in political life is legitimate and has been recognised as central to understanding Australian politics. The sectarian ‘party’ system in business, commerce, sport, education, communications, and social status has been just as obvious. But it has not been legitimate and so has been ignored.

What can one say about historians who recognise an issue’s significance but deny it any research time, because it is ‘illegitimate’, or for any other reason?

Alan Atkinson made quite a deal of Freemasonry in his 1997 ‘award-winning’ The Europeans in Australia. He devoted almost a whole chapter to a discussion of ‘Varieties of Brotherhood’ in the larger context of the earliest days of white settlement. His footnotes indicate that he has read some of the best secondary sources on Speculative Freemasonry but still, there is no sign of any primary research. Perhaps for this reason, he has made the errors of gendering SF as male, and of asserting France had substantially more of ‘brotherhood’ than Britain.

Fraternalism, as an operating practice and central organising principle was developed in Western Europe well before the time of the Elizabethans:

To become a gildsman, it was necessary to pay certain initiation fees, (and to take) an oath of fealty to the fraternity, swearing to observe its laws, to uphold its privileges, not to divulge its counsels, to obey its officers, and not to aid any non-gildsman under cover of the newly-acquired ‘freedom’.

Already in this guild charter from the year 1200, is the structure of ‘brotherhood’, on which Freemasons, ‘friendly societies’ and ‘trade unions’ continue to rest. Given an Australian name and Australian features, this mutuality is the basis of what has become known as ‘the Australian identity’. The iconic figure of the ‘jolly swagman’ in Waltzing Matilda is but an Australian version of the ‘travelling brother’, ‘the journeyman’ on whose struggle to survive ‘fraternalism’ was postulated and built from mediaeval times on. Put with his mates, one lonely tramp, ‘jolly’ or not, becomes a brotherhood. Thence cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity become possible, and in many cases, necessary. Indeed, the ‘brother’ was only able to travel because of the mutual benefit arrangements put in place and signed up to before he set off.

The principles of discipline, conviviality and benevolence which shaped nineteenth and twentieth century ‘mateship’ were quite straightforward – an oath, secret signs and secret knowledge, regalia marking ‘lodge’ office and achievement, members’ contributions kept in a ‘common purse’ or box, and a sense of exclusiveness based on a line drawn between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.
Mateship came to Australia in the form of Freemasonry, in the form of the Loyal Orange Order, in the form of radical nationalist societies, eg among the Irish, and in trade-oriented ‘combinations’, all of which used the organisational forms and philosophies originated 600 years earlier. In all 4 ‘sites’ its presence was mostly covert, the stuff of ‘secret societies’ and conspiracy. The fact of secrecy, however, was circumstantial, not inherent. What was crucial, and ‘built-in’ was the need to survive by combining in a multi-functional ‘brotherhood’ designed principally to support the weakest member through planning ahead during the good times for the inevitable downturn.

In Sydney town, Port Phillip, Moreton Bay, Geelong, Launceston, Norfolk Island, Coal River and Hobart the story, as we can put it together from contemporary records, is the same. By the 1830’s and 40’s brotherhood, fraternity, mateship, call it what you like, increasingly took the form of Odd Fellows, Rechabites, Druids and Foresters, and, for example, of the United Friends (Shipwrights) Society and the Australian Trade Union Benefit Society, as well as lodges of Speculative Freemasons.

Miners, as an occupational group were especially interested in systems of benefit payments, and the spread of ‘friendly society’ fraternalism over the length and breadth of Australia was, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early parts of the twentieth, largely co-terminous with the spread of mining. The moving populations found work on the rail networks that serviced the mines, in the pastoral outposts and around the camp-sites that became villages, then towns and cities. All the fraternal associations that I’ve mentioned so far, Trade Unions, Freemasons and Affiliated Friendly Societies alike, had ‘travelling cards’ whereby their members could travel from place to place, looking for work and being supported by fellow lodge members.

In her unpublished work on Castlemaine, a Victorian gold-mining town, researcher Nancy Renfree concluded that:

> In the final analysis their influence must be seen as encompassing all aspects of the lives of the generation which provided the stable basis for Victoria’s future social and cultural development.\(^\text{12}\)

By ‘their influence’ she is referring to the ‘Affiliated Orders’, that is, those formally-organised Friendly Societies which had, over the course of the 19th century, amalgamated into single, centralised organisations in order to even out payments and administrative requirements. The major Affiliated Orders were the three Odd Fellow groupings – MUIOOF (‘Manchester Unity’), the IOOF (‘the Independent Order’) and GUOOF (or ‘Grand United Order of Odd Fellows’) – Druids, Rechabites, Sons of Temperance, Free Gardeners, Foresters, Hibernians, Protestant Alliance and the Australian Natives Association.

A little-known, 1984 book by Cromwell and Green is the only published account in 200 years of white Australian settlement which has claimed to be covering Australian ‘friendly societies’. Their study, in fact, only covers some of the larger Affiliated Friendly Societies (AFS). It nevertheless, provides figures to show that at least 25 per cent of the population of all States was directly benefiting from the services of these societies before 1914. In especially relevant areas and occupations contemporary observers had found the percentage was well over half:

> It was thought … [in the 1870’s and 1880’s] … that throughout Australia eighty to ninety per cent of manual workers were members of friendly societies.\(^\text{13}\)

In western towns like Broken Hill, it was simply assumed that by the turn of the century at least 50 per cent of all men in the town and close to 100 per cent of miners were members of at least one lodge, including those of the Miners’ Association, the AMA, which had its own fraternal regalia, secret ‘work’ and benefit structure.

It was not accidental that it was the Manchester Unity Odd Fellows picnic which was fired on by recalcitrant Turks at Broken Hill in 1915. Neither was it unusual for a journalist to comment in 1910 of the Odd Fellows’ picnic at that same location:

> The success of the outing was due in great measure to that feeling of unity and loyalty that binds the members of this friendly society together.\(^\text{14}\)

The Cromwell and Green book, *Mutual Aid or Welfare State*, is not a history, as such, at all, it is an argument about the importance of people’s self-help and mutual aid to the construction of white Australian society. Though they attached their account of ‘mutual aid’ specifically to ‘friendly societies’, the authors, Green and Cromwell went well beyond life insurance and health statistics to something much broader, a notion they saw as fundamental to Australian white society:
This neglected part of the Australian story ought to engage not only those who wish to see the record put straight, but also those searching for an Australian identity. The spirit of self-reliance described in these pages has consistently been a prominent part of the Australian make-up.\textsuperscript{15}

There are numerous ambiguities here awaiting further scholars, in particular with regard to terms and functions. It’s clear, for example, that the Cromwell/Green lower-case term ‘friendly societies’ does not correspond to the upper-case Affiliated Friendly Societies though they believed there was exact overlap. The broader ‘fraternal’ situation was, and is, yet more fluid and ambiguous. As Ward was, they were clearly talking about that broad ‘fraternalism’ though their statistics are of only one branch of it.

The massive amounts of available evidence, available to those prepared to seek it out in primary documents, overwhelms any other interpretations than that these ‘fraternal associations’ were and are central to Australian social history in general and labour history in particular.

Stoodley, quoting north Queensland newspapers of record, asserted in 1972 a close chronological link between what she called ‘co-operative insurance societies’ and miners’ industrial agitation:

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Mining unionism did not grow out of digger organisation at all, but had an entirely independent origin, usually following the development of co-operative insurance societies.\textsuperscript{16}
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What has been described as the first ‘trade union’ of the Hunter River District was a ‘Mutual Benefit Society’, advocated by and formed at the behest of the manager of the AA Company in 1857 at a pit known as ‘the Borehole’. He later had cause to regret his action as this form of organisation quickly spread among the miners to the Glebe and Minmi pits. While increasingly active industrially, it retained its mutual benefit or if you prefer ‘friendly society’ characteristics, but as a ‘union club’, neither its members nor its opponents had any need to distinguish ‘trade union’ functions from those of a ‘friendly society’.\textsuperscript{17} As competition sharpened, the societies separated formally by function but continued to enthusiastically support one another as fruit of the same tree. The ‘first labour demonstration inaugurated on the Monaro’ at Cooma in 1891 featured

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[the] old Wagga ASU banner, which has done yeomen’s service all over the colonies…the new banner of the Monaro Labor Union, upon which Australia’s national flower the waratah is conspicuous, and the beautiful emblems of the various Friendly Societies well displayed, created a magnificent sight.\textsuperscript{18}
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A similar ‘Demonstration Day’ at Wagga in October was held ‘under the auspices of the local Friendly Societies and Amalgamated Shearers Union of Australia’. The ‘Grand Marshall’ was Jim Mooney.\textsuperscript{19}

At Barcaldine at the time of the Shearers’ Strikes a Bandmaster, and musician Will Chandler taught and led the Odd Fellow’s Brass Band and the ‘Court Friar Tuck Ancient Order of Foresters Drum and Fife Band’, in particular at the head of the 1891 May Day parade.\textsuperscript{20}

In the 1890’s, Henry Lawson, William Lane, WG Spence and other well-known ‘labour’ activists were secretly initiated into the Knights of Labor, whose American ‘Rules’ detail the use of triangular altars and Bible-derived symbols during their normal ‘industrial’ meetings. The Order’s Sydney ‘Constitution’, Adelphon Kruptos, is in the Mitchell Library, where the names of Lawson, Lane, etc are also recorded. The text refers to the Order’s secret signs and passwords, and includes in its ‘working’ instructions, the following:

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If there is any sign or portion of a sign, words or symbols, in use in your local different from what you find laid down here, discard the same at once.
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The Order’s US origins are clear from the use of the word ‘local’. W.W. Lyght brought the Knights of Labor secretly to Australia by first establishing an Assembly of the Knights at Wagga in approx 1890, and one in Sydney in 1891.\textsuperscript{22}

It is true that much of the language of the nineteenth century societies is, to ears conditioned to later usages, Biblical and overly wordy, therefore, perhaps, also ‘illegitimate’. To historians, however, this word should have no meaning. As custodians of historical truth we must be able see the relevance of prose such as the following from the early twentieth century, no matter how ‘foreign-sounding’ today:

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[In Manchester Unity’s ‘lecture’ on the First, or White Degree and its associated symbols]
This emblematic origin applies to the Antiquity of Mankind and is the starting point of a pilgrimage which is only completed by a full comprehension of those duties recognised by Oddfellers…
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The purpose of Oddfellows is, in spite of the artificial things which separate men and women, to bring all together in the Bonds of Brotherhood, to foster the glorious privilege of being Independent and to practice Benevolence without creating pauperism. Such an army, banded together to work no man ill, but to do such good as in our power lies, might be a mighty weapon in the cause of National Righteousness, making Friendship, Love and Truth the passwords to a kingdom on which our Old men dream dreams and some of our young men see the Vision.\textsuperscript{23}

What the gap between the secret reality and the romanticised version of ‘mateship’ spotlights is an intense struggle at the heart of myth-making about ‘the Australian character’ at the time. I’m not here referring to the pseudo-competition between Lawson and Patterson, and I’m certainly not referring to more recent discussions, such as Lake-Scates, which is totally irrelevant, since not based on, even vaguely connected to the historical reality.

The 1890’s crystallised a long period of philosophic competition about the best way forward for working people, in particular, competition between the ‘friendly society’ strand and the ‘trade union’ strand of fraternalism, for members, community resources and political dominance. I have elsewhere argued at length about the long-lasting, and negative influence of the Webb’s ‘history’ of ‘trade unionism’ on Australian labour historiography, in particular in the way they devalued any evidence which did not fit their preconceived notion of what constituted a ‘Trade Union’.

In the period of ten decades since the 1890s, Freemasonry, Trade Unions and Friendly Societies turned in on themselves. Each created a myth of ‘a true believer’, the steadfast supporter who increasingly thought only of one particular strand of brotherhood and saw and wanted no connection with the others. It wasn’t true when the period began, but by its end, it had become such a truism that parochial, self-serving pseudo-history has become the only ‘history’ each of the strands know. ‘In-house’ scholars have imbibed then propagated a myth of uniqueness and separation, causing fraternalism, the idea, to decline in people’s minds through neglect, until it has well-near perished in practice.

Thus resulted the neglect to which I’ve referred, especially of ‘friendly societies’. Even a rather more personal contest can be used to display the consequences. Manning Clark made no mention at all of benefit societies or fraternalism in his six volumes of \textit{A History of Australia}. Geoffrey Blainey’s more recent [1991] work on one Oddfellow network, the IOOF or ‘Independent Order of Odd Fellows’, asserted that these organisations were \textit{vital} to the survival of nineteenth century pioneer Australia. As research accumulates Blainey’s view will be proven the more accurate and Clark’s neglect, along with that of most other historians, regrettable. But listen to Blainey speak of his own, initial blindness:

\begin{quote}
I started with no view about friendly societies. I knew so little about their history and activities. More and more I became impressed. Here were tens of thousands of Australian of long ago, trying to prepare for the difficult times which were likely to come at some stage or other. Their motto was simple: help each other. In many ways they could teach us a lesson.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Again, the separating out of ‘friendly societies’ is a consequence of the neglect as well as an attempt at redress. Only the strongest fraternal societies or ‘Orders’ made the voyage to this country but many local variants sprang up here, often continuing to mix, rather than separate functions. Further, it is important to understand that despite competition and the looking-inward, the day-to-day life of the ‘brotheren’ and the ‘sisteren’ involved crossovers and interminglings, in particular of the three main ‘strands’. No-one was just a Freemason, or just a Trade Unionist, and no community supported just one society.

In the midst of the neglect, the most insightful response to Russell Ward’s thesis remains \textit{A New Britannia}, originally published in 1970, in 2004 re-published yet again. The author, McQueen, points out that Ward, in making his central argument had reversed F.J. Turner’s ‘frontier thesis’:

\begin{quote}
As developed in the 1890’s...in the United States, the frontier thesis had justified individualism as the dominant spirit in American life. Ward...argued that (the Australian) frontier produced a collectivist ethos because geography and legislation made it impossible for the small farmer to succeed, or for anyone to live in isolation.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

McQueen proposed a further version of the ‘frontier thesis’, arguing that Australia ‘was a frontier of white (international) capitalism’ and that:

\begin{quote}
The Labor parties that emerged after 1890 were in every way the logical extension of the petit-bourgeois mentality and subordinated organisations that preceded them. There was no turning point. There was merely consolidation, a confirmation of much that had gone before.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}
Again, unfortunately, McQueen’s insight remained for him speculation. As far as I know, to this day he has attempted no research of these ‘subordinated organisations’.

Most recently, because of the obvious anomalies between the claimed ‘record’ and the available evidence, available that is to anyone prepared to look, a re-building effort has begun. I’m not the only reconstructionist in this country, but I have had to go overseas to achieve a sensible conversation. In 1985 I began looking at the banners and processions of Eight Hour Day celebrations. For many reasons, including my response to what Labor politicians have grasped to themselves as ‘the tradition of the true believer’ I was led to concentrate on ‘benefit societies’ and to conclude that past treatment of them by historians represented issues of profound and fundamental importance to everyone concerned with our national identity. In November, 2004, I was the invited key-note speaker at an International Conference in Sheffield, in England, co-sponsored by the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, the Friendly Societies Research Group and the British Society for the Study of Labour History. I addressed the audience, composed entirely, except for myself, of northern hemisphere academics and private researchers on ‘Comparing Fraternalisms on Three Continents’.

In the last two decades of northern hemisphere scholarship similar errors and omissions to those I’ve outlined in the Australian context, have been reviewed and significant steps taken towards redress. Margaret Clawson has traced the development of fraternalism from early modern Western Europe through eighteenth century Britain to nineteenth century United States of America[27] and concluded:

[When] we consider the range of organisations that made use of fraternal identity, it is remarkable that it has gone unexplored for so long…

[Scholars’] lack of awareness is most pronounced in the study of nineteenth century American society, where a Masonic type of fraternalism served as the organisational model for trade unions, agricultural societies, nativist organisations and political movements of every conceivable ideological stripe, as well as for literally hundreds of social organisations.[28]

There are three specific issues for historians and social researchers: firstly, there is the question of why Friendly Societies, Freemasons and other fraternal associations have been excluded from the labour historical record. Sectarian conflicts, important in themselves, are yet only one small part of the world of fraternal associations. There is a vast array of associations of interest to labour historians, beyond even Friendly Societies and Freemasons and any historian limiting himself or herself as Labour History has limited itself in the past, is simply denying themselves a great deal. I refer anyone interested to www.fraternalsecrets.org and to my, mainly, self-published work.

Secondly, there is the issue of how to go about recording their existence, their role and their significance, and thirdly, there are the problems which would result from their insertion into the labour history record. But it has to be done.

Endnotes

6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
18. The Hummer, 19 December, 1891.
19. Ibid., 19 and 30 October, 1891.
20. Western Champion Almanac and Yearbook, 1891, pp. 54-55, for Chandler.
21. For Assembly documents, see Adelphon Kruptos, and Secret Work and Instructions – Knights of Labor, in ML366.974/1A1, 2A1, 3A1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
23. From an undated hand out to members, ‘Lecture on Ritual, Symbolism and Allegory’, MUIOOF, this version probably 1935.
26. Ibid.
‘A consequent gain in the tempo of effort’: Chinese labour and Chinese industrial activism in Australia, 1941-45

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Australians waited 45 years before discovering the labours of Chinese on behalf of the nation during World War II. Before this, Chinese’ war-time experiences lay in the shadow of two markers of the progress of White Australia. First there was the fall of the white bastions of Singapore and Hong Kong to the advancing Japanese forces in 1941 and early 1942, and the flight to Australia of merchant ships manned by Chinese; second, the legislative attempts in 1949 to deport the Chinese seamen who had remained in Australia, and the revival of the rhetoric of national defence against racial impurities and fifth columnist activism that the war-time arrivals had supposedly introduced.

Wendy Rankine has pioneered the social history some of the Chinese war-time refugees and evacuees organised into work brigades on the home front in 1942. Diana Giese and Morag Loh have gathered up oral testimonies from Chinese service men and women. The efforts taken with these rich archives have yielded most in recovering the labours of the Chinese-Australians in the military from historical obscurity. Chinese men and women were, indeed, forthcoming and generous in their recollections; previously, no one had thought to ask them, however. This essay clarifies the unprecedented geographic and occupational dispersal of Chinese in Australia after December 1941, and the employment issues they faced as ‘aliens’ (non-British subjects), as ‘coloureds, and as a labour force with much to offer an Australia at war. Second, drawing on the official, day-to-day record of residence, movement and community organisation, the essay surveys the industrial campaigns undertaken by Chinese seamen – the largest occupational grouping among the war-time arrivals – and their accession to a level of equality of wages and conditions hitherto unknown in the history of seafaring labour, and to an employment arrangement that established Australia’s first trans-national industrial agreement.¹

Several hundred students and merchants from the Chinese mainland were visiting Australia at or soon after the outbreak of the Pacific war. The dislocations of war in the region brought others – evacuees from Papua New Guinea and the mining settlements of Pacific Island territories, and a small group from the Solomon Islands. Others came from Hong Kong and South East Asian countries when the Australian ban on ‘Eurasians’ and Chinese softened. So, too, more Chinese crews arrived on the British and allied ships that sought safe haven at ports from Fremantle to Townsville, and were enlisted into the government-controlled merchant fleet. Some of these arrivals had been ‘captured’ – either found at sea or brought from the war zone as the allied forces overran Japanese-held areas and their concentration camps. Many of these men were held in Australian internment camps for periods of up to 16 months, before release into employment at the behest of the Chinese Consul-General.² Chinese from Darwin and other northern towns added to the movement of evacuees who regrouped in the southern states in 1942.

This was a movement of people from a diversity of origins. Chinese seafarers came from many provinces, including from Shanghai, Fujian, Henan, as well as from Canton, the predominant place of origin for Chinese residents of Australia, and Singapore and Penang. Among the refugees from South East Asian countries were those whose forebears had departed China in the eighteenth and in nineteenth centuries. The diversity of origins was matched by the breadth of work backgrounds, as well as marked differences in language and cultural affiliations.

For four decades the migration bureaucracy had worked to perfect its regulatory web of checks on any single addition to the Chinese population. Yet such were the exigencies of the home front and the mobility of seamen and other workers, that the precise numbers of Chinese in the country between 1941 and 1945 remains unclear. In 1944 when a formal ‘pool’ of Chinese seamen was under discussion, the Security Service could not lay its hand on a comprehensive listing of the seamen, or those on contract to the American forces or employed in protected industries. So, too, in 1945, shipping authorities at Sydney would not hazard a guess at the numbers at Sydney; the men ‘fluctuated’ between states, and many had moved to land-based employment.
Fewer than 1,000 war-time arrivals remained when Arthur Calwell introduced the notorious *Wartime Refugee Removal Act* in 1949 and defended it before the High Court. Certainly the numbers in Australia had exceeded 1,500 in the first year of the Pacific war; the total probably peaked at some 2,500-3,000 at any one time, an extraordinary addition to Australia’s longer-term population of 14,000 people of Chinese backgrounds.

**Combatant and non-combatant labour**

During World War II, Chinese men served with each of the armed forces. Women enlisted in both the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force and the Australian Women’s Army Service. Following the war, Chinese Australians served with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), in its work in China, and with BCOF, the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. Most of the enlistments were ‘unofficial’ as the *Defence Act* of 1909 barred the recruitment of those not ‘substantially of European origin or descent’, enforceable at the time of application or at the medical examination. The so-called ‘blood rule’ was not strictly applied to non-combatant roles, however. In early 1940, when the military authorities reviewed the racialised recruitment policy, the RAAF at its discretion, admitted ‘coloureds’ as ground crew based in Australia. By 1941, this limitation was increasingly relaxed. Enlistments in the RAAF, Navy and Army attest to the perseverance of the enlistees, and the discretion exercised by recruitment officers with more than racial delineations on their minds.

The restrictions eased somewhat in February 1942 when the *National Security (Aliens Service) Regulations* effectively overrode the racial and national delimitations of the *Defence Act*, and compelled all Aliens to register for service: allied nationals could be enlisted into the military; all others could be drafted into civil auxiliary roles. The distinction held important consequences for both the combatant and non-combatant labours of Chinese. First, rather than freeing up the constraints on Chinese enlistment in the military, it had the opposite effect. Invited to respond to the Regulation, Hsu Mo, the leader of the Chinese Legation at Canberra, sought an assurance that Chinese would receive the same post-war entitlements accorded to Americans, Norwegians or other allied nationals who enlisted. Hsu had in mind the small contingents of visiting Chinese merchants and students who came and went each year, but he had prompted a wider review. When the services each explored the utility of the Regulations in managing the Chinese population, they highlighted the racial and procedural entanglements that would ensue from any change to policy. First, a formal acknowledgement of post-war entitlements might not be reversible by peace-time legislation or the bureaucratic procedures that provided for deportation. The Army had suggested that a safer course could be to restrict enlistments to arrivals after December 1941, who fell under a different admission category than the regular system of short-term entry. Yet, how might Australia justify to Chinese diplomats or to the public at large the acceptance of one discrete group and the rejection of others? Among the Chinese with residency rights, for example, were at least 300 men who were suitable candidates for service. Further, if no Chinese nationals were accepted into war-time service – in effect, a blanket exemption from the *Aliens Service Regulations* – this could invite protests from those allied nationals who were obliged to enlist. The Chinese Minister did not press his case, however, and these questions had lapsed by mid-year.

The diplomatic exchange effectively had entrenched the general policy of non-enlistment of ‘coloureds’ into combatant roles, and so, too, the power under the *Aliens Service Regulations* to draft Chinese into non-combatant roles was rarely used; rather, Chinese labour was engaged on a voluntary basis. The major exception arose within weeks of the passage of the Regulations, and it resulted directly from industrial action by Chinese seamen who had ferried merchant ships from Singapore and Hong Kong. On 28 January 1942, a major incident at Fremantle arose during a protest over wages and conditions by the men of the SS *Chungking*, one of several vessels in port that was manned by Chinese. These seamen were particularly incensed that they alone among the allied crews received no war-time risk bonus on top of their traditionally poor pay and conditions. A delegation to the *Chungking*’s officers demanded a pay rise and in an ensuing scuffle that involved armed naval personnel, two of the crew were killed and four injured. The official response was to take 350 Chinese into military detention. The Chinese Consul General persuaded some of the men to work on ships at the pay rates that had been settled for the crew of the *Neptuna* at Sydney. The rest were formed into the ‘No 7 Labour Company (Chinese)’ on
17 March 1942. The Company continued for several years, variously added to or reduced by peripatetic seafarers. Its men were employed at six shillings per day, in line general pay rates for Aliens in civil auxiliary units.\textsuperscript{6}

Chinese were employed in a wide range of occupations under various employment arrangements. A survey of several 100 evacuees in Western Australia in mid-1943 revealed that most worked for private employers, and at local rates and conditions. 28 women were engaged as ‘Amahs’ (house servants and ‘nannies). As well as seafaring, men engaged in domestic service and there were 20 cooks, a dentist, a carpenter, fitters and engine drivers. Some were employed at Chinese cafes; others, as hotel workers. Small groups were employed as labourers and stewards by the US Navy at Fremantle, while carpenters renovated public buildings in Perth.

The use of Chinese labour extended Australia-wide. Fitters and turners were employed at GMH, Melbourne. The 7\textsuperscript{th} Labour Company, based in Western Australia, was in great demand at the wharfs, railway yards and ordinance stores. Its reach extended to the mines at Mt Isa by 1943. General labouring was undertaken in the cities and countryside, from potato digging and market gardening for the Army in Western Australia, to a select team that worked in charcoal production under the supervision of the Works Council at Dubbo, NSW.\textsuperscript{7} Chinese ship stewards who landed at Sydney on bonds were employed by the Water and Sewerage Board on pipeline work. This was a mobile labour force that brought a range of much-needed skills to the home front.

Some 600 indentured Chinese from the phosphate mines of Ocean Island and Nauru arrived at Brisbane in March 1942 and they were redirected to mining work at Wauchope and Hatches Creek in central Australia. Notwithstanding the bonded employment arrangements they had left, and Australia’s Aliens Service Regulations, they negotiated on wages and conditions, which delayed their posting for six weeks while a scale of pay was struck that reflected skill levels – some £7 to £15 per month – with overtime payable beyond a 48 hour week; a plan for bonuses as well as suitable board and lodging at the mines; and repatriation to China at the war’s end. Chinese festival days and ‘Republic Day’ were given over to holidays. These were far superior to the conditions at the phosphate mines. Five years after the war, Chinese indentured workers on Nauru were paid a flat £6/10 per month. One man rejected the deal and was sent to Melbourne, to work at his trade as a carpenter.

The mining venture fell far short of the expectations of both the men and the officials responsible for its success. The men were not trained in underground mining, and war-time shortages of materials bedevilled the development of the mines as well as construction of proper accommodation. One half of the labour force required medical attention within the first month, and disputes arose over pay and working conditions.\textsuperscript{8} Reflecting on the mining venture after it closed, Chinese consular officials concluded that the formulations of pay, bonuses, and overtime had effectively left the men at below award rates, a breach of the war-time policy of wages equality.\textsuperscript{9}

The official attention to Chinese labour went well beyond its engagement in useful work. The interest was two-fold: first, the potential of Chinese to act as agents for enemy nations, in particular the mobile seamen and the former prisoners of the Japanese who were counted among the refugees. Second, they might serve ‘some national, embryonic, movement’, or communist organisation. Under the co-ordination the Security Service’s special ‘Chinese Section’, the surveillance net was as wide as the dispersal of Chinese on the sea front and in the mines, in restaurants, and anywhere else that Chinese gathered for work or for social, patriotic and other activities.\textsuperscript{10}

Just as the notional risks moved from the sea to the land, and back again, seamen in general and ‘deserters’ in particular, presented the greatest potential threats. Overseas reports, from ‘a reliable source’, warned that British ships in 1941 had been riddled with Chinese spies operating for the Japanese.\textsuperscript{11} The Commonwealth’s Security Service failed in its endeavours to separate out the ‘subversives’, however. Following the industrial action at Fremantle in 1942, for example, local Security Service officers entirely discounted the subversive intent; the strikers were genuine in their actions for a pay rise.\textsuperscript{12} Exceptional cases were, indeed, found among the arrivals in 1941. Four Chinese men who had worked as Japanese interpreters for the Singapore military police were quickly recruited and posted to Military Intelligence at Melbourne.\textsuperscript{13}
The formalities of industrial organisation among seamen

Chinese Seamen were of note for their numbers, the supposed security risks they presented, and for their industrial militancy. By mid-1942, the population at ports around the land included hundreds of seamen whose vessels had been destroyed, or who were surplus to their ship’s needs, or who had been left behind after disputes over wages. Some 500 seamen were on shore at NSW ports at any one time. Some were engaged on the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board’s Warragamba pipeline; others, who had been paid off temporarily, were sent to work, for example, at the American Hospital at Herne Bay, rather than placed under restraint. The Chinese Seamen’s Welfare Association estimated that the workforce of seamen probably reached 1,500 men.\textsuperscript{14}

Unionists, both Chinese and European, had been active during the industrial disputes at Fremantle in early 1942. For the Seamen’s Union of Australia (SUA), this sat with the Union’s involvement in the newly-formed Maritime Industry Commission, established by the Curtin Government to supervise the efficient manning of merchant ships. The SUA, itself, had been successful in gaining a 44 hour week in December 1941. The Intelligence Service suspected that Prime Minister Curtin advised E V Elliott, the General Secretary of the SUA, to disassociate himself and his Union from the Chinese activists.\textsuperscript{15}

However, in that year, the industrial unrest extended well beyond Australian shores, as Chinese crews across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans sought improvements to their appalling working conditions. When this involved the Chinese Embassy at London, the Chinese diplomats, in a brilliant negotiation, struck an agreement with the British Government that challenged long-standing wage relativities that returned to the Chinese seafarer some one half to two thirds of the British wage. For the Chinese government, an improvement was only fair, and it would serve to contain communist agitation among Chinese crews. The ‘British-Chinese Agreement’ of 24 April 1942 provided Chinese seamen with pay rises and the security of ongoing work. Adopted by the British dominions and supported by Britain, China and key American authorities, the Agreement promised industrial peace for the duration of the war. In contrast to the north Atlantic ports, throughout 1942 the unrest on the Australian coast escalated among Chinese seamen, to involve ships of the Blue Funnel line and other major deep-sea operators, as well as coastal and regional operators and the Asian-crewed vessels of the British Phosphate Commission that were still afloat. Throughout the year, a dozen or more disputes arose in ships at Melbourne, Sydney and Townsville.

The Chinese Seamen’s Union was formed at Sydney on 22 January 1942 when a meeting of 200 seamen voted to declare an Australian branch of the Chinese Seamen’s Union. Its object, specified in the draft constitution, was to advance members’ interests to the same ‘equality of standard’ as other nationals, while its Articles of Association declared its allegiance to Sun Yat Sen’s three principles. The growing organisation of crews was evident in the tactics adopted along the east coast. Within hours of signing on, for example, a crew would announce a walk off for better wages. By the end of the year, shipping agents at Sydney complained bitterly to the Government at the Union’s ‘hold’ over the men. Number 66 Dixon St, Haymarket, the Union’s headquarters from June, had virtually replaced shipping offices as the ‘pick-up point’ for engagements and discharges of Chinese seamen.\textsuperscript{16}

Strikers faced the full force of the legal remedies available to ship owners. In August 1942 Regulation 14A of the \textit{National Security (Aliens Control) Regulations} added to the range of laws, as the Curtin Government expanded its unprecedented controls over practically every aspect of national life. The Regulation was a response to the desertion by merchant seaman of all nationalities, which was as common during the war as it had been in peacetime. A seaman who was deemed to have deserted ship or was absent without leave, or otherwise contested on-board ‘discipline’ could be arrested and interned, or gaoled. These were broad powers, and they added to the power of detention under the \textit{Immigration Act} and to the array of clauses of the \textit{Navigation Act} concerning breaches of on-board ‘discipline’.\textsuperscript{17}

Some 100 Chinese strikers were declared deserters at Sydney. Under the \textit{Navigation Act} shipping agents undertook prosecutions of the men who walked off the \textit{SS Taiping} and the \textit{SS Anhui}, which operated out of Brisbane and Sydney to New Guinea and formerly to Hong Kong. The charge laid was a ‘refusal to obey a lawful command’ to return to work.\textsuperscript{18} 28 men off the \textit{Hoegh Silver Star} had been charged under the \textit{Immigration Act} and imprisoned as prohibited immigrants. When the men in the \textit{SS Nellore} also sought Australian Award conditions, the ship’s agents proposed a settlement akin to the rates paid on the \textit{SS Neptuna} – some £6 below the pay of crew on Australian articles, which had been settled with
the help of a Commissioner of the Industrial Court. These were deep sea-going vessels of up to 7,000 tons, formerly operating on the China and south Asian routes. The Nellore perished in 1944 in the Indian Ocean; the Neptuna and its Chinese crew perished in Japanese air raids on Darwin, the ship’s destination when it sailed from Sydney in early 1942.

At an early point, the Union had decided to make no application for registration with the Registrar General’s Department or Industrial Register at Sydney. Perhaps the Union was hesitant to engage openly with the racialised politics of Australian unionism, or with Australia’s over-worked, war-time bureaucracies. Rather, formal recognition was sought from the Chinese Government at Chongqing, China’s war-time capital. The Chinese government’s approval came in the form of a short instruction from the Central Executive Committee of the Guomindang [KMT], then China’s senior governing instrument, to the Sydney KMT Branch that it should assist the Union. This was despite the Sydney KMT’s advice to Chongqing that to all appearances, the Union was rather more communist than nationalist, in effect, a new arm to the organisation whose members and leaders were subject to repression and punitive military expeditions under Chiang Kai Shek’s direction. The commendation the unionists needed for Chinese Government recognition had come from Chinese Minister to Australia, Dr Hsu Mo, who had arrived in September 1941. For Hsu, an effective Union could end the growing drain on consular resources that stranded seamen or ‘deserters’ presented at Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. Furthermore, like other Chinese consular and diplomatic establishments around the globe, the Legation and consular staff in Australia were charged with a mission to expand the Chinese Government’s reach among ‘the Chinese overseas’. The Australia-wide Chinese consular networks engaged in this work, and the Chinese Government also directly supported local KMT branches. Indeed, as it had for a decade, the KMT in Chongqing sent specialist emissaries to run its newspaper, the Chinese Times and to win the support of and organise the locals. By the late 1930s, these endeavours were not going well, however. The KMT had little sway over many organisations in Sydney. When the recognition for the Seamen came from the Chinese Government, it appears that neither the Consulate nor the KMT sought instructions or advice from Chongqing on how they might assist the new Union.

From the improbable circumstances of its creation, the Union gained legitimacy as an arm of the Chinese Government, and this guaranteed it recognition by the Australia government. Furthermore, distanced as it was from the local KMT in Sydney, the Union could not be dismissed as an offshoot of a local branch of a foreign political party. The formal recognition also assisted the creation of a union leadership. Both William Jong and Stanley Wai, who ran the Union’s secretariat, were resident in Australia on the standard 12-month Certificates of Exemption (from the dictation test) for Chinese visitors. A blanket extension for three-years was granted to all ‘coloured’ visitors on exemption in 1942 and again in 1945. Jong and Wai, who had changed their employment without notifying the authorities, were singled out to receive year-by-year extensions, but no further restrictions were placed on either their residence or mobility within the country. With a membership that approached 700 by late 1942, some 90 per cent of who were working seamen, the resources as well as the leadership were available to advance members’ interests on two fronts: conventional industrial campaigns along the East coast, and in providing the specialist welfare services on shore to meet the needs of a membership from a wide range of linguistic and provincial backgrounds.

The Ferguson Inquiry

For the Australian Government, a formal inquiry was the means to intervene in the troubles at the ports, as a matter of public safety and defence. John Alexander Ferguson, a Judge with the Industrial Commission of NSW, was appointed to formally report to Attorney-General H V Evatt on the difficulties in manning ships with Chinese, and on the men’s wages demands. Hearings were held at the Sydney Industrial Court over late February and early March 1943. A representative of the British Ministry of Shipping attended with his legal advisers, while the seamen were allowed two legal representatives – for the Cooks and Stewards, and for the Radio officers, Sailors and Firemen. The Department of Customs provided an observer, as did the Chinese Consulate at Sydney. Vice-Consul Kwong Tonking had been involved in the discussions with Chongqing when the Union was established. Seamen of different grades were called as witnesses, along with shipping representatives and E V Elliott, the General Secretary of the Seamen’s Union of Australia.
Ferguson, whose personal interests ranged across Presbyterianism and his presidency of the Royal Australian Historical Society in 1942, was known among his Court colleagues as ‘something of a radical in his day’. It was clear to him that while the British-Chinese Agreement of 1942 benefited Chinese seamen, the discontent at wage level included the seamen whose articles had ended in Australia and who were seeking a new ship, as well as the men who had gone on strike to make their point. Stanley Wai, the Union’s Secretary and William Jong, Assistant Secretary declared the Union intention to reject employment on other than Australian terms and conditions. Ferguson interpreted his brief widely. Rather than focus on coastal shipping alone, he expanded the inquiry to the conditions among Chinese on any ship ‘based upon Australia and customarily signing on crews in Australian ports, though the voyage may be beyond Australian waters’. Several dozen ships were immediately implicated – those of British registration and those that sailed under the Norwegian, Dutch or other flags and operated under the close supervision of the Australian Government and British Ministry of Shipping. The recommendations of the inquiry would impact on all ships that carried Chinese seamen to and from Australia.

Steering clear of the allegations of ill-treatment of Chinese, or that imprisonment might be preferable to the working life of Chinese on some ships, Ferguson observed that men placed in ‘concentration camps’ or gaols were of little use to Australia’s war effort. With appropriate remuneration at sea and limitations on land-based employment, crews would return to their ships. Ferguson rejected the British case for abiding by the British-Chinese Agreement, and its implicit differentiations of Chinese and British seamen. First, any jealousy of Chinese by British seamen was irrelevant to his inquiry. Second, commonly-held preconceptions that worked against Chinese needed to be rebutted. Chinese were not of feeble constitutions and, therefore, lesser workers than English seamen. Lieutenant Morley of the RAN, called as an expert witness, attested that Chinese crews were often larger on British ships because their labour was cheaper, though interpreters and cooks added to the numbers on board. Nor could Chinese and their dependants necessarily live more cheaply than Europeans. In Australia and under famine conditions besetting much of China, a simple diet of pork, fish and rice, for example, was very costly, and Chinese men, too, had families to keep. Such racialised distinctions as were embedded in the case put by the British shipping interests had been held out for so long that they largely went unquestioned. Furthermore, with their homes occupied by the enemy, Chinese seamen were deemed Australian in the terms of the maritime laws that designated their ‘home port’. Indeed, the Australian Government obliged employers on land to pay Chinese according to local Awards. Chinese also faced similar war risks to other men on the sea and this, too, should be factored into their wage levels. For Ferguson, government officials, consular officers and Union leaders shared a responsibility that ‘serious attempts be made to study and provide for the comfort of Chinese seamen’. And a pay rise was warranted. Firemen, for example, paid some £21 per month under the British-Chinese Agreement, would receive £29/3/4 for a 12-month engagement, or less than a pound below the base rates for British or Australian seamen. The working week would be limited to 44 hours, after which overtime would accrue. Under these revised conditions, the supply of Chinese crews, with ‘the assistance of officials of the Seamen’s Union’, could be assured. All told, Ferguson concluded, the extra expense entailed would be justified by the ‘consequent gain in the tempo of effort’.

Ferguson had stopped short of recommending the equality the industrialists had sought. E V Elliott in his evidence advocated a general equality, and equal pay rates for Chinese. He had suggested that Australian Seamen would not object to living and working with Chinese. Nevertheless, Ferguson’s pay scales for Chinese incorporated a discount of one sixth from the Australian award levels, ostensibly to account for the necessary augmentation of Chinese crews by Chinese interpreters and cooks. Perhaps he was influenced by the British plea that equality would cause jealousies and unrest among white, British crews.

Minister Hsu Mo declared that he and the Union were satisfied with the proposed new wage scales, and no formal inter-government agreement was necessary. Ferguson’s recommendations were incorporated into a war-time regulation, the National Security (Chinese Seamen) Regulations, which were introduced on 17 December 1943. The shipping authorities considered the gains to the seamen as matters ‘undesirable to publicise’, and the detail was not spelt out in the Regulations. On the next day, an Order issued under the Regulations documented the new wages scale and an array of conditions for leave, war risk, and so on, and in similar terms to the entitlements of the Seamen’s Union of Australia. The Order also specified
a Commonwealth responsibility to pay wages and a sustenance allowance of eight shillings and six pence per day to men who were between ships. The seamen, in turn, would be obliged to accept land-based employment as directed.  

The Chinese Seamen Regulations lodged the agreement firmly within the industrial relations framework. A consultative role for the Union was specified and any disputes over interpretations of the agreement were to be referred to ‘the Industrial authority’. Any determination (such as the formal Order) was to be lodged with the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court, to become, in effect, ‘enforceable as if it were an Award’ (Clause 6(3)). If not the first formal industrial agreement that Chinese in Australia were party to, this was the first with nation-wide coverage. Indeed, in as much as the Union’s legitimacy arose from its status as a registered arm of the Chinese Government, albeit in a very loose connection, and the Ferguson rates applied to deep sea as well as coastal shipping, the agreement marks the creation of the first trans-national industrial agreement struck in Australia.

Some conclusions

The successes of the Chinese Seamen’s Union rested on the extraordinary efforts of its organisers; the curious political dynamics that legitimated its existence, and the mentorship of other Australian unionists. Elliott made it clear to Ferguson, ‘in camera’, that he had worked with William Jong on the development of the Union, while the Chinese communist newspaper, Hain Hua Jih Poh on 6 July 1943 praised E V Elliott’s efforts in assisting the Union. The connection between Chinese and Australian union leaders was not entirely new. In the 1920s Sam Wong, an associate of Jong and Wai and a founder of the first Australian Guomindang political organisation, had fostered ties with Jock Garden and other leading industrialists in the early 1920s, for example. However, the successes in 1943 clearly present the pinnacle of gains in both wages and working conditions for Chinese workers in Australia. The agreement also served to end the disputation over wages when vessels of all flags fell into line. Occupational and geographical mobility continued to mark out the working lives of both the seamen and other Chinese workers. In July 1943, all of the Melbourne Branch of the Seamen’s Union and the Brisbane membership of some 200 men were assigned to the US base at Ballimba, Queensland, to assist in the preparations for the invasion of the Phillipines. Most of the men at the mines in central Australia voluntarily enlisted with the US forces in November 1943. If the mining ventures met with mixed results, glowing references were provided to men with whom government officials had most contact. Thirteen of their number were posted to the south in January when they declined the Americans’ pay offer of some three to four times the prevailing wage rates. By early 1944, all Chinese with the AMF employment units were released from service, with the concurrence of the Consul-General, to work under American authority in shipping and on the docks at Brisbane and Townsville.

Chinese who arrived in Australia after 1940 never presented the sorts of threats to nation imagined by post-war politicians. They had proved to be exemplary workers: skilled, intelligent and remarkably adaptable to the shifting demands of the war effort. With the end to the war, so ended the pressing needs for Government regulation of Chinese working conditions. Most with interests elsewhere left Australia as the conclusion of hostilities and as available transport would allow. By the end of October 1946, no ships on the coast under Australian Commonwealth control were employing Chinese; nor were British ships taking on Chinese seamen at Australian ports – a retaliation at a campaign of the Chinese Seamen’s Union’s for 12-month engagements and Australian conditions on the China run. As ship owners petitioned for an early end to the Chinese Seamen Regulations, the Union urged their continued operation, while the Australian Government’s concern lay with its obligation to pay wages and sustenance to Chinese seamen when on shore, though no applications had been received. For its part, the Chinese government, a champion of trans-national organisation in 1943, was increasingly irrelevant to the advance of Chinese seamen’s welfare. The Legation at Canberra failed to respond to an official query about China’s intentions as to the future of the Regulations, and the Union’s campaigns over wages had effectively ended by 1949. The end to the war marked a return to the former pattern of industrial relations on the Australian coast – of a separation of wages and conditions in Australian coastal and deep-sea shipping, and the exclusion of ‘coloured’ labour from Australian shipping.
Endnotes


2. See, for example, National Archives of Australia [Hereafter NAA]: MP1103/1, 30, Chinese internees, 1942-57; MP742/1, 255/19/392, Chinese POW – release, 1943-50.

3. See, for example, NAA, C320, C9, Security Service, Internal Report, July 1944.


5. NAA: A659, 1944/1/4331, National Security Regulations, 1942-45. NAA: A816, 19/306/158. Army HQ, Corres, 1943, and War Cabinet Agendum, March 1943. The calculation of Chinese available for enlistment was a conservative one. 3,300 Chinese nationals were considered as subject to the Regulations. 75 per cent of these were over 45 years of age and 60 per cent of them could be eligible for exemption status, which left a pool of 300 for enlistment into the military.


7. See, for example, NAA: PP6/1, 1932/H/104, Correspondence, Security Service and Customs, 14 July 1943; and NAA: MP508/1, 240/714/31, Potato digging at Harvey [Western Australia] – Chinese labour, 1942; NAA: C320 P1, C9, Report of 2 July 1943.


11. NAA: C320P1, C9, Security Service Internal memo, 15 August 1941.

12. NAA: C320P1, C9, Liaison Officer to Director of Military Intelligence, Melbourne, 4 February 1942.


15. NAA: C320P1, C9, Correspondence, Commonwealth Security Service and Military Intelligence, 4 February 1942.

16. NAA: A981, CHIN 10, Boating Inspector’s Report, Security Service to Boating Inspector, Customs, 15 June 1942. A less formal body might have been in place by August 1941, when an approach came from Sydney to the Hong Kong seamen’s organisation for permission to establish a South Pacific branch of the Chinese Seamen’s Union. However, the Union had not come under the notice of Sydney port officers at that time.


18. NAA: C320P1, C9, Correspondence, Security Service, 3 February 1942.

19. NAA: A2998, 51/2783, Department of Interior, internal reports, February-March 1942.


22. The Articles of Association and Rules required a joining fee of £1 and annual fee of £2 for the employed. NAA: C320 P1, C9.


30. NAA: A1838, 494/5/1/1, Secretaries of Supply and Shipping and Attorney General’s Departments, 14 June, 1 October 1946.
Léontine Cooper to Rose Scott: the Queensland suffrage movement

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Women’s history in Queensland is still an understudied phenomenon. One hundred years on since white women won the vote in the Lower House, 40 years since Aboriginal people won the vote – and 35 years on since the resurgence in modern feminism and Australian women’s history, we still lack basic reference texts, basic biographies and fundamental studies. Take the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, for instance. Very few of our outstanding galaxy of suffrage women in Queensland have an entry, not May Jordan/McConnell the women’s union activist, not Agnes Williams the suffrage movement’s ablest orator, not Eleanor Trundle the popular Women’s Christian Temperance Union suffrage superintendent, and not Léontine Cooper. (Exceptions of course there are with the fiery Emma Miller who has her own biography.)

How far Léontine Cooper disappeared from the public gaze is rather phenomenal. No monument, no copies of her writings apart from in old newspapers, no copies of her suffrage newspaper the *Star* can be found, and this is significant, that is no copies at all. She is mentioned in Audrey Oldfield’s book on women suffrage¹ and Pam Young’s biography of Emma Miller² – but her writings, her scholarship are not mentioned in any Australian bibliography of literature that I have seen – except recently the electronic AustLit Gateway. Not by H.M. Green, not by Nettie Palmer, not Miller and McCartney nor Debra Adelaide. Other papers she wrote for have not survived – *The Early Closing Advocate, Flashes* – and neither have the minute books and records of the three organisations she was extremely active in -The Women’s Suffrage League, the Women’s Franchise League and the Pioneer Club.

In this paper I hope to explore further the life and contribution of Léontine Cooper to the struggle for the vote in Queensland – but it is in this context of paucity of sources, of lack of manuscripts, rather than the levels of life and meaning which we can only glimpse. The few letters to Rose Scott are real gems. Léontine Cooper a brilliant woman, a courageous woman, a woman who struggled with the great questions of her day, a woman who claimed a place in public discourse as a woman’s rights activist, a socialist, a social activist and writer. Perhaps the Catherine Helen Spence of Queensland? Few of us had heard of her until, with the centenary of suffrage in Queensland, it became obvious we had to undertake some work to fill this gap.³

Ellen Carol Dubois argues there are two reasons why the woman suffrage movements have so little history world wide.⁴ In the Australian context, the first issue – the claim that women did not fight for their own political equality has been soundly rebutted in Audrey Oldfield’s book subtitled *A Gift or A Struggle?*, which shows how the vote was won through the agency of its women. There were three main suffrage organisations in Queensland – the Women’s Equal Franchise Association, the Women’s Franchise League and the suffrage department of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The second unsubstantiated claim is that the woman suffrage movement was conservative (and bourgeois). It is in this context I want to discuss the nature of Cooper’s feminism. Apart from the outline of her life and work it is important to find out what she wrote about the suffrage movement and the women of Queensland, what were the claims she made for the vote for Queensland women, what was her role in the first women’s suffrage organisation that folded, the Women’s Suffrage League? Given her significant role in public debate, what was her construction of gender – and how did she construct women’s political identities? What did she say herself about the need for a separate organisation and why did she lead the breakaway group from the Women’s Equal Franchise Association? As the key spokesperson for the suffrage movement in Queensland – bridging radical political beliefs and an autonomous women’s movement did she call the conservative women to account and limit their sway? With her death in 1903, with the federal vote in 1902, how can we characterise the advent of maternal feminism and the specific anti-socialist stance of the women’s groups she once was instrumental in forming.
Is there another reason, too, especially in Queensland, for the limited interest in the earlier struggles of our suffragists? In Queensland where the racialism of the suffragists was the most explicit and aggressive, especially in those with close ties with the emergent Labor party. What of the racialising strategies employed by Cooper in her advocacy of the women’s vote, in her depiction of the pioneering community in Brisbane? Are her perceived silences partly our inability to locate her writings and are there any links, as in America, with the suffragists and the anti-slavery movement?

1871, the year Cooper and her husband emigrated to Brisbane was the year Charles Lilley first raised the issue of the right for women to vote in the Queensland parliament. He moved an amendment to allow women, and people of colour – including Aboriginal people to have the vote that was ‘Persons shall include females as well as males… [Queensland] should have the honor of being the first country under British rule to carry out this great priniciple’. In his discussion of the bill he spoke of the need to extend voting (property) rights to the Aboriginal men, Polynesian and Chinese. He had some support for the amendment that is 8 for, 17 against but it backfired badly, for once alerted, the Parliamentary majority ruled that Aboriginal men, Chinese and Polynesian men would be specifically excluded from the new electoral laws then being decided. It was to be nearly 100 years before this clause and its later variations was to be taken off the statute books. Cooper was to become a friend of Lilley, also Griffith and the William and Annie Lane.

By the 1880s Brisbane was, in many ways, a radical and advanced colonial city – with a range of social, political and intellectual activities and institutions. Before the days of the University of Queensland, a state library and when married women were actively discouraged from working as teachers in the public system, where might we expect a woman of Cooper’s intellect turn? Cooper wrote firstly fiction then political journalism, forging a very early role as public intellectual. She wrote essays and fiction for the colonial newspapers and became very active in the School of Arts, the Home Reading Union, the University Extension Lectures, the Brisbane Literary Circle and so on. That much we know.

A major break came in the research on Cooper when we discovered her pseudonym – Onyx. Onyx is a gemstone with alternating black and white parallel bands, used as a gemstone, a variety of calcite used as an ornamental stone. Of course she used a pseudonym as a woman in the nineteenth century and it seems more than ever likely that she was a prolific writer and that she worked for a living. While we still have no way yet of accessing what she wrote for the Courier, during the 1870s, 1880s, 1890s or other pseudonyms she may have used, we have re-found several novels of varying lengths – ‘Divers Ways’ a long novel, and shorter novels ‘Off the Beaten Track’, ‘Ianthe’s Vision, Forearmed/Forewarned’, ‘Lady Help or Christmas at Sunny Vale’ and ‘Marcia’ – all serialised in The Queenslander during the 1880s. There are also some 15 essays all published using the pseudonym Onyx. Throughout them is her deep and delighted awareness of the environment, and compassion and involvement with the animal kingdom – that is the domestic animal kingdom, although some of the local fauna do get a mention.

One extremely witty and astringent essay discourses on the difference between the general and the particular, another takes issue with a professor to discuss the natural repulsion of the sexes and the inevitable natural superiority of women. In a further essay she compares the nature of the male and female of the human species on the physical, intellectual and moral planes:

In conclusion, we find that in physical and mental powers woman has to give place to man; but in moral force she claims superiority, and also in the influence which the one sex wields over the fortunes of the other. It is the unacknowledged consciousness of inferiority in this last respect that no doubt prompted the well-known reply to the question, ‘What is the chief end of woman?’ It was the spirit of impotent revenge that inspired the answer, ‘To surprise man!’

Elsewhere Onyx asked do men improve with age? She wrote about marriage, married people, the cost of a kiss, our bush life, names, dogs and noses.

The extent of and range of Cooper’s writing we have discovered from the 1880s reaffirms the view that she was the spokesperson for the women’s movement in Brisbane – and while we need to see the women’s suffrage movement as an international/ transnational one drawing on inspiration and ideas from America and Britain, in Brisbane she was one of the key intellectuals and claimed the right to speak on behalf of Queensland women. At the cusp of the emergence of the suffrage groups in the late 1880s, Cooper published three important pieces of political journalism, of feminist theory if you will
– on women’s wrongs, on women’s work and on women’s unions – in the Boomerang. As I have shown previously Cooper believed that women ‘now demand that she should be considered as an individual’ and not considered only in the character of wife. The laws failed to protect women and violence against them was widespread. Women were also actually oppressed by the law. The lack of property rights denied her ‘the absolute right to the fruit of her own labour’. Cooper argued that the crux of women’s exclusion was the lack of women’s right to vote. Invariably ‘power’ legislated in its own interests. She based her analysis on parallels with electoral reform in Great Britain and the enfranchisement of the working classes.

Cooper drew on concepts of citizenship more akin to those of post-revolutionary France than Britain. The demand for woman suffrage arose in France in the 1860s framed as an issue of political rights. France the country, where during the Revolution of 1789, women called for not only that women be represented by women in the National Assembly – but that women have their own separate and parallel assembly. Cooper, in ‘Woman’s Work’, discussing the middle class woman’s ‘invincible right’ as a citizen of the state ‘to labour and to enjoy the fruits of that labour’ made very early clear and well argued demands for equal pay for equal work.

The 1880s saw the increase in women’s participation in the paid industrial labour force and consolidation of the family wage economy (that is rather than artisan household economy). The belief that women reduced the price of labour by accepting lower rates, that women undercut men, was widespread among of the labour movement in Queensland (just as the parallel belief that ‘black labour undercut white wages.) Cooper believed it was a ‘glaring injustice and inequality to suppose men support a family and women only herself’. ‘Is not man’s sense of justice large enough and strong enough to allow her to come and work by his side and fight, not against her, but against the system which robs the labourer of his share in the wealth he creates, and so, by the fierceness of competition, prevents either from earning more than a bare pittance’, she asked. It was a position she reiterated again and again. She was well aware of Marx’s theory of surplus value.

Her writings articulate an important strand of feminism. She claimed the individual’s right to citizenship and the right to vote was based in the individual’s right to work and to economic independence (the fruits of their own labour). As women made an economic contribution to the community, they should have the right to vote. A case could be made that these three articles on women’s wrongs, unions and work were powerful manifestos, strong calls to the women of Brisbane to take up the issue of their rights.

The social changes and political upheavals in family, work and place that white women faced through emigration to the colonies in the last half of the century led to widespread questioning about the nature of women, their role and their function. ‘There is no question more perplexing at the present time and more frequently discussed than women’s place in society’ Cooper reported. The demands for women’s rights cut across many aspects of life – our focus here is on the specific sections of the movement focusing on women’s suffrage rights. Cooper was possibly secretary for the first shortlived Women’s Suffrage League. They declared at their second meeting:

They were not called upon to adopt the attitude of ‘soldiers’ preparing for battle with a feeling of doubt regarding the issue, but rather to recognize the fact that the Parliamentary franchise – an agency by which women would largely benefit themselves and help to make the world better – was gradually and surely coming within their reach.

Some of the achievements of the League are known – that is their lobbying for a private members bill on suffrage, on married women’s property rights (successfully) and their concern with the Contagious Diseases Act and the age of consent which was twelve. Earlier I have shown how the League was under intense attack by William Lane in the Boomerang accusing them of asking for the property vote but this was unfounded ‘as the platform of the league is simply to obtain the extension to women of the Parliamentary franchise’. Women in Brisbane had the right to vote for Divisional Boards on a property basis; with the Married Women’s Property Rights about to become legal a further number of propertied women would be included. Cooper’s addressed the League – obviously issued as a press release as the report is verbatim in two different newspapers:

I will endeavour to formulate as concisely as possible our position. We, the members of the league, claim a personal vote for every woman over the age of 21, who has resided in an electoral district for the space of six months. We claim it in virtue of our citizenship, we claim it because we are amenable to the laws… and we claim it because we pay our share of the taxes.
Within another year the Women’s Suffrage League had dissipated.

The Intercolonial Congress of Trade Unions in 1891 voted against supporting female suffrage, and women were kept out of the men’s unions and other trades. The Labor Federation believed the fight for one man one vote was more important than the women’s vote, which was a secondary issue. ‘Women must stand aside and wait’, ‘women are in the way’ called the Boomerang in late 1891, and the woman who wrote this was actually a member of the Council of the Woman Suffrage League.16 ‘No political movement yet among the Queensland women. All are quiet and supine’,17 reported Cooper in the Dawn. There had been ‘a spate of resignations of the more active members’ of the League.18 It is not clear from Cooper’s reports as to whom she was referring. Were the radical women of the labour movement acquiescing? Did she herself resign?

Cooper hoped that the ‘women’s unions in different parts of Queensland would take up the Suffrage Question’, and that this might prove the way forward for women, since ‘the question of the vote is an economic one’.19 Women’s Unions were formed in Brisbane, Charters Towers, Hughenden, Townsville and Blackall. The Australian Labour Federation then attempted to organise women making each trade form its own union with some success. Her eloquent letters to the editor frequently graced the pages of the Courier. Occasionally they were a prompt response to a leader, as for instance in 1893 when the editor had advocated lower wages for women and girls to encourage them to return to the fold of domesticity and escape the perils of prostitution. On this issue of social purity, Cooper found his reasoning strange and argued that women had no choice in the matter and that they must work that they might eat. ‘Let the men give the women fairplay’ she cried.

Cooper’s main attack was on the white male union movement as an expression of ‘the old conservative hatred of allowing women to do any work outside their homes. This, in a country so progressive as Queensland would be surprising, if we did not know that the cruellest opponents of women’s work are those of the new unionism’.20 Cooper named a number of unions in trades eminently suited to women workers where the men would not admit the women, nor even share the work when women were paid at the same rate, and through her work on the Royal Commission into working conditions she knew it was a matter of health and life and death for some women. Cooper believed that women should be able to join the unions representing their labour and that workers should regard themselves as a class independent of sex. So strong was her sense of the betrayal by the labour movement, she wrote, ‘women, as women, would be justified if they went for the property vote’.

By late 1893 the woman suffrage movement re-emerged in Queensland. Cooper was an acknowledged and outspoken spokesperson. She chaired the provisional committee which prepared resolutions to be put to the next public meeting which she spoke at. It was at this meeting that the women’s suffrage movement split over strategy – whether to work for one adult one vote, or votes for women on the same condition as men (then a property vote). Cooper spoke at the next public meeting and was elected vice-president. She resigned soon afterwards because she believed the struggle for universal male suffrage might delay women’s enfranchisement.21 She and 29 others formed a breakaway group, the Women’s Franchise League.

So we have the two secular women’s groups organising in Queensland – different in broad principles. Always it is difficult when only working from conservative newspaper accounts. The Courier at the time was against women’s suffrage. We might expect they would focus on the antagonism between the two groups. Again we can draw on Ellen Dubois, we can see the fierce battles between Cooper and Miller, between the Women’s Franchise League and the Women’s Equal Franchise Association as an expression of the dialectical situation of social feminism, of the shifting and unstable but distinct and authentic political territory it occupied. More recently Claire Moore has commented on the diversity of women’s groups in common cause as extremely valuable catering for differences between women, especially in class.22

The Women’s Franchise League, that is the organisation with Cooper as president, was to continue through to the turn of the century. The object of the WFL was to ‘secure the parliamentary franchise for women on the same conditions as it is or may be granted to men’.23 With their careful wording WFL were not advocating the property vote but, rather, any kind of vote for women. Regular meetings were held through 1894, and reported for a brief while in the press. They elected a council and executive.
Cooper claimed that, unlike WEFA who were backed by the Worker, WFL members had ‘nothing but our tongues, which all men know is but a feeble weapon’. Cooper believed in strategies of solidarity among women. She was to reiterate her claim that when women had political power, no matter on what basis or terms, they would fight for the cause of their fellow women, irrespective of class or creed. Unlike WEFA who allowed men back into the organisation, we can assume men were not accepted as members with full voting rights and that the association was ‘non party’. The Star, Cooper’s suffrage paper was published from 1894 to 1895 for one penny each and when that folded because Cooper had a disagreement with her co-editor, no other paper, including the Worker, appears to have publicised their activities so it becomes very hard to trace their activities and even their continued existence.

Cooper was a socialist, but what kind of socialist and what do we mean? A close friend spoke of her as brought up under the principles and views of Rousseau and was naturally, all her life a confirmed Socialist. Intellectually we might place Cooper in a tradition of French socialism, especially in context of her work on Victor Hugo. She was familiar with Marx’s theory of surplus value and Bellamy’s Looking Backwards. The useful working distinction between the socialist women’s suffragism and the bourgeois variant is not, in Queensland, as usually supposed that between those advocating one adult one vote and those advocating votes for women on the same conditions as men. More useful are the distinctions between those who recognised the increasing public character of women’s labour had to be matched by an equally public political role.

Regional and suburban suffrage groups were being spontaneously formed all through the 1890s. Representatives from the three strands of the women’s suffrage movement – that is the two secular groups WEFA and WFL – and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, were asked to speak often in the initial public meetings. Cooper appeared on platforms alongside the leaders of WEFA and the WCTU. In 1895, when the Sherwood branch opened with a public meeting the 12 speakers included Cooper, Miller, Trundle, and Moginie. Other attempts were made at co-operation between the three main groups – in 1895 a proposed joint meeting fell through. Cooper told Rose Scott men friends advised against it – ‘as they were all too much occupied with the elections to speak for us or take any notice of us. A monster meeting after the Elections was decided on, but nothing has been done’. Emma Miller had been to see Cooper about the meeting – and there was an exchange of angry letters to the paper.

When Rose Scott wrote to Cooper in 1898 and asked her what the Women’s Suffrage League had achieved Cooper’s reply is very telling.

That action so far as The Women’s Suffrage League is concerned has been nil. The Labour people have monopolized the little work that has begun.

Cooper was an astute if tart commentator. She then went on to record those achievements that we might not now recognise as achievements of the women’s movement – that is of the first practising medical doctor in Brisbane, the appointment of a woman as inspector, women in various paid employment such as the intake of women into the public service when allowed to sit for the entrance exam for the first time, and more. When Cooper visited Sydney, she spent the day with Rose Scott whose ‘non-party’ vision was of a united polity of women citizens working to improve the position of women. Their intermittent correspondence was to continue.

The WFL remained a relatively small group of women we think – or did it disappear altogether for a bit? Cooper continued to find an outlet in letters to the editor, but she no longer included President of the WSL below her name. She continued to be concerned about working conditions and pay of women and girls. In a long letter on seats for shop assistants her assumed audience was clearly middle class women. In an issue that needs to come before the public again Cooper wrote of how, despite legislation, the health of women serving in shops was being ruined as they were standing all day. Women needed an ‘espirit de corps’ and ‘spirit de sexe’ for public opinion was even stronger than legislation. By 1898 she was furious. In an outspoken letter she pointed out that a deputation to the current Premier was a mere waste of time, given that the government was ‘representatives of the rich landed proprietors and captains of industry who successively grasped power on the overthrow of feudalism’. On the specific issue of early closing (a very different perspective than that of today) the state was a merciless employer. In her letters she scattered figures about the franchise – such as that out of the population of 469,559 only 86,933 had voting rights.
A constant concern was for the education of girls – and their higher education. Cooper was voicing the opinion of several ladies she said when she wrote of the case of Miss Bourne show had prepared for the University Exhibition exam at the Brisbane Boys Grammar School as a precedent rather than an exception. Later that year in 1896 she made a plea for a university, the presence of an educational centre, would give a much needed impetus to the intellectual life of the city. When a committee was set up to establish a commemoration after the death of Queen Victoria she wanted the women of Brisbane to boycott it, for none were included on the committee; the policy of the same omission of women widespread pointed to further instances.

Cooper had long believed in the importance of debate and discussion. In 1899 she was instrumental in setting up the Pioneer Club for women only. It evolved from a Dinner Club/Ladies Club set up the previous year and the custom of five minute speeches, where members drew questions from a hat then spoke to them, was to continue. Cooper was its first president, and the members included Dr Lillian Cooper, the first woman doctor to practise in Brisbane. Eliza Fewings, who had stood up to the Trustees of Brisbane Girls’ Grammar School when they sacked her for her strong belief in girls’ education, and went off to found her school, was one of the vice-presidents. Another was Mrs R.H. Roe wife of the headmaster of the Boys Grammar School. In May 1899 the opening of the club was celebrated with a conversazione, when between 60 and 70 members and guests attended. As a social support club for women intellectuals, its focus was wide and general. The club rooms were open to members throughout the day and in the evening. At Cooper’s suggestion, discussion and papers were presented at fortnightly meetings – ‘Debate nights – alternating with lighter amusements – Frivol nights.’ The club thrived – by late 1899 it had over 100 members. With a balcony overlooking the Courier office, on the night of the referendum on federation, interest was so great that night’s debate was cancelled. Usually, the inexorable Cooper, in the chair, enforced the rules of debate with a firm and gentle ruling. Members were being trained to speak in public and getting used to it. Again we have a vital letter from Cooper to Rose Scott about the nature of the Pioneer Club where Cooper speaks of her intention to bring women workers in touch, but how the club was ‘only developing socially’.

By 1900 the Women’s Franchise League emerges again. Newspaper reports suggest its continued existence when Cooper is quoted as president of it in a delegation to the Premier, a different Premier, with Miller and Trundle representing WEFA and the WCTU, among others. In August after a furore of anti-suffragism, her two long eloquent letters on Women’s franchise were published as president of the league.

In 1902, with the introduction of the voting rights for women on the federal level, political parties found themselves addressing women as political actors for the first time. Acting on the assumption that women were politically different from men, they sought to define women’s political interests. In 1903 the year Cooper died prematurely, it was the Pioneer Club, not the Women’s Franchise League that co-operated with the other women suffrage groups to form the conservative and explicitly anti-socialist Queensland’s Women’s Electoral League to address women’s entry into the polity. Many of the Pioneer Club members were participants in this new ‘non-party’ body formed in part to articulate what they assumed to be female interests by invoking a set of ‘women’s issues’ – political and economic rights, maternity, religion, social welfare and so on in the construction of women’s political identities. (Labor women formed the Working Women’s Political Association with the same purpose). Rose Scott, invited by QWEL visited Queensland on a lecture tour –Brisbane, Gympie, Maryborough and Bundaberg, Ipswich, Toowoomba and Warwick arguing the importance of steering clear of ‘all party politics and sectarianism’ expressing surprise at the property vote, but also meeting with the other suffrage groups. In 1905 the Pioneer Club housed a meeting of delegates to form the National Council of Women in Queensland. Socialist and labour women’s groups held back from involvement in this national body – and it was that year that WEFA held a party, when the vote for the lower house was won for white women, to dissolve itself.

Both men’s and women’s work were also redefined in the refashioning of existing discourses to construct the female voter. Susan Magarey finds that, after the vote, in the realignments of capital and labour, in the accommodations reached between the two warring sections in the first decades of the twentieth
century, the nature and value of gendered work changed. The kind of work women did was mostly marked off from the paid economy confined to the unpaid domestic sphere. Women’s access to forms of relationships that were contractual as distinct from feudal (marriage or domestic service as Cooper once argued) were limited. Non-party feminism was often aligned with political conservatism and recognition of Cooper’s strand of feminism grounded in an understanding of labour was undercut.

Cooper’s radical analysis of women’s labour, of the importance of women organising separately for electoral reform, of the importance of the women’s vote, of women’s unionism and the possibility of solidarity among women is compelling. Hers was not the more typical form of liberal or utopian or even maternal feminism. She did not argue women’s rights in terms of any unique contribution as mothers or homemakers; she continually challenged the society who thought it not ‘womanly’ or ‘nice’ to be concerned about wider politics. Her journalism is amazingly eloquent when contrasted with that of her contemporaries.

Why has Cooper’s outspoken contribution to intellectual and political life in Australia been so overlooked? Cooper was not a conservative woman. Her challenge to the middle-class women may have tempered the conservatives among them. She constructed a radical political identity for women to represent themselves as women of ‘advanced thinking’. The challenge in understanding a woman of Cooper’s calibre is in her capacity to both compete in the conservative press to make a living, and to confront prevailing paradigms. Her readers, her audience, her students were the general populace and in Cooper we can see Gramsci’s ‘organic’ intellectual at work. None of her writings, that we have located, have been published in book form and it is time they were.

Endnotes

3. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of several others – notably Joan Keating of the AustLit Gateway, Carole Ferrier, Pam Young, Tom Watson and Robert Thompson.
5. Courier, 1871.
7. ‘There Is Nothing So Queer As Folks’, *Queenslander*, 9 July 1887.
8. ‘Men and Women’, *Queenslander*, 9 April 1887.
23. *Courier*, 17 April 1894.
27. L. Cooper to Rose Scott, 20 May 1898, Scott Family Papers, vol. 12, 1877-1899, ZA2271, item 280, ML, thanks to David Pollock.


33. Cooper to Rose Scott, Scott Family Papers, 12 June 1898, vol. 12, 1877-1899, ZA2271 item 679, ML.

34. *Courier*, 13 October 1903.

Annie Lane, ‘Lucinda Sharpe’: first wave feminism and utopian socialism

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Under the pseudonym ‘Lucinda Sharpe’, the feminist and utopian socialist, Annie Lane, wrote regular columns in the Queensland press between 1885 and 1892. Born Anne Mary Errington McQuire in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1863, from a young age Annie was forced to fend for herself and to provide for her young sister. By 1882 she was working in a Chicago newspaper office. The following year she met and married a young English immigrant and journalist, William Lane. In early 1885 Annie, William, their infant daughter, Nellie, and Annie’s younger sister, Eleanor, sailed to England. After a few weeks stay they re-embarked for Brisbane with William’s younger brother, John. The Lane party arrived in Brisbane on board the immigrant ship, Quetta on 29 June 1885.

William Lane quickly made a place for himself in the Queensland labour movement and in Australian history. Through first The Boomerang and then The Worker he successfully promoted a utopian socialist critique of colonial capitalism. He became the leading ideologue of the labour movement, basing his ideas on an idealised understanding of the character of the Australian bush worker. For Billy Lane, as he was widely known, the millennium and peace on Earth were soon to be achieved though the mateship which was inherent in the Australian trade union movement. But with the failure of the big strikes of 1890-91 he organised the New Australia Cooperative Settlement Association and in July 1893 he and Annie and their four young children led some 400 settlers to found a utopian colony in Paraguay.

In historical accounts of the period, Annie appears only as an accessory to her famous husband. This is due to the failure of historians to realise that it was Annie, not Billy, who wrote the long-running ‘Lucinda Sharpe’ columns in the Brisbane press. In 1891 Billy revealed the pseudonyms under which he had written during his stay in Brisbane: ‘Sketcher’, ‘Bystander’ and ‘John Miller’. Nowhere did he claim to be ‘Lucinda Sharpe’, yet many historians have attributed these columns to him. But there is ample evidence, derived from a careful reading of the ‘Lucinda Sharpe’ columns, that it was Annie who wrote these columns.

This paper offers a critical assessment of Annie Lane’s feminism and her utopian socialism. The paper concludes that Annie’s feminism and her utopian socialism were in complete harmony – that they were, in fact, two complementary expressions of the same critique of colonial society.

First wave feminism

In Creating A Nation (1994) Patricia Grimshaw observes that first wave feminists ‘stressed motherhood even more than wifehood as the core of women’s claims’. In her 2001 book, Passions of the First Wave Feminists, Susan Magarey confirms Grimshaw’s analysis and adds that first wave feminists were engaged in ‘a discourse which positioned women primarily as women, as members of a sex, rather than primarily as, say middle class or working class, English or Scottish, Catholic or Protestant’. Moira Rayner neatly summarises these observations: the best definitions of feminism ‘emphasise the different life experiences that women have … We [women] want to become what we potentially are, to develop our full human personalities’.

There were a variety of reasons for late-nineteenth century women becoming feminists. These range from a rejection of organised religion, to involvement in millenarian churches, to a commitment to the labour movement. For still others the impetus was the ‘harsh patriarchal world of the frontiers of settlement’.

Creating A Nation enumerates the issues of concern to first wave feminists: dress reform, secondary and university education for women, the franchise, ‘the acceptance of women as waged professionals’, men’s excessive use of alcohol (and its consequences), and revision of the divorce laws and property rights. Many feminists saw legal reform as just one aspect of the emancipation of women. These women launched ‘a challenge to the consciousness of men about their dominance of women, socially, physically and sexually’.
In *Debutante Nation*, Susan Magarey argues that one of the main issues concerning first wave feminists was ‘sexual labour’—that is, ‘the marriage bed as a site of struggle’. Magarey argues that in the 1890s feminists launched a ‘counter-discourse’ which cast marriage as a means of escape from poverty, and as no less exploitative and degrading than prostitution. In the same book Susan Sheridan argues that a further aspect of the emancipation of sexual labour was that feminists focussed ‘on male rather than female sexuality as problematic, as the subject of public scrutiny and reform’. In *Getting Equal*, Marilyn Lake concurs: ‘In the eyes of the nineteenth century Woman Movement, Australian masculinity was a problem. In order for women to become autonomous and self-determining, men would need to change their ideas about what it was to be a man; they would have to become more like ideal women’.

Annie Lane, in her guise as Lucinda Sharpe, fits the feminist mould: she saw women’s role as mothers as entitling them to political, economic and social equality; while her feminism was coloured by a commitment to the trade union movement, she embraced all the issues common to first-wave feminists; and she articulated a clear understanding of the origins and ramifications of ‘sexual labour’ in marriage, and of the need for men to change the way in which they dealt with women. Annie Lane was all of this—and she was more.

In 1992 Audrey Oldfield’s study of the movement for women’s suffrage in Australia employed such terms as ‘public sphere’ and ‘private sphere’ feminism, ‘domestic’, ‘expediency’ and ‘social’ feminism. Ten years later Susan Magarey also identified a number of different feminisms: ‘socialist-feminist’, ‘liberal-feminist’, ‘radical-feminist’, ‘post-structuralist feminist’, ‘post-modernist feminist’, ‘post-colonial feminist’, ‘second wave’ and ‘third wave’ feminism. Magarey notes that all are legitimate expressions and understandings of feminism, because feminism ‘is a politics and therefore inevitably takes elements from the contexts in which such politics are being played out’. This paper will demonstrate that the political context of Annie Lane’s life in late-colonial Brisbane gave rise to yet another form of feminism, a form we might identify as ‘millenarian’, or ‘utopian socialist’ feminism.

These were turbulent years. In 1885 the first Brisbane Trades and Labour Council emerged from the Eight Hours Day movement and the local craft unions. By the late 1880s the organised labour movement faced a prolonged and well orchestrated attack on its very existence. After some initial wins in strikes by Brisbane bootmakers and by shearers at Jondaryan Station on the Darling Downs, the disastrous Maritime Strike of 1890 and the Shearers’ Strike of the following year resulted in the near-annihilation of organised labour in Queensland. At the same time, the TLC experienced internal ructions which resulted in its dissolution and replacement with the Australian Labour Federation. By the time of the inaugural meeting of the ALF General Council in August 1890, the Federation, then heavily under the influence of Annie’s husband, Billy Lane, had become a vehicle for the realisation of utopian socialism.

While few of Annie’s columns contain any comment on the great industrial events of the day, they are nevertheless informed by those events to the extent that Annie’s conception of feminism is entirely consistent with an understanding of utopian socialism. Indeed, through Annie Lane’s pen, the two ‘isms’ coalesce around the same issue: the distribution of property and privilege in colonial society. As a feminist this issue expressed itself as a concern with the transcendence of the barriers between men and women and hence with such causes as the female franchise and the property rights of married women. As a utopian socialist, this same issue was manifest as an emphasis on voluntary cooperation as a means to transcend the ‘artificial’ barriers between capital and labour, on collective ownership.

The first of the ‘Lucinda Sharpe’ columns appeared in the satirical newspaper, *Figaro*, within three weeks of the Lanes’ landing in Brisbane. The columns took the form of a letter from Lucinda to her friend, Kittie, in Chicago. The columns maintained this format until Lucinda moved to *The Worker* in 1890, when the letter format was abandoned. In her first column the 22 year old Annie tells us who she is: ‘I’m American, I am, if I have married an Englishman. The Yankee of it fairly oozes out of me. I believe in the equality of man, the forty-fifth amendment—I guess that’s the number—the future of Chicago, the eternity of the Union and the superiority of the female sex’. This set the tone for the articles which were to appear over the next seven years: democracy, republicanism, the equality (or, indeed, the ‘superiority’) of women, and ‘women’s’ issues more generally were to be her themes. As a vehicle to carry such a didactic load, Annie presented her columns as an objective appraisal of life in Brisbane, but with a satirical, even humorous, voice. Her articles ran under the heading, ‘As Others See Us: A Yankee Girl’s Impressions of the Sunny South’.
Motherhood

Motherhood is at the heart of Annie Lane’s feminism: ‘… all that is good and true and tender in us comes from the mother in us … maternity by its very pain and peril, sweetened by hope and softened by a vague uncertain love for a new life which is ours, is like a fiery ordeal …’

In February 1886 Lucinda wrote to Kitty on the birth of her first child: ‘[I] am different – transmogrified, as it were, never again a thoughtless girl, but, oh! ever so much happier as a woman’. The Sharpes called their new son Valentine, because he was born on Valentine’s Day. While this was Lucinda’s first child, it was, in fact, an acknowledgement of the birth of Annie’s second daughter, Elsie. Lucinda maintained the fiction that she had just one child until she began writing for The Worker in March 1890, when she began to talk of her ‘children’ or, indeed, of her ‘nestful’ of babies.

We know that during her Brisbane years, Annie gave birth to four children. Another was born in Paraguay and two more in New Zealand after the Paraguayan experiment had failed. By 1917, at the time of Billy’s death, Annie had one son and five daughters – three other children had already died, two in childhood and one at Gallipoli.

In a moving and eerily prescient piece, in July 1886 Lucinda wrote of the death of a neighbour’s infant child who faded away ‘like a lily that the wind has broken’. She empathises strongly with the child’s young mother:

I used to see her crying gently through the open window, and once, do you know, I saw her sobbing on her knees, praying with her hands uplifted and her head buried in the baby’s pillows so that nobody should hear her in her frenzy. … She was so young, younger than me; her baby was all she had, and I had seen its little life and knew how she love it. … Oh, Kittie! if mine went too, as it might go! Oh what should I do? what should I do?

In February 1888, she imagines the death of her two-year-old son:

I could imagine my life without the Valentine, never to kiss his little mouth or to hush his baby woes. And to go out to his little grave and feel that there his little hands and feet were lying stiff and cold and to take up the book I’d marked for him that he’d never read and to put his things away in a box, as I’d seen a poor young mother do, to keep as a souvenir of the days gone for ever.

Annie’s second child, Elsie, died of ‘convulsions’ in 1889, aged three.

A corollary to Annie’s assessment of motherhood was her disparaging of the women whom she referred to as ‘blue stockings’: ‘I prefer the woman that prays [but note her disdain for organised religion] to the blue-stocking that shrieks with glee whenever she hears a strong freethought hit’. At the theatre, Lucinda watched with contempt a ‘blue-stocking’ who ‘leant on the arm of a weary, meek-looking little man who looked as though he minded the babies while she trotted round and had good times’. The explanation for this disdain lies in Annie’s preoccupation with motherhood – the ‘bluestockings’ do not mother their own babies; such women do not value the trait which Annie holds to be the fundamental characteristic of the feminist.

Men

A critique of the prevailing relationship between men and women flows easily from this understanding of feminism. Such a critique allows for a reassessment of the role of the family home, and of those who maintain it: ‘It is the women who are the housekeepers and men only do part of the work when they earn enough to buy mere food and clothes’. Ideally, the home was to be occupied by a husband and wife:

I think any one of [the immigrant girls now arriving in the colony] can do better work for Queensland, in a single year as the wife of a sturdy artisan or selector, than she could if she spent a whole lifetime as a scullery maid … Oh! yes; I believe in getting married. It is one of the very few things that is nice, without being at the same time naughty.

But this did not mean that women were to be confined to the home. To a female friend, Lucinda advocates the use of female doctors. Her friend responds: ‘Women doctors … Really, Lucinda you’ll be proposing women butchers and men house servants soon. Don’t you want women to drive cabs and go as sailors?’ And Lucinda replies ‘If they can, I don’t see why they shouldn’t’.
She was quick to identify the law as a limitation on women’s ability to realise this potential. Under the law, she wrote, ‘we [women] are still … a miserable consignment of goods and chattels … We are things of no account in the modern state … What else can we do but look as nice as we can and keep house?’

Indeed, as for so many feminists of her era, Annie identified legal reform as being of the highest priority. She proposed, for instance, that divorce, which was readily available to women in the United States but difficult to arrange in Brisbane, should be the means by which women could guarantee their freedom.

And in order to maximise women’s potential, they should seek education both within and outside the home. Commenting on the drudgery of domestic duties, Lucinda cites the need for outside stimulation through the theatre and conversation, and through reading. She herself had recently read Crime and Punishment, Anna Karenina, Looking Backward, and Robert Elsmere. On a government plan to build a university in Brisbane she commented that ‘only in knowledge is there true happiness … We used to laugh at our “blue stocking” mates, but they have the laugh at us now’, because they have an education, and can therefore ‘keep pace with their husbands … It isn’t only a cook and a room mate that woman should be. She will never be man’s equal or companion till she has knowledge …’

The female franchise

Lucinda refers to her husband, Charlie, as ‘the nominal holder of our vote’. This succinctly sums up Annie’s attitude to the female franchise: she was quite sure that she was equally well informed and equally entitled to vote as was her husband, or any man.

She argues against the case, held by certain female acquaintances, that only women with property should be entitled to the vote – rather, she points to her status as a responsible adult, and especially as a parent, as qualifying her for the vote. And when Billy proposes that votes for women could only reasonably be sought after the labour movement had won the right to one-man-one-vote, Annie had this to say:

it seems to me that we are left out in the cold and that one-man is nursing himself as usual over the fire and leaving one-woman, also as usual, to bring in the wood. It might not be very wise but it would be very much nicer if one-man put his arm round one-woman’s waist and said out straight that they’d have one-vote together or not at all … Just why one-woman shouldn’t have one vote as well as one-man – you can take this any way you like – is one of those things which this particular woman could never make out.

Sexual labour

Annie tacitly condoned couples living together without being ‘booked and ringed’ – the important thing, she said, is love, not convention. She saw that the problem with marriage was that too many women married for the wrong reasons, namely to avoid having to work for the appalling wages then available to women. She had a particular sympathy for working class women, for charwomen, sewing girls, shop girls, all of whom were clearly overworked and underpaid. But women’s problems would not end with marriage as most married women ‘put in seventeen hours out of the twenty-four and get nothing for it whatever but board and clothes’.

Although Annie did not use the term ‘sexual labour’, this was clearly the way she understood the state of marriage for a large number of her contemporaries. But she also provided her readers with evidence that things could be different. Of her earlier life in the US she wrote: ‘We Chicago girls earned our own living and considered it the proper thing to do. And there were lots of things for willing girls – telegraphing and telephoning, proof-reading, type-writing, copying, a hundred things, enough to suit every taste. A girl … could be independent and respectable, and that meant a lot’. Indeed it did: a job which brought independence and respectability would allow a young woman to avoid having to enter into marriage, and into ‘sexual labour’, against her will.

Annie repeatedly made the case for the payment of fair wages to women. She argued, for instance, that the appallingly low wages of women and girls was ‘a meaner wrong than…the denial of the franchise’ – because poor wages forced women to sell their bodies, and thereby to prostitute their motherhood, in order to live.
Given the absence of fair wages for women, and the likelihood that this situation would not soon change, women should have easy access to divorce so as to allow them a way out of unwanted sexual labour. However, as Annie wrote, the conservative English establishment in Brisbane ‘wont let the colonies loosen the absurd matrimonial arrangement which leads to all those humiliating inconsistencies and which are making very many practically ignore the law altogether’.47

Indeed, since the 1850s the law in Queensland and the other colonies had allowed divorce on unequal terms – men could divorce on the basis of a single adulterous act by their wife, whereas women had to prove repeated adultery and cruelty. Legislative changes in NSW in 1889 and Victoria in 1890 introduced more equitable laws,48 but Queensland lagged sadly behind.49

None of this is to suggest that Annie was in any way prudish about the physical aspects of love and marriage – far from it. Indeed, in the context of the late Victorian era, she might have been considered profligate. She wrote that a woman ‘can lay down the law by a judicious system of coaxing at home’,50 that most women ‘don’t understand what power there is in banged hair, bright ribbons, scent, and smiles’,51 and, indeed, that women ‘carry victory in our pocket – the only times we fail is when we are excited and forget in which particular fold or our dress our pocket is placed’!52

**Utopian socialism**

Lucinda knows a married woman who is ‘forewoman in a big Brisbane dressmaking shop … She earns £5 a week and she can get all [her housework] done for a pound-note’, so that she can relax with her husband and family after her day’s work. ‘She is as good as a man and has as good a time and I’d like somebody whose brain is bigger than a hen’s to explain why she shouldn’t’. As for the poor wages she pays to her housekeeper – rather than the current rate of two shillings a day, or one and a half pence an hour, the forewoman should pay (the very high rate of) 1s an hour. This, says Lucinda, would mean that even well-paid working women couldn’t afford a servant girl, but domestic chores could then be organised communally – ‘all meals sent in ready cooked from big cook kitchens as bread is sent in cooked from the bakeries now’, and all domestic cleaning could be done by contractors ‘who did the housemaid work for a whole street’, while children could be looked after in day nurseries.53 In the following issue of *The Worker*, Lucinda was forced to respond to criticism of her ideas, especially the idea that meals should be cooked in a ‘factory’: ‘The bakery is factory business, as you’d call it. I s’pose you’d think me a better wife if I baked bread more and read books less. Well, my husband wouldn’t and I guess it’s all right as long as he and I are satisfied’.54

These passages neatly bring together Annie’s feminism and her utopianism. Not only is she proposing that women should receive good wages and that, just like men, they should have their domestic duties performed for them, but she is also advocating the communal operation of the most basic of domestic functions. She might have completed the vision of the utopian future by adding that the collectivisation of cooking, cleaning and childcare would eradicate many of the class-based distinctions which then existed in Brisbane, as a levelling out of the nutritional, educational and domestic circumstances of a community would do much to dissipate the inequalities which flow from an uneven distribution of the means of production.

Indeed, Annie launched a number of scathing attacks on the prevailing system of class and privilege. She has Lucinda comment of the Queensland rail system, where there is one ticket window for first class tickets and another for second class: ‘They have already got two classes in this young colony and actually separate them as much as they do in England. There is a first-class waiting-room. The second-class people wait round on the platform. So much for democratic Australia!’55 And she sees the popularity of private schools in Brisbane as a symptom of the class system: ‘they lay the foundation of caste and pander to the snobbery that is already an English failing’.56

As did her husband, at this time Annie found in trade unionism an antidote to class privilege and the means to the attaining of the millennium. She wrote of the 1887 Eight Hours Day procession that, ‘It is an army … the army of labor that is to over-run the world’.57 And the terms in which she appraised the worth of trade unions were completely consistent with her feminism. At the height of the London Dock Strike she has Lucinda confess, ‘a motherly affection for this man [John] Burns [one of the leaders of the strike] whose voice is like the Beaver’s siren whistle and who is tall and strong and “bossy” …
“My,” said I to Charlie when I’d read the evening cablegrams before dinner, “That Burns is a love of a man.”

Motherly affection, trade unionism, and the world over-run: such were the terms of Annie Lane’s feminism and utopian socialism.

Trade unionism for women was the logical conclusion of such a world view. Lucinda wrote that in order to attain fair wages ‘we [women] must help ourselves or else nobody else can help us’. She advocated a women’s general union: ‘if women would only stick together, they would be sure of getting fair play’. And in 1890 she commended the formation of the Domestic Servants’ Union at Charters Towers and the Brisbane Women’s Union.

However, Annie’s motherly affection did not extend to her brothers and sisters of races other than the Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, she fully expressed the labour movement’s (and her husband’s) racism. The Chinese are ‘yellow-skinned heathens’; Aborigines ‘are not equal … and they never will be. … Between the black and the white there must ever be a line that cannot be past’, and ‘I wouldn’t do a black man harm or a yellow man or a green man for that matter; but I’d sooner see a daughter of mine dead in her coffin than kissing one of them on the mouth or nursing a little coffee coloured brat that she was mother to’.

Nevertheless, it is in terms of motherly affection that Annie couches her dreams of a utopian future. Lucinda writes to Kitty of a day dream she has been having about the future of her infant son: the greatest thing that could happen is that he became the President of the ‘free republic’ of Australia. She goes on:

[But] I knew that even in this fair land, poverty would keep pace with progress, and it struck me that my boy might be one of those who might slip and fall in the great race of life. … Instead of being prosperous, I saw him hungry and poor … for there are millions and millions of us who are only born to want and despair. … I have laughed at Charley for his Utopian hopes; I have told him that men are only animals, and that if he doesn’t trample on them they will on him, but I don’t seem to feel that way now. … [I dreamed that my son] should get on and be great for others’ sake, and not for himself alone. I thought he might take away the sting of progress, and fix things so that none who would work need ever be hungry.

And of Looking Backward, the leading utopian novel of the period, she wrote ‘If you haven’t [read it] hurry up and read it for it’ll do you good’. If we believe ‘there’s some show for the millennium … [t]hen we may console ourselves with the idea that we give ourselves babies to free the world, as American mothers gave their boys to free the slaves rebellion, and that all their sufferings and miseries are necessary so that the world may win’.

Conclusion

One of Annie Lane’s recurring themes was that ‘the world that [women] live in seems to take a satirical sort of joy in balancing her on a moral tight-rope and then doing its best to shake her off’. Through a combination of her own work as a journalist and her role as a mother and wife, Annie appears to have avoided that tight-rope. In 1893 Gilbert Casey, a leading union official and Billy Lane’s friend and confidant, reported that Billy ‘believed in one God and likewise in one wife – especially his own … Lane’s home life was a poem’. ‘[Charlie] and I are “mates”’, wrote Lucinda. ‘He knows that as long as he’s straight with me I shall be true as steel to him and perhaps even more so. And he knows, too, that my name’s Mrs Lucinda Sharpe and not Mrs Charles Sharpe’.

As Susan Magarey has observed, feminism is political. As must any politics, in order to be effective feminism must be attuned to the economic and social contexts in which it operates. Annie Lane’s feminism was informed not only by her status as a mother, but also by the utopian socialism of the contemporary labour movement, of which her husband was a leading ideologue. This was a fortuitous and harmonious union, as feminism and utopian socialism share a preoccupation with creating the conditions under which we human beings can ‘become what we potentially are, to develop our full human personalities’.

Endnotes

4. Immigration Register of Migrants Arriving 1885-1886, Queensland State Archives.
5. See for example Souter, A Peculiar People; John Kellett, ‘William Lane and “New Australia”: a reassessment’, 
Labour History, no. 72, May 1997; Lloyd Ross, William Lane and the Australian Labour Movement, Forward Press, 
Sydney, 1937.
6. The Worker, 13 June 1891.
7. See for example Michael Wilding, in his Introduction to William Lane’s 1892 novel, The Workingman’s Paradise, 
1970, p. 251; Ross, William Lane, p. 658.
8. Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quarterly, Creating A Nation: 1788-1900, McPhee Gribble, 
Ringwood, 1994, p. 185.
10. Moira Rayner, ‘Public Discourse and the Power of Women’, in One Hundred Years of Women’s Suffrage in Australia: 
Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, pp. 91-99.
17. Magarey, Passions of the First Wage Feminists, pp. 11-12.
Ellem, Raymond Markey and John Shields (eds), Peak Unions in Australia: origins, purpose, power, agency, The 
20. The Queensland Figaro, 18 July 1885. The reference to the forty-fifth amendment is odd as by 1885 there had been 
only 15 amendments to the US constitution. Writing 45 years after the event, John Lane asserts that Billy and Annie met 
and married in Detroit (Daily Mail, 17 February 1930). This discrepancy may be due to an old man’s failing memory, 
or it may have been at attempt by Annie to conceal her true identity from her readers. But for present purposes it makes 
little difference in which city the couple first met.

21. The Worker, 7 August 1890.
22. The Queensland Figaro, 20 February 1886.
24. For example The Worker, 25 June 1892.
25. Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 9, p. 659; Souter, A Peculiar People, pp. 129, 175, 284; Clarrie Beckingham, 
27. The Boomerang, 4 February 1888.
29. The Queensland Figaro, 19 June 1886.
30. The Worker, 1 April 1890.
31. The Queensland Figaro, 2 January 1886.
32. The Boomerang, 30 November 1889.
33. Ibid., 12 May 1888.
34. The Queensland Figaro, 26 September 1885.
35. The Boomerang, 31 December 1887.
36. Ibid., 9 November 1889.
37. The Queensland Figaro, 9 April 1887.
38. The Boomerang, 5 May 1888.
39. Ibid., 12 October 1889.
40. The Worker, 13 June 1891. For further analysis of Annie/Lucinda’s views on the female franchise, see John Kellett, 
‘One-Woman-One-V ote: Annie Lane, Lucinda Sharpe and the Female Franchise in Late-Nineteenth Century 
41. The Worker, 23 April 1892.
42. Ibid., 14 May 1892.
43. The Boomerang, 9 November 1889. See also The Worker, 1 March 1890; The Boomerang, 14 January 1888.
44. The Worker, 1 April 1890.
45. The Boomerang, 3 December 1887.
46. The Worker, 15 November 1890. See also The Worker, 1 June 1890.
47. The Boomerang, 28 July 1888. See also The Worker, 14 May 1892, and The Queensland Figaro, 26 September 1885.
48. Grimshaw et. al., Creating a Nation, pp. 171-3.
49. Legislative changes in 1897 allowed only that the court could suppress the publication of divorce proceedings, which 
must, at least, have relieved women of the ignominy of having their sexual humiliation at the hands of their husbands 
50. The Queensland Figaro, 2 January 1886.
51. The Boomerang, 24 December 1887.
52. The Queensland Figaro, 17 April 1886.
53. The Worker, 1 April 1890.
54. The Worker, 1 May 1890.
55. The Queensland Figaro, 17 October 1885.
56. The Queensland Figaro, 10 April 1886.
57. The Queensland Figaro, 5 March 1887.
58. The Boomerang, 7 September 1889.
59. The Worker, 1 April 1890.
60. The Worker, 1 July 1890.
62. The Queensland Figaro, 31 October 1885.
63. The Queensland Figaro, 22 May 1886.
64. The Worker, 2 April 1892.
65. The Queensland Figaro, 3 April 1886.
66. The Boomerang, 28 September 1889.
67. The Worker, 15 November 1890.
69. The Boomerang, 3 December 1887.
70. Magarey, Passions of the First Wage Feminists, pp. 11-12.
Industrial relations in a deregulated era:
reappraising nineteenth century building unions

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The Building Industry, operating by tradition on a competitive subcontract basis, mostly in small teams, and always subject to irregularity of work, has been characterised by a high level of industrial disorder and disputation. This circumstance has been exacerbated in recent times with Australian government policy striving to deregulate industrial relations generally. Where there once existed a fairly simple system of federal and state mirror Awards we now have operating on the same building sites in New South Wales the following: state and federal construction Awards that differ in many respects, State ‘union’ Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBA’s), State site specific Awards, Federal ‘union’ EBA’s, Federal non-union EBA’s, and Australian Workplace Agreements.

Government agencies such as the Building Industry Taskforce direct aggrieved parties away from informal ‘round the table’ conciliation as well as from formal industrial tribunals. And as systems of collective bargaining break down, workers and employers are left to find their own way. Both unions and employer associations have lost authority along with their membership. At the same time, the relationship between small business, the union, and its membership has also changed in many surprising ways. Building unions are now often contacted by employers rather than employees, directing them to intervene on their behalf, to ‘encourage’ builders or clients to engage them. They often demand the union ‘attack’ a site if tenders are rejected for their being too high, their workers being financial union members. They insist that unions enforce a level playing field; round up every competitor they say undercuts them by dodging industrial standards.

Building a co-operative relationship with employers is not a sound prospect for Unions that take pride in a traditionally hard left industrial, social and political stance. While a propensity to work with ‘friendly’ employers was certainly a feature of industrial relations culture in the building industry in the Award era, the call to find ‘common cause’ with them has progressed to an extreme level. Unions previously acting to enforce legislative rather than agreed rates and entitlements must now seek agreement and then enforce these standards throughout the industry.

In a sense Australian industrial relations has arrived back at its nineteenth century beginnings, and it is essential that we now look at how officials operated before, not after the 1890’s, the period normally focussed upon by Australian labour history, at a time when legislative minimums did not exist. T.A. Coghlan in his work *Labour and Industry in Australia* has an intriguing reference to a building industry board of conciliation established in NSW around 1882 which ‘did excellent work in warding off strikes, a result due as much as anything to the good will which the members had for one another’. If this is a true picture of sentiment in the late nineteenth century, the development of the award, and conciliation and arbitration structures were as much a product of employer wishes as that of unions. Amid conflict and strikes, economic cycles of boom and bust, unemployment and the hundred other heartbreaks of the late nineteenth century, there can be no doubt that both masters and men saw a common desire to ‘civilise’ the industry. What could be so different today?

This paper argues that a deregulated industrial relations system may hold surprises. An examination of the building industry from 1850 to 1890 shows several apparently conflicting forces in play. Building unions on one hand expressed progressive activism, socialistic politics, political organisation and industrial militancy. But they also embraced very positive industrial relationships with certain builders. Strategies evolved to protect bona fide employers, providing them, to the best extent possible, security in the market. The trade-off for efforts to protect builder’s interests was union recognition and expectation that Society rulemaking continued as the primary regulation of the industry. Nevertheless industrial militancy continued against many builders trading outside the system. Ultimately it was not sustainable for established employers or unions. It was this circumstance that fed union resolve to politicise and control systems of government and/or oppose capitalist ideology outright.
The current trend to deregulate industrial relations, individualise and depoliticise the working class may well create common cause against competitive forces, between unionists, the public and certain employers. We may find that militancy develops among rank and file building workers and radicalism increases among their leaders.

The historiography of the nineteenth century operative building unions

As suggested, the idea of forming strong co-operative relationships with employers is upsetting for progressive unionists. Prima facie it is the wrong thing to do, conflicting with the interests of membership. Labour historiography points an accusing finger directly at nineteenth century unions for this very reason. Indeed those wishing to salvage the reputation of the founding unionists have formidable challenges ahead.

In 1892, Fredrick Engels, still railing against nineteenth century capitalism, shook his head at the progress that the bourgeoisie made in the ‘art of hiding the distress of the working-class’. And among those sapping strength from the once revolutionary British working-class was the aspiring labour aristocracy of craft unionists.

Certainly the idea that tradesmen combine to serve their own interests, rather than of the working class generally, predated Engels. But it is the Marxian endorsement of the notion of craft elitism that appears to have set the paradigm from which progressive labour historiography stems. In his preface to the conditions of the English working class (English edition 1892) Engels writes of a compact established between trades unionism and capital to ‘quickly and safely crush smaller competitors’. He remarks that the old Trade Union movement had become tame:

The engineers, the carpenters and joiners, the bricklayers, are each of them a power to that extent that, as in the case of the bricklayers and bricklayer’s labourers, they can even successfully resist the introduction of machinery…for more than fifteen years not only have their employers been with them, but they with their employers, upon exceedingly good terms. They form an aristocracy among the working-class; they have succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final. They are the model working-men…and they are very nice people indeed nowadays to deal with, for any capitalist in particular and for the whole capitalist class in general.

As counterpoint to this rather dim view of craft unions is Engels’ hope for the new unions of the ‘unskilled’ proletariat of East End London:

That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago…The new unions were founded at a time when the faith in the eternity of the wages system was severely shaken; their founders and promoters were Socialists either consciously or by feeling; the masses, whose adhesion gave them strength, were rough, neglected, looked down upon by the working-class aristocracy; but they…were virgin soil, entirely free from the inherited ‘respectable’ bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated ‘old’ Unionists. And thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working-class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud ‘old’ Unions.

Engels’ analysis of, and disappointment with, the agents of change remained unsoftened by time. To the end he was totally unsympathetic to all movements outside the Marxian model – the ‘neophytes’ and ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ – who preach socialism from their ‘superior standpoint’, above class interests and class struggles, reconciling in a ‘higher humanity the interests of both the contending classes’.

Engels established ideas that wend into the heart of labour studies; the character of nineteenth century trade unionism as apolitical, class collaborationist and very pale in comparison to the dynamic, ragged ‘New Unionists’. It is a view that in one way or another is universally adopted by early Marxists and non-Marxists alike, scholars including the Webbs, Lenin, the great GDH Cole and Eric Hobsbawm. For example, the Webbs, depressingly, and with approval, regard leaders of nineteenth century unions like any businessman of the era, with an eye firmly on the doctrine of Supply and Demand, self-complacent, content with the social order:
To the idealist who sees in Trade Unionism a great class upheaval of the oppressed against the oppressors, it comes as a shock to recognise, in the trade union official of this type, pushing the interests of his own clients at the expense of everybody else, merely another embodiment of the ‘spirit of the bagman’.6

As revolutionary man Lenin, like Engels, is understandably disappointed (though unsurprised) with the failure of trade unions to properly struggle to bring about socialism. His disdain for British trade unionism grows from the well-meaning figure leading the masses in What is to be done? (1902), to a more malignant entity in, Imperialism (1917)8 Lenin’s conclusion as to the bourgeois nature of trade unions is certainly formidable. Little wonder the pigeonholing of craft unions occurred.

Hobsbawm is very influential in carrying on the Marxist tradition. Labour Aristocracy, describes a ‘certain distinctive upper strata of the working class, better paid, better treated and generally regarded as more “respectable” and politically moderate than the mass of the proletariat’. A worse indictment is that certain of these workers came to identify with and be identified as the lower middle class. He suggests six criteria for membership of a Labour Aristocracy:

First, the level and regularity of a worker’s earnings: second his prospects for social security; third, his conditions of work, including the way he was treated by foremen and masters; fourth, his relations with the social strata above him and below him; fifth, his general conditions of living; lastly his prospects of future advancement and those of his children. Of these the first is incomparably the most important, and also the only one about which we have anything like comprehensive information, however inadequate.9

Hobsbawm here draws upon numerous comparative income tables to demonstrate the existence of the labour aristocrats, finding even a ‘super aristocracy’. And although admittedly Hobsbawm uses less deterministic measures to examine the subject – citing subcontract, piecwork, co-exploitation and demonstrations of superiority over their less skilled brethren10 – like most authors making such allegations, he doesn’t give adequate details where policies or actions of craft unions, rather than individual tradesmen, seek to perpetrate these crimes against fellow workers. Unsurprisingly too, he is not able to quantify the numbers making up this aristocracy of labour. ‘It is not easy to sum up…the size of the labour aristocracy. Did its relative size increase or decrease? We do not really know enough to say. At a guess, it was probably no larger in the 1860’s and the 1870’s than the favoured strata had been before 1850’.11

In the main, Australian scholarship within and without the Marxist school is also certain a Labour Aristocrats existed. Bruce Scates, however, goes some way to re-evaluate nineteenth century political radicalism, locating non-Marxist discourse within working class politics.12 He evokes the forgotten hopes of early working class radicals; other socialists, anarchists; those who sought to abolish land monopoly, all manner of discontents looking forward to a better world. He writes, ‘the study of nineteenth century radicalism has focussed almost exclusively on labour politics: single tax, socialist and anarchist groups appear as small and ineffectual factions, insignificant ‘tributaries’ of mainstream political life’13

Despite Scates’ call to a more flexible re-evaluation, he too maintains fundamental preconceptions that early craft unions were somehow elitist – discussing alleged fundamental differences between Picnic and May Day demonstrations, how well tradesmen dressed while promenading with their ladies, and their aspiring to Middle class values. Moreover, when Scates discusses the influence on 1880s trade unionism of the American radical Henry George, he hardly sees them as proletarian:

Very few Georgists earned a living at a trade. Those who did believed they belonged to an aristocracy of labour – engineers like D.M. Charleston, or J.S. Higgs, or stonemasons like John Grant and William Elmsley. Earnings and expectations placed these men at the borders of working class life… ‘the indeterminate social strata’ between self-employment and wage labourer.14

This paper does not presume to argue against the value of Marxist historiography, or dismiss the personal knowledge that Engels, and indeed the Webbs had of Victorian society and trade unionists, but it does seek to temper their views. It finds a diversity of ideology, motivation and activity among Trade Unionists of the era – new or old – labourer or artisan.
The ‘twin face’ of building unions: surviving competition and deregulation

Our first task in reassessing nineteenth century building unions is to examine how a deregulated industrial environment shaped the daily affairs of the operatives and see how this situation dictated the working rules of their unions. Our second is to demonstrate how deregulation forced them to act as a class, envisage radical alternatives to capitalism and competition, and to organise politically. The Webbs are useful in positioning deregulation at the centre of nineteenth century unionism:

[W]e consider [Trade Unionism’s] fundamental object – the deliberate regulation of the conditions of employment in such a way as to ward off from the manual-working producers the evil effects of industrial competition … Regulations … existed … under emperors and presidents, aristocracies and democracies. The spread of the Industrial Revolution and the enormous development of international trade have everywhere brought the evils of unregulated competition into sensational prominence.  

In the face of today’s aggressive global markets and deregulated industrial relations systems, this message from Industrial Democracy is much better understood by the trade union movement, because without regulation, there is no unionism at all. While objecting absolutely that unions are or should be confined to the Webbs’ rather dismal dictates of Mutual Insurance, the survival and advancement of the trade organisation was the main game – and on this point our examination should proceed.

How did building unionists manage to maintain rights in the absence of legislative minimums, and how did they advance their conditions such as with the eight-hour day? We see they did so by the militant enforcement of their codes on site and by internal discipline, by co-operation with employers, by creating legitimacy for their organisations in the eyes of the public, by maintaining a critical stand against laissez faire capitalism, but ultimately by educating and uniting the working class as a whole.

What follows are illustrations from building union history from the 1850’s to the 1891 NSW Royal Commission into Strikes – the short hour movements and eight-hour leagues, the initiatives of the NSW Trades and Labour Council (TLC), and ideology expressed in Society literature. It is hoped these few examples cast some doubt upon the negative way artisan unionism has been viewed and promotes further enquiry.

It should be recalled that prominent building union leaders of the 1850s were Chartists and escapees of Britain’s ‘hungry forties’- Stephens, Galloway, Douglass and Vine being contemporaries and in cases colleagues of radicals like Lovett, Cooper and O’Connor. Their first action was to agitate for a reduction in Labour hours. This objective was long cherished by working class radicals since early in the century when Owen challenged unfettered capitalism, after witnessing the appalling oppression it laid upon the proletariat. In Marx’ view the creation of a normal working day was a ‘civil war’ between the capitalists and the working-class. Nevertheless Sydney Stonemasons and the building trades of Melbourne achieved this boon in the mid-1850s with a minimum of industrial dislocation, inviting co-operation of the friendly employers and leading public figures such as J.T. Smith, Mayor of Melbourne. The benefit was heralded by public lectures and essay competitions and reinforced in the public mind by great processions and family picnics.

While eight-hour debates, ceremonies and even procession saw employers in hand with union leaders, the hours’ movement, throughout its long history was in every respect a class campaign. The first act of the Masons of Sydney and Melbourne was to establish short hour leagues of fellow building workers. Further, we find all NSW operative builders campaigning to bring the benefit to workers outside their sector. The bricklayer’s minutes record both building tradesmen and their labourers meeting at the Square and Compass in October 1870 resolving that the eight-hour system, should be extended to ‘all classes of the community wherever practicable’.

We find operative builders prominent among artisans forming the TLC in 1871, helping determine an agenda to advance the working-class, intellectually, politically and industrially. Immediate debate regarded establishing a working-class newspaper. Progressive Carpenters commented ‘it is desirable there should be an Evening Newspaper to advocate the interest of the working men seeing that the mercantile community only are represented by the leading papers of Sydney the necessity for such a paper is acknowledged by hundreds’. The TLC in 1875 urged societies to extend the circulation of the workman … to the utmost of their ability in order that its position may be strengthened as an exponent of the principles of the working-class.
Building unionists often through the TLC acted in solidarity with other organised trades in public rallies, including support for the shoemakers in 72, the bakers in 71 & 76, the Sawyers in 73, Drapers in 74, and Seamen in 1878 ongoing. Other activities pointing to determined class objectives include the organisation of an intercolonial trade union conference in 1879, and the establishment of a ‘United Trades Hall’ desiring ‘increased organisation among the working classes’. And Angus Cameron, Progressive Carpenter, the TLC’s first candidate in Parliament, was hailed, not as a tradesman’s representative, but representative of the working-class. Cameron himself hoped through parliament to be able to ‘get at’ those men outside unions.\textsuperscript{21}

Contrasting these activities, the TLC’s industrial position was not at all adventurous and had at its centre the hope of conciliation. We see for example in the Boot trade dispute in ‘72, while recognising the ‘oppressive and unprincipled combination’ of some employers by introducing cheap boy labour against the tradesmen agitating for ‘just’ claims, the TLC sought a satisfactory arrangement to resolve ‘misunderstandings’ between employers and employed, appealing to their ‘mutual interest’. In another dispute they sent a deputation to Iron trade masters seeking compromise. And among other examples, the painters union, approaching the TLC for support in a wage claim was sent back with advice to avoid a strike and to try harder to conciliate with their employers. When that failed were told to give it another go.\textsuperscript{22}

The 1891 Royal Commission into Strikes is of huge value to the study of the relations between masters and men in the 1800s. Mr John Grant, secretary of the Operative Stonemasons, mentioned above by Scates as borderline working class, balanced radicalism, militancy and the need for industrial order. John Grant was of an evangelical type, his account in the Commission ought to be read by aspiring union rebels. Before the committee had its opportunity to ask him questions, he insisted they need hear his analysis of the causes of strikes and almost any other topic politic.

Grant saw society in class terms, a struggle between ‘toilers’ and ‘earth owners’. Compromise was no option: ‘The favourite and most effective modern methods of ending strikes are for other bodies of workers, if necessary to support the strikers…until employers concede…or for the party in power to over-awe the strikers by displays of civil and military force’. There will be the ‘phenomena of strikes’ and there can be no ‘permanency of industrial peace’ where ‘workers realise that any part of the produce of their labours is legally annexed by others’. No-one shall ‘…be legally empowered to exact tribute from another for existing or working on the earth; or to intercept any portion of the fruits of the exertions of other men’.

The root of grief, social inequity, slum dwelling, and human misery was the private ownership of land. Reforms to society had been palliative with benefits gobbled up in rent. Free trade was fruitless, and equally, co-operatives were the solution of ‘Superficial thinkers’. ‘The aims and objects of Trades Unions should be more political than industrial’. Luckily the Stonemasons had considered the problem thoroughly so, accordingly, had a plan.

They must form at haste ‘labour electoral leagues in every district or ward throughout the colony’ allowing ‘the slaves’, even with their limited power, to the enact ‘equitable and beneficial legislation’. Naturally the ‘army of aristocrats, thieves, loafers and the various species of legalised robbers who are empowered to collect tribute from the toilers would take some uprooting’. However, ‘bettering the conditions of the slaves by revolutionary methods does not in their present disorganised, undisciplined and unarmed condition seem possible’. It should be an orderly process, ‘slow and careful’, ‘of course, always within constitutional means’.

Grant’s vision was to ensure ‘every slave’ has ‘every publicity given to the wrongs imposed upon him’. Libraries must stock a ‘plentiful supply’ of books advocating his cause. Sunday evening lectures, the ‘regular hunting ground’ of priests and parsons, should be instituted, and reform the public education system, where ‘radical and equitable ideas [can be] systematically drilled into youth and remain there unshiftable throughout life’. Grant observed that these tactics had worked well for religious orders sparing no expense in this regard. Moreover an efficient and ‘thoroughly democratic labour newspaper’ must be of the ‘very first importance’.\textsuperscript{23}
Thus we see Masons at the pinnacle of craft unionism – self reliant, active and progressive. Surprisingly, however, given this view of class conflict, of masters and slaves, of inequity and injustice and of urgent appeal to mass political action, the practical policies of the operative masons is quite different. In the tumult of 1890’s industrial mayhem Grant admits only to ‘small strikes’. And these all involved the Masons fighting to control and regulate their industry, walking off the job – against those ‘declining to contribute to our Union’, contractors engaging non-union labour, and where contractors underpay Union rates. No Great issues of state. No protracted battles against capital, only the grind of maintaining a system forever under attack by market forces. Moreover, when asked: ‘What relations exist between the stonemasons and the employers?’ he replied: ‘They are very good’, conditional that employers are happy with the quality of work and if the masons are paid their entitlements. During what has historically been described as a watershed dispute encompassing the entire eastern seaboard of Australia we find in the building industry only the mundane grind of capital against labour with no hard feelings.

Other building officials testifying before the commission also aimed to harmonise relationships with employers, discerning between the good and the bad – those recognising their system and those that refused to. They spoke of an industry board of Conciliation doing ‘useful work’. Generally industry agreements were bipartisan. Thomas Bavister, speaking for the Bricklayers and Building Trades Council regards the rules as ‘just and right’, ‘mutually established and carried out by both parties’. This alliance was not to serve the interests of a single employer. Agreement must not be altered to help an employer even if in difficulty ‘since we should be assisting him in tying down the wages of everyman in the colony, and placing him in unfair competition with other employers’. ‘The Union cannot make one set of rules for one employer and another set for another’.

Further, the agreements and union rules were not to suit one individual worker. Societies expected internal discipline and sobriety. Gillespie, representing builder’s labourers claims unionism makes workers more principled and obedient. Bavister notes officials would ‘restrain them [the men] from action that might not be hasty, but might be the outcome of years of belief that they were not being fairly done by, and they were suffering from injustice’. Such could lead to conflict among them: ‘In the most recent…dispute…the officers incurred the ill-will almost of the Bricklayer’s Society because they advised the men to put up with a breach of agreement on the part of one of the first builders of this city rather than have a strike’.

Bavister insists that officials of the union were not ‘professional agitators’ claiming ‘nine times out of ten’ they know not of a dispute until it is brought to them. He declares that the efforts of Union officers are ‘chiefly directed to prevent strikes’. Strikes are a matter of principle ‘…I do not think a number of intelligent men would call out their fellow Unionists unless they had sufficient grounds. I should go out if advised by the responsible officers of the Union, because I have always seen only men of character and honourable men elected to these positions’.

_Bona fide_ employers could identify with Unionists and had an interest in acting co-operatively with them. Indeed, Peter Dow, speaking in the commission on behalf of the Master Builder’s Association was a carpenter by trade and had been a Unionist in the old country. He would prefer it if all the men were in Unions commenting that it is ‘almost necessary to control the work’. But the unions gain something from this. Dow is against sub-letting and is for paying the standard rate. ‘I believe in freedom of contract, but not in freedom of contract that is to work and injury’. Good employers, members of his association, unlike ‘unscrupulous’ ‘little Jerry builders’ would never take advantage of workers and ‘screw’ down the rate. Dow relies upon the unionists to enforce their rules on the industry, against men who are ‘fools’ to accept wages below the ‘ruling rates’. Accordingly unionists themselves are blamed for reductions in rates forcing legitimate business to adopt the same system as their competitors.

It must be appreciated that co-operative and tolerant arrangements were accepted by unionists where it allowed them to maintain control over their industry. Unrest manifested and strike action continued to be used often, briefly in small groups, in order to enforce industrial standards. Bavister himself would ‘strike tomorrow’ should his employer put an unindentured lad to work beside him. Moreover, despite insisting upon the integrity of his word with the Master Builders, Bavister confirms he would indeed break agreements, striking in the interests of his class.
In our final example of how disparate objectives co-existed within Operative societies we can look at the ideas they express. The very name selected by the Carpenter’s organisation – Progressive – is significant. The Progressive Carpenters of Melbourne and Sydney took the name of the radical London carpenter’s organisation active in the short hour campaigns in Britain during the 50s. The rules of the Sydney Progressives in 1884, like many such trade union documents are a lofty tract legitimising and making moral the purpose of the society. The preface states an aim to protect members ‘from any oppression that unprincipled persons may attempt’, moreover declaring:

> In this age of improvement it is the duty of every trade to combine with his fellow-workman to form Trade Councils, so that disputes of any kind may be adjusted by their Delegates without the baneful effects of strikes or lockouts, ...[occurring]... to the detriment of the trade and loss to all parties concerned. But also, ‘The capitalist finds that it is to his benefit to co-operate with his fellow-capitalist, and why not the mechanic co-operate and balance his skill and labour in the same scale of justice?'

Once more we see a blend – class ideology, the call to all workers of all societies to combine in strength to challenge united capitalists, and accompanying this an aim not to embark upon industrial warfare, but to avoid it entirely. It is, though colonial unionists distinguished Masters and Men from Labour and Capital.

**Conclusion**

A great difficulty arises in reassessing the character of the nineteenth century craft unionist. Historiography gives him little room to rest. If he is not standing in a dirty shirt, active solely in revolutionary ferment, he is a reactionary or a class collaborationist. A problem this study encounters then is how to explain or understand the motivation of those who led the Masons, Bricklayers and Carpenters of the 1800s. One will look in vain for the schooled socio-economic analysis and rhetoric of the twentieth century union leadership. Yet we do clearly see their class awareness, their hatred of injustice and their anguish over capitalist and destructive competitive forces. But for all this, many historians cannot easily posit them within a radical and progressive tradition. The idea of ‘Labour Aristocracy’, selfish, privileged and apolitical, is ingrained in the minds of labour historians. It has eliminated sound analysis of the struggle of early unionism. But early unionism must be studied to assist unions face their modern industrial and political environment.

Dynamics in the building industry have changed remarkably little in over a century. And those working in modern industrial relations could mingle comfortably with Society men at a TLC meeting in the Hyde Park Hotel in 1871 or slip into leather chairs at the inaugural meeting of the Master Builders Association two years later. It is true to say then, as it is now, the union does not shape the industry – it is itself shaped by it. While production lines and machinery have replaced labour in some industries, a building is still a building, and is put up with teams of brawn tying steel in the sun or cold or lugging timber and other gear across vast sites, in holes or at great height. The principal builder or developer is ever distant with layers of managers and foremen and subcontractors cajoling workers – and to a degree each other – to production, the payment or withholding of progress cheques and weekly wages being both whip and glue to the industry. While mechanisms are invented and reinvented to eliminate excesses of the market process upon building workers, building unions consistently challenged fundamental capitalist forces from which injustices spring.

Despite a history of passion and militancy, to an extent there exists a ‘live and let live’ philosophy in the building industry. For all the turmoil and political machinations, houses, office blocks and bridges have been built and the union continues to operate. The word ‘chivalry’ is too strong a term, but the idea it evokes goes to explain how traditional relations between building industry unions and employers can be both aggressive and co-operative, and eternal.

Questions remain as this project continues. Certainly the leaders and policies of building unions have not always been progressive. Nor can it be said that unions always represented the political ideology of the rank and file. Far from it – unions in the deregulated environment of the 1800s formed the smaller proportion of operatives. But overall these operatives, striving for recognition, industrial order, worker’s rights and an end to exploitation and injustice were the inspired and aspiring section of the working class to whom we owe a deep gratitude.
Endnotes

16. *Ibid.*, p. 152 The Webbs write that: 'it would not be difficult to regard all the activities of Trade Unionism as forms of Mutual Insurance'.
19. For good illustrations of this see Murphy, *History of the Eight Hours’ Movement*, throughout and ch. IV and onward in particular.
23. For convenience Q&A numbers used by the commission are utilised, not page numbers. These quotes of Grant’s are found 8900-1.
The importance of consent: labour management practices at Australian Abrasives, 1945-62

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In recent years, in the context of declining union density, contemporary scholars have engaged in debates about both the nature and consequence of labour management strategies in non-unionised firms. In response to these debates, a proliferation of literature has emerged. Traditionally employer attempts to remain union free have been categorised around a simple dichotomy of either ‘substitution’ or ‘suppression’. While this simple dichotomy provides a useful distinction between employer strategies that seek to provide positive benefits for non-membership and those strategies that seek to impose costs on workers joining unions, it has been criticised for its failure to recognise the dynamic nature of the employment relationship. Academics such as Roy, Gall and Peetz have found that management has adopted both approaches simultaneously across space and time or at different moments in space or time.¹

However, this contemporary literature suffers from a number of problems. Firstly, despite recent intellectual advancement the simple dichotomy of ‘substitution’ or ‘suppression’ remains at the heart of much of the literature. Secondly, this literature is laden with descriptive typologies that detail management’s anti-union behaviour, but fail to explain why management has adopted certain strategies, or what factors influenced and shaped their choices. A further striking feature of this discourse has been its almost total failure to place these contemporary debates within a broader historical context. Why would this be important? As Hyman reminds us, ‘the present is historically conditioned and historically contingent’.²

If the present is both historically ‘conditioned’ and ‘contingent’, what can history tell us about labour management in non-union firms. Recent contributions to the historical literature by overseas scholars such as Jacoby and Sangster have been influential in identifying a range of factors that have shaped management’s approach to labour in non-union firms. Unlike their overseas counterparts, Australian labour historians have been slower in contributing to these debates. To date, Chris Wright has provided the most notable contribution to the literature on the development of Australian management. However, while he has provided a comprehensive analysis of management practice during the post-World War II period, it is overwhelmingly management practice in unionised firms. Subsequently, a significant gap still remains in our historical knowledge of labour management in non-union firms. The aim of this paper is to contribute to filling this gap in Australian historical literature.³

To address the current gaps in the literature, this paper analyses the labour management strategies in a non-union firm involved in the manufacture of abrasive grinding wheels from 1945 until 1962. The post-World War II period were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, this was a period of substantial change for Australian managers. Unlike the pre-war, the post-war years were ones of economic boom and prosperity. Secondly, this period was characterised by chronic shortages of labour, high levels of industrial disputation and a reinvigorated and powerful trade union movement. Such labour market conditions are often cited as an important exogenous factor driving the adoption of certain labour management practices. Dunlop and Kalecki argue that a tight labour market will make employers more competitive in acquiring staff and possibly more likely to adopt consent-based approaches to attract and retrain staff. Alternatively, a labour market with high unemployment is likely to see a greater reliance on control-based approaches. This paper examines the impact that exogenous factors had on labour management in this non-union firm.⁴
**Historiography and management practice in non-union firms**

As mentioned previously, labour historians have generally neglected labour management practices in non-union firms. This neglect can be contributed to the fact that prior to the 1980s Australian employers had traditionally represented ‘something of a lacuna in industrial relations research’. In part, this neglect can be attributed to one of the dominant theoretical influences in Australian industrial relations research: ‘systems theory’. While Dunlop’s ‘systems theory’ included management as an actor in the industrial relations system, it failed to capture management’s ability to unilaterally impose rules in the workplace. Heavily influenced by Dunlop’s model, many scholars have had a long-term preoccupation with the macro features of the industrial relations system. Thus, many have viewed organised labour as the great moderator of the excesses of unbridled capital, and the state as the empowered and independent adjudicator of these collective arrangements. By investing the state and labour movement with such an important function these scholars have inevitably treated management and in particular, non-union firms as socially retrograde, and thus undeserving of scrutiny.

The conventional wisdom associated with the ‘business cycle’ approach can also explain this traditional neglect of non-union firms, especially during the post-World War II period. This approach argues that union growth is positively associated with the economic upturn, and negatively with an economic downturn. Thus, many assumed that during the post-war period chronic labour shortages exacerbated union growth and lessened the likelihood of non-union firms.

A further corollary of this neglect has been the long-standing assumption by Australian labour historians that non-union labour is inherently passive. However, studies by Quinlan and Patmore into labour management relations in the period prior have since challenged this long-standing assumption. Therefore, we cannot presume that a lack of union presence negates the agency of labour to act, especially if they feel aggrieved. Nor should such actions always be overt; labour historians have long noted the ability of labour to act covertly. For example, Patmore found in the New South Wales Railways that labour expressed their discontent with work-to-rule bans.

Australian scholarly neglect also extended to the agency of trade unions. A long-standing assumption within the literature had been that trade unions had failed to actively organise for most of the twentieth century. Howard had argued that the system of compulsory arbitration usurped the need and motivation for Australian unions to organise. Instead he attributed union growth not to the agency of trade unions, but as an outcome of a state controlled industrial relations system. However, research by Cooper has since challenged this claim. Cooper found that high levels of union growth during the early decades could be attributed to union intervention. She argues that Howard’s simple casual connections between an improved economy, arbitration and union growth are simplistic and fail to recognise the actions of both the union movement and employers. By investing so heavily in the state and in the power of the arbitration system, Howard and the other pluralist scholars had effectively presumed away the agency of both the unions and management in shaping their own destiny.

Since the 1980s Australian academics have started to overcome the traditional neglect into Australian management. Wright argues that foreign owned firms engaged in sophisticated forms of Welfarism to thwart unionisation. Eklund however, argues that management’s decision to introduce welfarism was not necessarily influenced by union activity. Wright also identified that management had adopted four distinct industrial relations approaches during the post-World War II period: confrontational, sophisticated paternalist, constitutional and consultative.

The lack of Australian research on labour management practice in non-union firms contrasts markedly with the situation overseas. In Canada and the United States labour historians and industrial relations academics have undertaken extensive historical research on labour management in large non-union firms. Sangster’s study of a large Canadian non-union firm from the 1920s and Jacoby’s research into three large non-union firms in the United States from the 1930s found that management had thwarted union attempts by engaging in a sophisticated form of Welfarism. Management engineered loyalty and consent through the provision of high wages, generous retirement funds, sporting clubs, newsletters and consultative arrangements while ensuring compliance with suppressive tactics of victimisation and anti-union propaganda. In both studies the drive and commitment to avoid unionisation emanated from the
strong anti-union mentality of the firm’s founder. Jacoby argues that these founders created harmonious industrialised communities, as an alternative to the Taylorised bureaucracy and market contractualism of the period. Moreover, Jacoby and Sangster argue that underpinning management’s ability to engage in such tactics was a stable and steadily expanding product market.\(^{11}\)

As the previous discussion has shown Australian historical scholars have been slower to contribute to the literature on non-union firms. Nonetheless several themes have been distinguished in the literature: firm ownership; management’s approach to industrial relations; the agency of labour; the labour market and union organising. Overseas historical scholars have identified the firm’s founder; firm size and the firm’s economic fortunes which were underpinned by stable and steadily expanding product market.

Contemporary debates: the simple dichotomy revisited

The proliferation of non-union workplaces both in Australia and overseas, in recent times has stimulated academic interest into non-union firms. At the heart of these debates remains the assumption that management action can be encapsulated within the simple dichotomy of either substitution or suppression. One implication of this approach is that non-union firms have been characterised along a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘ugly’ continuum. The ‘good’ firm offers generous wages and conditions; while the ‘bad’ firm offers poor wages and conditions without malice; and the ‘ugly’ firm seeks to exploit workers. More recently, this has translated into the question of whether non-union firms represent either ‘human resource innovators’ or ‘bleak houses’. However, the empirical evidence in this debate has been at best unclear and fragmented.\(^{12}\)

In the United States Foulkes found that large non-union workplaces were characterised by highly sophisticated human resource management practices. In contrast to this finding, British studies by Sisson found that in Britain human resource management practices have been distinctively less visible in large non-union workplaces than in unionised sites. While a later British study by Guest and Hoque identified that large non-union firms were no more, or less likely, to have clear human resource management strategies than unionised workplaces. Australian scholars Deery et al found that non-union workplaces were distinctively less innovative in their employee relations practices than union workplaces. This they argue that non-union workplaces were neither ‘human resource innovators’ nor ‘bleak houses’.\(^{13}\)

In seeking to encapsulate the diverse and dynamic relations at the workplace level Roy, Gall and Peetz have developed typologies and models of labour management practice in non-union firms. Roy developed a four-fold typology of employer anti-union strategies, Gall later expanded this to a six-fold typology. More recently, Peetz developed a more sophisticated model: ‘Model of Decollectivist Employer Behavior’. However, while these typologies/models expand our understanding of management practice they fail to identify the factors that have shaped management practice. Rather than seeking an elegant typology/model of non-union firms, it is argued that it is more historically accurate to look at the problems and opportunities that have confronted management over time, the factors which have shaped their approach and at the mix of strategies with which they have experimented.\(^{14}\)

Methodology

The research for this paper was based upon historical case study using a combination of oral history and documentary evidence. The reasons for this are varied. Labour-management relations involve an intricate web of factors that range from the social to the economic, from the collective to the individual. Such complexity means that an understanding of the causes and effects of management strategy can be best understood through in-depth qualitative analysis. Documentary evidence provided a rich source of historical data for this research. Both primary and secondary documents were used in this research. Primary documents included Commonwealth Arbitration transcripts, reports from the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service, reports from the Commonwealth Department of Trades and Customs, trade union journals and archives. A secondary document titled The Norton Story was also utilised. Oral history provided an important source of information and a means for cross checking documentary evidence. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with former employees and managers were conducted.\(^{15}\)
The hard abrasive industry in Australia

The Australian abrasive industry emerged prior to World War II. Prior to this period, Australian industry had been virtually dependent on overseas sources for the supplies of grinding wheels, sharpening stones and other abrasives. The industry itself is divided between two distinct products: soft abrasives and hard abrasives. Soft Abrasives include sandpaper and abrasive belts. Hard Abrasives refers to the manufacture of abrasive grinding wheels. While both soft and hard abrasives consist of similar raw materials, they differ considerably in their manufacturing process. They also differ in the gender composition of their labour-force. The hard abrasives labour-force is predominantly male, while the soft abrasives labour-force is predominantly female. Australian Abrasives manufactured hard abrasives.

High capital investment and sophisticated technical knowledge are required to manufacture hard abrasives. Such technical knowledge however, is only required by a small number of specialised staff. The production process is the domain of unskilled labour. With no formal training these workers perform laborious, mundane, and monotonous tasks. Such jobs include mixing the formula, filling the moulds, firing the wheels, finishing and testing the finished product. Not only were these workers involved in repetitive and boring tasks, the machines that they operated also controlled the pace of the work.

Australian Abrasives was established in 1940 by a consortium of the largest abrasive manufacturers and distributors in the world. The Australian Abrasives venture was the brainchild of a United States multinational Norton Company. While Norton recognised the possibilities of the Australian market they also had serious reservations over its small industrial base. These reservations were overcome through a carefully planned web of vertical and horizontal integration. Horizontal integration allowed Norton to share the risks with its competitors, while also eliminating any future serious competition. Vertical integration ensured a favorable means of distribution into the domestic market. From the outset, Australian Abrasives was a sophisticated operation specifically designed to offset the restrictions imposed by the impending tariff protection (which they believed to be imminent), variations in exchange rates, and most importantly, to monopolise and manipulate the Australian market. Most importantly, Australian Abrasives was specifically designed to be a non-union operation.

War time shortages and a lack of competition in the domestic market enabled Australian Abrasives to gain a stranglehold over the local industry. This stranglehold in the market place continued throughout the post-war decades. Underpinning the stable and expanding product market was the massive expansion of Australian industry. Subsequently, the labour force grew from 300 employees at the close of the war to 500 by 1962.

Managing by consent: labour management practices Australian Abrasives

There was no union, nobody wanted a union we had everything we could want. Mr Miller was a great manager, everybody was happy, we respected him. It all changed when Mr Adams came, he set the cat amongst the pigeons when he pitted worker against worker we had no choice we needed a union.

This retrospective observation from a former employee provides an insight into the fundamental changes that occurred in labour-management relations at Australian Abrasives during the post-war decades. Inherited from its American parent, Australian Abrasives under the management of Roy Miller was founded on a sophisticated form of welfarism. This approach was from the very beginning part of a conscious attempt to avoid union influence. Until his retirement in 1962, Miller was the guiding force of the company’s personnel policy. Miller saw himself in terms familiar to the paternalistic father: as one that shows both concern and discipline over his family. Indeed it was revealing that many employees and associates constructed their memories of the company around a narrative theme that stresses the rise and decline of the family. In this narrative theme the family and the business have merged, their fate tied to the legacy of Miller and the death and destruction of the family tied to the actions of his successor, John Adams. Unlike his predecessor, Adams viewed the management of labour in much harsher terms. He believed that unions were an inevitable part of industrial life and thus held a constitutional approach to industrial relations. Subsequently, and despite the continuation of the generous welfare benefits, his hostile attitude towards labour coupled with the introduction of scientific management led to the labour force becoming completely unionised by late 1962.
Before arriving in Australia, Miller had spent the previous ten years as manager of the technical division at Norton’s Worcester plant. On arriving at Australian Abrasives Miller endeavored to entrench Norton’s paternalistic philosophy on his employees. For Miller it was important to manage by consensus, which meant developing close relationships with his employees. He regularly walked through the factory, greeting the employees by their first names, inquiring about the health and happiness of their families. However, Miller’s actions were not as altruistic as they may seem. Miller’s actions were designed to create an industrial ‘family’ that was isolated from the industrial turmoil of the period.

Bureaucratic rules and procedures inherited from the American parent were clearly evident in the operation at Australian Abrasives. The ‘bible’ as it was referred to by the Australian Abrasives managers, detailed Norton Company policies and practices. These policies and practices were designed to ensure that all foreign subsidiaries conformed to Norton standards and most importantly, that they remain union free. However, the ‘bible’ did provide managers with a certain amount of discretion to be exercised in light of local conditions. Miller exercised this discretion by not introducing scientific management practices into the Australian Abrasives. Miller feared that such practices would create division and unrest within his ‘family’ and ultimately result in his greatest fear being realised: the unionisation of the labour force.

Australian Abrasive’s management hierarchy was clearly defined. Miller headed up the operation and guided the firm’s direction. The personnel manager was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the company’s welfarism. This included ensuring that all new recruits were suited to the company’s culture and in particular, they were aware of the company’s stance on unions. Miller instilled in his foreman and managers the importance of building consent, showing concern for their employees and creating a harmonious environment. Miller trained his managers and foremen to listen and mediate, rather than to reject complaints and especially, not to patronise or humiliate the employees.

Within this fairly rigid structure, there existed a small degree of flexibility for managers and foreman, which assisted the company’s efforts to manufacture consent by mitigating the intrinsic alienation of wage labour. Sympathetic to the monotonous nature of each job, management encouraged job rotation, workplace joking, singing and socialising.

In line with their desire to create a loyal family, the company inaugurated a personnel policy designed to secure long term investment in employee stability. While the impetus for this approach stemmed from their desire to avoid union influence, for employees enjoying such generous entitlements, this thinly veiled goal did not concern them. Employees received above average wages; additional annual leave; carers leave; years of service payments; bonus payments; absenteeism incentive scheme; funeral benefits and a generous superannuation scheme.

It was not only through material benefits that Miller was able to engineer consensus and create his ‘industrial family’. Through the provision of a heavily subsidised canteen and a carefully rostered lunch break system, the company ensured that all its employees were able to interact and become acquainted. The company’s on-site tennis court and lunchtime competitions were designed to enhance the ‘family’ atmosphere. Miller actively supported the social club and a range of sporting clubs. Miller, his managers and foremen, regularly participated in Saturday competitions. Miller believed that such social activities would break down barriers between the management and the factory floor and tie the employees to each other, and most importantly to the company.

If team sports supplied one method of cementing the Australian Abrasives family together, another was Australian Abrasives Spirit, the company publication. The Spirit, as it became known, was a well-planned strategy, designed to emphasise the importance of the Australian Abrasives ‘family’. While social activities and gossip dominated the publication, Miller ensured that a part of the publication was devoted to ensure that the employees were aware of the company’s performance and objectives.

Welfarism also provided management with an effective recruitment tool. Despite the chronic labour shortages of the period turnover was extremely low and positions at Australian Abrasives were rare and sought after. One report it states that ‘only four men left during the time Mr Miller was manager’.

Recruitment into the Australian Abrasives ‘family’ generally occurred through family connections. As one former employee explains, ‘the conditions were so good the only way to get a job was through family connections’. Because the jobs were rare and sought after, workers often developed a sense of debt to their employer. The culture of promoting from within only served to increased this debt of gratitude.
Despite the appearance of family harmony there is also evidence of unrest. For example there were instances when management had unilaterally changed the organisation of the work much to the dismay of the employees. In response, the employees collectively banded together to challenge managerial prerogative. In each case Miller listened to the complaints of the employees and negotiated a resolution that was acceptable to both parties. Miller was conscious that the strategy of welfarism would only be successful while relations between labour and management remained harmonious.

Miller’s welfarism appeared to prove successful despite attempts by the Federated Brick Tile and Pottery Union to organise the labour force. However, Miller’s welfarism was not as sweet as it may appear. Beneath the surface lurked a more sinister element. During recruitment drives, Miller refused union requests to access the factory premises. He also had a policy of refusing to enter into any correspondence with the union. Furthermore, he left his employees in no doubt of his hostilities towards unions, often claiming he would not employ a unionist.

On Miller’s retirement, John Adams came to Australian Abrasives from another Norton subsidiary, Behr-Manning. The reasons behind Adams appointment to Australian Abrasives are unfortunately unknown. For a company who had prided themselves on their success at remaining union free, the choice of Adams was uncharacteristic. During his term at Behr-Manning, the labour force had become unionised. Adam’s harsh and controlling attitude towards labour coupled with the introduction of scientific management practices resulted in industrial turmoil. Despite the continuation of the welfare benefits, which had been instituted under Miller, the labour force became unionised by late 1962.

These findings of this paper support the argument put forth by Jacoby, Sangster and Wright that non-union firms can avoid unionisation by adopting sophisticated forms of welfarism. Wright had found that these practices had been inherited from the foreign parent company and this was indeed the case at Australian Abrasives. The sophisticated welfarism operating at Australian Abrasives encapsulated both suppressive and substitutive elements. The firm’s ability to engage such practices was underpinned by its economic success in a rapidly expanding and stable product market. While the firm’s economic performance was important it is argued that welfarism as a strategy to avoid union influence, is reliant on a consensus style of management. This research concurs with Quinlan and Patmore arguing that non-union workers when aggrieved will challenge managerial prerogative. While Jacoby and Sangster have emphasised the founder’s culture in driving this approach as we have seen a change in management can usurp the founder’s culture. Therefore, it is argued that it may be more pertinent to analyse management’s approach to industrial relations.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to overcome the problems with the contemporary literature by providing historical context to contemporary debates. It has been argued that management strategies in non-union firms are far more complex and diverse that the traditional dichotomy. In a context of industrial turmoil, chronic labour shortages and high levels of industrial dispute, inherited from its American Parent, Australian Abrasives engineered loyalty and consent through a sophisticated form of welfarism. This involved management engineering consent through a range substitutive tactics, while ensuring compliance by engaging in suppressive tactics. In conclusion this paper argues that management strategy was contingent on, and shaped by, six factors: the firm’s economic fortunes, management’s approach to industrial relations, the agency of labour, the labour market, the firm ownership and threat of union organising.

Endnotes


17. Occupational Descriptions – Abrasive Manufacturers, series SP193/4, item T63682, NAA.


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20. Author’s interview with Ron Bunn, 10 July 2003.

21. Author’s interview with Ron Bunn, 10 July 2003; Author’s interview with Gerry Lunney, 30 July 2003; Author’s interview with Edgar Green, 20 February 2003; Author’s interview with Ruth Dean, 30 July 2003; Australian Abrasives Pty Ltd and The Federated Rubber Workers’ Union – Introduction of modernisation of plan, series B206/149, item 441/1964, NAA.

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30. Author’s interview with Gerry Lunney, 30 July 2003.
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34. Australian Abrasives Pty Ltd and The Federated Rubber Workers’ Union – Introduction of modernisation of plan, series B206/149, item 441/1964, NAA; Author’s interview with Ron Bunn, 10 July 2003; Author’s interview with Gerry Lunney, 30 July 2003.
Leadership in trade unions: how history and biography can help

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In the last 30 years, trade union density has fallen dramatically in Australia. From over 50 per cent of the workforce in the 1970s, trade union membership has dwindled to close to 20 per cent of the workforce today. It is not the purpose of this paper to go into the reasons for this spectacular decline but rather to suggest that, in the current political and industrial climate, leadership is a critical factor for trade unions in their struggle for survival. Thus, an understanding of leadership and its relationship with the union as an organisation may provide some insights as to how trade unions can better meet the challenges with which they are presently confronted. One way of accomplishing this task is by employing biographical methodology to undertake an historical study of leadership within a trade union in an attempt to illuminate the relationship between leaders and their organisational context.

There has been little attention given to the analysis of union leadership in Australian labour historiography. Whilst leaders serve as historical actors in these institutional histories, their institutional lives are rarely used in any explicit manner to provide insights into how the trade union functioned or developed or how they, as individuals, may have shaped the development or the culture of the institution. Conversely, trade union histories often fail to demonstrate how the behaviour or conduct of leaders might have been shaped or influenced by the culture or development of the institution.

Where leadership within trade unions has been more comprehensively explored, it has been in the form of biographies of individual leaders. Even here, there have been relatively few published biographies of leaders of Australian trade unions, although there are a number of biographies of political labor leaders who began their careers in trade union leadership positions. Separate stand-alone biographies which make some effort to explore the historical traditions of trade union leadership outside the boundaries of mainstream labour historiography are in no way to be demeaned. However, seeing biography as something that occurs externally to historiography seems to ignore the opportunities biographical research offers as a methodology for writing labour history.

This paper explores how biographical research can be employed in the context of an historical analysis of trade union leadership. It begins by examining the reasons why the study of trade union leadership in Australian labour historiography has been neglected. It goes on to suggest how biographical research provides a means by which this neglect can be remedied by drawing on the outcomes of an historical study of leadership within the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU). The paper concludes by suggesting this methodology not only contributes an additional dimension to the historical study of trade unions but also allows us to draw on the lessons of history to better assess what role leadership can play in union renewal in the current industrial and political environment.

There are a number of reasons why the study of leadership in trade unions has been neglected. These include the fact that it did not quite fit in with the agenda of social and feminist history which has dominated labour historiography since the 1960s, the legacy of Michels’ ‘iron law of oligarchy’ thesis which over-generalised about centralising trends and underestimated leaders’ legitimate need for extensive authority and discretion and the dominance of the ‘heroic’ concept of leadership in the literature has deflected attention from the study of leadership in a less ‘heroic’ form but one which is equally important in studying institutions. Finally, this neglect might simply relate to the difficulties historical researchers face in obtaining relevant material. Trade union leaders are far less likely than politicians to keep diaries or private papers which might record details of their work or to write and publish memoirs based upon their period of incumbency.

The biographical model developed by Kevin Theakston in his study of leadership in public administration would seem to be fundamentally suited the study of trade union leadership. His model employed biographical case studies – examining and comparing the personal qualities, careers and achievements of top mandarins – thus illuminating the exercise of leadership in Whitehall and the changing role and culture of the civil service as well as the history and the study of the contemporary practice of public administration.
Theakston’s model also incorporated a key administrative conservatorship role for leaders based on the proposition that the leader was obligated to protect the ‘institution’s distinctive values, competence and role’.\(^8\) This aspect of leadership can be applied equally to the leader of a trade union who, it is argued, shares a similar obligation.

By adapting the methodology employed by Theakston, it is possible to accomplish similar goals in the study of a trade union organisation. The AWU was chosen as it is a union which has been in existence for over 100 years and has been the subject of two comprehensive histories. The AWU also provides a good historical perspective from which to draw conclusions about the impact of the organisational environment on leadership roles. Historical perspective provides the means to penetrate the abstract nature of organisational structure and governance of the union and a window into the set of principles and values which define the prevailing ethos of the organisation. Ethos has been likened to the ‘organisational glue’ which binds an organisation together. The AWU’s development was fundamentally shaped by the experience of its past and its organisational ethos reflected this. This aspect of the AWU’s historical development is crucial to understanding the behaviour and activities of its leadership.

The general propositions that emerge from an evaluation of the biographical case studies of the AWU leadership over time include the fact that no one particular approach to leadership or leadership style is discernible in the study. The intervention of personal factors was as significant here as it would be in any similar study of leadership. Henry Boote falls squarely into the ‘conservator’ category and it also proved to be an important aspect of the leadership roles of both Spence and Rae. Fallon, too, demonstrated he was mindful of his guardianship obligations of his position. Yet Dougherty exhibited no such tendencies.

The study also shows that leadership power can be derived from more than one of bases of power and that the principle power source of a leader’s influence can change over time. The studies also highlight the advantage of examining leadership in an historical context by the revealing the impact of the role of the organisational environment. For example, leadership became more bureaucratised and professionalised in the wake of national legislative and regulatory initiatives in the area of industrial relations after 1904. The AWU study also provides an example of outsider leadership. Following his expulsion from the union, Rae was still able to attract a sufficient following to cause concern amongst the AWU leadership throughout most of the 1920s and 1930s.

Overall, the employment of biographical method in writing labour history can reveal useful insights which in turn can extend our historical understanding of particular events and institutions. In this example, by employing a series of case studies to examine the historical dimensions of leadership within the Australian Workers’ Union we gain a broader account of the leadership in one trade union. It demonstrates the dissimilarities as well as the similarities of the various leadership approaches while underscoring the importance of the role of context in terms of the organisational environment and its impact on leadership at particular historical intervals. It also highlights the dangers of over generalisation and has at least the potential to open the door to the evaluation of empirical evidence in the light of existing theory. Biographical research in history writing is not just about putting the people back and telling their story, but rather in using that story to reveal an additional dimension of historical understanding.

**Endnotes**

1. This is a truncated version of a paper to be delivered at the Ninth National Labour History Conference to be held at the University of Sydney between 30 June and 2 July 2005. It is not to be reproduced either in part or whole without the permission of the author.
2. H.V. Evatt’s biography of William Holman (1940), Fitzhardinge’s two-volume biography of W.M. Hughes (1964, 1972), Crisp’s biography of J.B. Chifley (1961) and Lloyd Ross’ (1977) and David Day’s (1999) biographies of John Curtin are some in this category.
3. Stuart Macintyre’s biography of the Western Australian trade union leader and militant, Paddy Troy, is a good example of how biography and historical explanation can be synthesised.
Co-operatives and the Newcastle labour movement, 1860-1940

Tony Laffan, Newcastle

This paper discusses those co-operatives which can be considered, through their purpose and membership, as part of the labour movement in the Lower Hunter. The study takes as its examples of co-operation a worker owned coalmine, two waterfront stevedoring operations as well as several types of building societies and consumer co-operatives. Most of these co-operatives were registered under the Friendly Societies Act but several were incorporated companies. It examines what the co-operators sought to achieve for their working class membership. It explores the reality of the experience and how others in the labour movement viewed those developments.

Competition may be the ideal for well resourced individuals living in societies based on market values but it imposes a variety of problems and threats to those who possess few resources. However by collective action, combination or co-operation the situation of the worker can be improved. Concrete problems are able to be addressed, capital can be accumulated and skills in handling resources built.

The dominant local industry during this period was coal mining. In 1860 each of the region's major mines, the Australian Agricultural Company's (AAC) Borehole, Burwood, Wallsend and Minmi, had a miner's ‘union club’. These clubs had a number of functions apart from industrial relations and each embodied the concept of collective action. They had responsibility for matters such as sick pay, medical attendance and insurance, funeral expenses and sustenance for dependents. Each ‘lodge’ had a number of men who were responsible for the safe handling of substantial sums of money. Such men were, through their ability to manage and account for money, crucial to the emergence of so many local co-operatives. The rank and file also had a tradition of guarded faith through such things as thrice locked chests and frequent election of officials coupled with regular meetings. An indication of the money involved can be gauged by the affairs of the Minmi Mutual Benefit Society which in the first six months of 1861 handled £240 in subscriptions. This sum exceeded the typical annual income of a healthy fully employed miner.¹

In July 1861 a district wide lockout was imposed by the employers in an attempt to cut labour costs. Stocks had been accumulated and a prior agreement had been reached among the proprietors. This covered matters such as the proceeds of sales when strikebreakers were introduced during the dispute. Active steps to recruit labour interstate were carried out and strikers were evicted from their company-owned housing sites in anticipation of new tenants. The owners stood united on terms for a new contract demanding a 20 per cent cut in hewing rates. A further demand was the removal of the darg that a miners’ aggregate meeting had imposed in an attempt to equalise earnings. In late August, several weeks after the strike had commenced, Joseph Moffat, speaking at a miners’ aggregate meeting, proposed the establishment of a co-operative coalmine. Moffat had been involved in establishing a retail or consumer co-operative at Wallsend in 1860. The seconder was George Curless, a Borehole (AAC) miner and a temperance activist. The motion passed and events moved so swiftly that negotiations must already have been underway. If coal could be got to market the employers would be undone. Curless was reported as saying ‘they would secure the profits while all steps forcing them to strike would be at an end forever’.²

By the end of August a contract had been signed and a £100 deposit paid by James Fletcher, the chairman of the Hunter River Coalminer’s Mutual Protective Association, from Association funds. The lease covered 600 hectares with royalty at sixpence a ton for the first two years, £500 for the third and £1000 per year for a further 18 years. Lease fees were also to be paid for homesites. The first sod was turned early in September. 500 were present at the ceremony as 200 volunteers set to work. A shaft was sunk which struck the main seam of coal at about 40 metres depth. A blacksmiths shop was built and a 300 metre corduroy road built to the small tidal Iron Bark Creek where it was intended to float the coal to the Hunter River. A short term commercial contract was signed to shift 300 tons and an attempt was made to form a co-operative to handle this traffic.³
However in late September the proprietor’s unity had fractured and the dispute was settled with no cut in the hewing rate and some minor compromises from both sides. The urgency had gone and the co-operative venture lost momentum. The contract remained valid with no fixed payments necessary until late 1863. The project was revived within a year as the AAC moved to enforce managerial control over working conditions following substantial new investment. This time the dispute was confined to one employer. Again it was hard fought but this time the AAC represented by its mine manager Winship prevailed. He actively recruited strikebreakers from the Victorian goldfields and the South Australian copperbelt. He evicted strikers and obtained extra police from Sydney to overcome pickets by the miner’s wives. After four months the AAC was able to obtain a growing output although resistance continued and a large part of this was the new co-operative.\(^4\)

Thomas Alnwick, a miner, outlined the proposals in a letter to the Sydney paper Empire. Thirty thousand pounds was to be raised by way of £5 shares. Five shillings was to be paid on application with 25 shillings on allotment. The balance was to be paid by weekly subscription over two and a half years. The amount was a big ask being equal to ten weeks earnings for the entire mining workforce. The Hunter River Coalminers’ Mutual Protection Association met the other cash needs of the Co-operative as it incorporated through a private act of Parliament as was then necessary in order to achieve limited liability. The Association’s solicitor handled the paperwork.\(^5\)

In the meantime the AA strikers had to be sustained. A district levy provided £1 per married miner per fortnight. A district meeting in September, five months into the strike, voted to allow this money to be paid as a loan to those strikers who wished to work constructing the co-operative mine prior to incorporation when wages could be paid. They were held to have found new employment and therefore to have left their lodge. Speaking to this resolution Fletcher described the union as a ‘broken reed’ compared to the Co-operative Society. He claimed that the Society would be the mainstay of the union. By late September the strike began to collapse.\(^6\)

However the plans were well advanced and the co-operators eager. Early in 1863 tenders were called for the building of a rail connection. Share sales however were insufficient to finance the project and continuous problems arose over funding. By September 1863 the Co-operative, in an endeavour to sell more shares, stressed that there was no limit to the number that could be held. Early in 1864 it appears that a trust arrangement was introduced to permit borrowing. Dr William Brookes, a local politician with a Chartist past, became active with solutions and was elected to the board. It was only after borrowing substantial sums that the first train of Co-operative coal arrived at Newcastle in late July 1865. This coal met a very competitive market which was experiencing downward pressure on prices. It was not until November 1865 that regular sales were reported and these were mainly speculative shipments to Shanghai. By June 1866 proxy voting was permitted and the private firm Laidley, Ireland & Co became increasingly involved in the running of the company. The Co-operative was only able to stay in business as the workforce deferred part of their wages. This debt to the workforce stood at £1375 in January 1868. In January 1869 when the Co-op was put into the Insolvency Court the debts to some 80 working shareholders amounted to about £6,000. These miners received about a tenth of what they were owed.\(^7\)

Despite this dismal result the co-operative idea was not without continuing support. In February 1868 it had been claimed, with good reason, that the Co-operative had prevented a reduction in contract rates and that up to that time the benefit to the region’s miners had been £19,000. That Dr William Brookes was elected member for Northumberland in the parliamentary election of December 1869 indicates, given his participation in the venture, that the community was far from negative.\(^8\) For some radicals the concept remained central. Bob Winspear, who in 1887 launched Australia’s first socialist newspaper at Hamilton, argued that co-operatives were the only safe way for workers to proceed. It was only through co-operatives that they could accumulate capital. Otherwise they would be at the mercy of the supreme monopolist; namely the state.\(^9\)

The Co-operative Colliery had revealed fundamental problems. The initial enthusiasm and voluntary sacrifices had not been enough to launch an undercapitalised venture into a fiercely competitive market where the others had all the advantages. The miners lost not only money but they remained employees in a market into which they had introduced extra capacity. Yet another experiment some years later revealed other hazards.
A number of new mines came into operation when construction of the railway between Newcastle and Sydney began in 1887. Among these was the Great Northern at Teralba. This company was undercapitalised and did not have the shareholder links that would ensure contracts in the gas and shipping markets. If it could reduce costs it might survive in the competitive sectors of the market. The directors decided on a co-partnership scheme labelled as a co-operative. The existing company had a little over 1,200 shares of £20 each. The company was renamed as the Pacific Co-operative Steam Coal Mining Co. 200 new shares were offered to working miners. These miners were to accept a cut in the hewing rate which was to be used to pay the capital value of the shares. It can be easily argued that this was not a true co-operative as the company had a majority of non-working shareholders who clearly expected profit from the working shareholders but the miners could hope for an improvement in their security and status during the production process. The participants could also expect a dividend. During a period of acute unemployment and severe economic depression a number of miners, particularly those with working sons, were prepared to defy the district union hewing rate in order to secure a living.¹⁰

The company was not particularly prosperous and the miners were locked in as minority shareholders with the management being able to extract the profit elsewhere along the production chain. The experiment came to an end about six years later with the working shareholders staging a 14-week strike, winning acceptance back into the district union and receiving half value for their shares. With the return of better times the district rate and the ability to switch places of employment had more appeal.¹¹

A strongly negative attitude to producer co-ops developed among some unions as a result of the 1893 Depression. However, for coalminers, the form of organisation was again to be used, with the support of union officials, in an attempt to save the Balmain Colliery from closure during the late 1920s.¹²

The actual rate of pay may not however have been the sole criteria for potential members in judging the need for worker-owned producer co-operatives. The waterfront in Newcastle provides examples where working relationships were also of crucial importance. Economic conditions during the 1890s depression were brutal. Trade unionism survived on the wharves with great difficulty. At one point blacklisting was so severe that a local barber served as union secretary. In these circumstances a Co-operative was formed and an undercutting bid submitted for the annual contract to work 15 hydraulic cranes and about two kilometres of wharves. The Co-operative won the contract for 1897. Instead of employment depending on the caprice of the employer the members were now guaranteed a fair share of the available work. If necessary extra labour could be hired but the existing workforce now controlled entry into the market, a classic trade union demand. With respect to labour discipline the minute book for the first two years survives and this makes clear that the confirmation of the board was required for dismissal. The Newcastle Co-operative Coal Shipping Company (trading as Carrington) had problems when its manager, socialist agitator Frank Butler, absconded with the funds in December 1898. Fortunately the bulk of the money was recovered very quickly. The ‘crane boys’ held the contract for a number of years, losing it in 1908 but recovering it subsequently. This experiment came to an end when the McGowan Labor state government took over the wharves in 1913 with union conditions. There were also waterfront worker-owned producer co-operatives for coaltrimmers and an attempt to form a co-operative company to work in the discharge of ballast.¹³

There were other uses for co-operation which appealed to miners and many others. By 1865 the Newcastle region had a population of about 8,000 of whom some 900 were miners. The mining workforce was to double over the next decade and to increase by the same absolute amount for several further decades. Housing was a high priority and many miners were reluctant to be tenants of proprietors who could evict during strikes or lockouts. Squatting on the pockets of vacant crown land scattered about the city provided no security and led to substandard housing. Building societies capable of providing finance to ordinary workers, who were not helped by banks, were clearly needed. Societies were being formed in other centres such as Morpeth, Brisbane and Sydney and there were many English model constitutions available. Variations in rules and methods of operation were substantial but the basic idea was that each individual could subscribe for a limited number of shares, of high value, payable over 15 years. Ownership of shares permitted the owner to borrow from the society.

Heated debate occurred over the limit to shareholding, the number of shares needed as qualification for office in the society, the transferability of shares, proxy voting, how and if interest was to be charged and whether the society would borrow at interest from outside its membership for on-lending.
Priority of borrowing could be decided by ballot, sale or a combination of both. The approach taken on these issues determined if the society was to be primarily for mutual aid or available to speculators and investors. Locally these issues were to be important for several generations as financial cycles played themselves out.

The first serious attempt to form a local society occurred in October 1864. The initiative was taken by an investor who had a small subdivision near Waratah railway station. He secured a list of potential shareholders and convened a meeting. At the initial meeting rules were adopted which required ownership of multiple shares as a qualification for office. The dissent generated led to the establishment of a short lived rival. By the end of the first year the original society, with a board including AAC manager Winship, had made 29 loans and had amended the rules in order for the directors to borrow, at interest, for on-lending. This move was made in order to increase the price of the shares by boosting profits. The heavy emphasis on profit and capital gain on share values make it difficult to classify this society as a co-operative but it started life with many of the features of one.14

In 1866, the Northumberland Building Society started as a terminating society in the mining town of Waratah. It became a permanent society in 1876. Permanent societies were at this time an innovation which allowed a trusted, experienced and capable management team to continue to function. Instead of having the whole society commence termination after all had been able to borrow the individual shareholder was able to redeem his own shareholding upon discharge of mortgage. W.T. Dent, the long term secretary of the permanent society, was a former miner’s lodge delegate from Lambton and had also served as Mayor of that mining town. The original chairman, Robert Turton a brickmaker, had been associated with the establishment of the Bon Accord Co-operative Society the first consumer co-operative store located in central Newcastle. He remained a trustee for several decades and the Northumberland was well run. It retained features of the older societies such as paying a bonus to borrowers during the distribution of profits. The Northumberland played a big role in the break up of the large AAC estate.15

In 1879 the Northumberland had funds of £21,639, a large amount of capital. It was in a position to purchase land for subdivision from the AAC which had been given 2000 acres, in 1831, as an incentive to enter the coal industry. The AAC estate covered many of the inner city suburbs of today. The subdivision proved profitable for the society and at least a further five estates comprising the modern suburb of Islington followed. The society prospered and an adequate supply of freehold land was provided for those workers able to afford house building. By 1891 the Northumberland had assets £317,000. Like many other financial institutions it had to reconstruct during the 1893 Depression. Share capital was frozen but after a decade the society traded out of its problems and remained a major local institution.16

The first Newcastle building societies charged interest but in 1903 a Starr Bowkett society was successfully launched. Starr Bowketts could be described as co-operatives of borrowers who wished to acquire a house. Starr Bowketts were terminating and had a limited number of shares coupled with a small maximum holding. They were designed to ensure that all shareholders had received their loan by the 15th year. Impatient borrowers could bid at meetings for a loan but half of all loans were balloted for at no interest. The impatient borrowers had their interest waived when they drew a ballot. After 15 years capital was gradually returned and the society wound up. The return of share capital also served the purpose of providing savings for retirement. Inflation, however, began to seriously erode this element from the 1950s.

In Newcastle if any one name was associated with Starr Bowketts it was E.J. (Teddy) Brent. A skilled tradesman, Brent had been district president of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and 8 Hour Committee and the Northern District Assembly of the Political Labour League. He became a successful small businessman and actively formed a. Starr Bowkett, which eventually became the Greater Newcastle Permanent Building Society. Brent remained a director of it until his death in 1961. Brent was to serve for over 50 years as a director of the NS and he was an able spokesman for the feelings of the men who ran these societies.17

As previously noted the first local examples of consumer co-operatives emerged during 1860. During this year two co-operatives were launched, one in Newcastle, where temperance activists were deeply involved, and one at the Borehole or Hamilton as it is now known with a branch at Wallsend within a
year. Initially these local co-operatives did not operate according to the Rochdale principle of rebates on purchases but divided profit on the basis of high dividends on share capital while displaying the key co-operative feature of easy share subscription. Although retaining a competitive rate of capital dividend they both quickly adopted the Rochdale methods within 18 months as their customer base developed.¹⁸

In order to survive a society had to make a profit but the methods used to distribute this profit could vary considerably. Indeed some societies worked best when there were only small profits. This point is demonstrated by a slightly later successful co-operative bakery society at Maitland. The West Maitland Co-operative Bakery Society needed to generate high sales in order to achieve what economists call economies of scale. It needed to attract not only those with some spare capital but a large number in the community as customers. It cut prices by one eighth, achieving only small dividends for the shareholders. The shareholders also enjoyed the price cut. This society adhered to an earlier co-operative model, from Scotland, which was used for bakery and corn mill co-operatives in that country. Again it was easy to subscribe for a share with only a small deposit being paid with dividends paying the rest.¹⁹

The initial co-ops were not overly successful. The Borehole & Wallsend survived for several decades before merging. The Newcastle society opened a branch store and bakery but succumbed to a trade depression and excessive debts in 1865. Likewise a co-operative butchering society erected a shop and traded briefly at Lambton but failed to keep its butcher/manager. It was not until the late 1880s that a new crop emerged. Robert Gray, founding manager of the Pioneer Society of Merewether said of his aims, ‘[c]o-operation, to mind is Christianity in common life … helping each other, doing unitedly what cannot be done by individual effort’. He went on, ‘[t]o stop where we are and merely hunt for dividend, is to declare our own deep rooted selfishness, … our aspirations ought to be … to alleviate the poverty and pauperism in our midst, the ignorance and darkness by which we are surrounded’.²⁰

Several did not survive the 1893 Depression but the new Wallsend & Plattsburg and West Wallsend societies did. In 1899 a new inner city society was launched. The Newcastle and Suburban (NS) went on to be the district’s largest with a peak membership in excess of 100,000. Later long term successful societies were established at Boolaroo, Kurri and Cessnock. Frank Butler, the founding president of the NS (and soon to abscond with the Craneboy’s funds) said in a preamble to the first rule book, ‘we can by uniting together … make the interests of Capital and Labour identical by removing the capitalist, and assuming control of the instrument of production, distribution, and exchange, so that we shall produce for use and distribute for use … as combined masters and servants of industry’.²¹

While economic gains, lower prices and unadulterated goods, were of prime concern to the members, the managers and boards dealt with a large workforce. It was not always an easy task to reconcile the movement’s ideals with the surrounding competitive pressure. In Britain the Co-operative Union published a series of pamphlets on the relationship between the co-operative movement and unions. These made it clear that many in the co-operatives wanted to use their organisations to make useful contributions over matters such as hours of work, rates of pay and the provision of annual leave to their employees. However these pamphlets also lamented the competition co-ops faced.

It appears that the local co-ops adopted a friendly attitude to the Shop Assistants Association and indeed fostered it to ensure that any benefits they provided could be spread to other shopkeepers. At a celebratory dinner in 1924 held by the local branch of the Shop Assistants the main speakers made clear their debt to the co-ops in the formation of that local union branch prior to World War I. The existence of this branch enabled the implementation of the legally enforceable award.²²

The democratic feature of frequent member meetings at a convenient local venue meant that members were able to bring forward various topics such as the employee rights of a relative, friend or neighbour. As dismissals could lead to considerable controversy the power of the quarterly and special meetings put a limit on managers. Nonetheless a determined board could win approval for labour discipline. In February 1908 Brent and two other directors of the NS, resigned and stood for re-election successfully over a dispute involving a dismissed employee. There are several examples where the consumer co-ops, as employers, resisted working hours cuts and only one clear example where they supported such a cut. In 1869 the Borehole & Wallsend Co-op store at Lambton was the only retail establishment in that town to fail to support a half day holiday per week by way of an early closing day. It is uncertain how this matter was resolved.²³
More than 40 years later a similar dispute arose at Wallsend. In 1911 the Wallsend & Plattsburg Co-op opened a slaughter yard and butchery. The union representing the butchers sought the support of the Newcastle 8 Hour Committee in its efforts to have this butchery work the 8 hour day. As this was not in the award or general throughout the community the Co-op resisted. Like many disputes within the labour movement this one turned personal.

Tom Scott, a rising local politician and labour movement activist, happened to be Vice President of the 8 Hour Committee where he represented the Colliery Enginedrivers. Scott was also on the Co-op board. The delegates forced Scott to resign. He showed his ability for infighting by organising a Co-op society picnic for the 8 Hour Day holiday. His picnic was suburbs away from the official 8 Hour procession and the delegates were not pleased. Scott continued to serve on the local council and the Co-op board for another 25 years. He became local president of his union and Mayor of Wallsend.

A few years earlier in October 1908 the Operative Bakers approached the 8 Hour Day Committee in order to obtain the holiday for its members. The local co-operatives, many of whom owned bakeries, secured the issue by offering to do a double bake on the Saturday. This and related incidents indicate that co-op society employees had some benefits such as better job security and stricter adherence to the award. The NS subsidised a yearly fund for its employees as a form of sick pay. Yet the gains beyond the conditions in the private sector were marginal.

The co-ops were of vital importance to their coal miner shareholders during various disputes. Early in the Peter Bowling strike of 1909-10 Brent had the board of the NS accept Colliery Employees’ Federation vouchers. Jim Comerford, former Miners’ Federation General Secretary, participant in and historian of the 1929-30 Great Lockout, has testified that credit organised by the various coalfield’s co-ops was crucial in permitting 15 months of resistance. Indeed the Cessnock society successfully forced a reduction of nearly one third in the price of milk late in the lockout as a benefit to its miner members. This effort was publicly undertaken as a supporting move by a board dominated by miners.

Nor were the co-ops just of assistance during disputes. The West Wallsend society during the Depression of the 1930s adopted a policy which gave their unemployed members, nearly all ex miners, a tiny quota of dignity in those awful years. The society struck tokens which were given as change when dole tickets were presented at the store in place of a book entry. While the tokens could only be spent at the Co-op they could be used in local exchange, as a form of money, before being re-presented at the Co-op counter. The local co-op was able to circumvent in a small way obnoxious legislation which gave dole rations to the unemployed but denied them any money.

Just as unions discovered that the world market lurked behind the individual employer the co-operative managements found that there were also ever larger arenas that required application of co-operative principles. The local co-operatives held frequent representative conferences and participated in state and national congresses to discuss expansion. However real problems arose between the movement’s ideal of mutualism and so called ‘commercial reality’ as expansion was attempted. One of the simplest ways of expanding the movement was to aid in the creation of further consumer co-ops. The West Wallsend Co-op, for example, was of great assistance to at least three other societies. It provided a loan of £1500 to the fledgling Kurri Co-op. It provided a manager and ran the affairs of the Charlestown Co-op for several years in a futile attempt to sustain that society. It also assisted in the formation of the Boolaroo Co-op when it decided to close its own branch there. In each case local control was implied as the ideal.

To the local co-ops the next logical step was the establishment of joint wholesale facilities between the societies. The Newcastle and coalfields co-operative societies moved to form a Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in 1911. The CWS was ‘federalist’, in the British tradition. It was a federation of consumer co-operatives for the specific purpose of organising wholesale purchases. The CWS did not have individual shareholders but the shares were held by the affiliating societies. It was governed by a board elected on the basis of one per society. Its AGM was attended by the board and one elected delegate per society. The workforce had no direct say in the management. George Booth, ALP MLA for Kurri, became the foremost public spokesman for the CWS and its board from the 1920s.

The ‘federalists’ such as Brent and Booth wished to proceed carefully. First the CWS had to be made profitable then other ventures such as a co-operative insurance company could be considered. They were
not keen to establish producer co-operatives which they felt were certain to lose money. The opposition to the federalists were referred to as ‘individualists’. Individualists wanted to use the funds generated by the consumer co-ops to fund worker owned producer co-ops. Even though Brent and key associates such as George Booth clearly had the numbers when it came to board members among the Lower Hunter co-ops there are strong indications of a continuing debate over mutualism among the local membership. In 1916 A.T. Griffiths, a temperance and labour movement activist, deeply agitated by the impact of World War I published a pamphlet calling on local trade unions to establish a ‘manufacturing fund’ in order to help with the establishment of a Christian Co-operative Commonwealth. At West Wallsend the 1919 AGM passed a motion calling on the CWS to levy each affiliate the sum of one shilling per member to establish a fund to sponsor producer co-operatives.

Likewise the Co-operative Women’s Guild, launched in Sydney by sympathisers of co-operative production, spread to the various co-operatives in the Lower Hunter. At their peak there were nine local guilds with 300 members. Members were pledged to work, through co-operation, to seek to achieve ‘equal fellowship for men and women in the home, the store, the workshop and the state’. The guilds were involved in many activities promoting the co-operative movement. The guilds helped to organise the floats when co-ops took part in coalfield May Day marches. They participated in co-op society picnics and undertook raising charity funds. The Guilds held regular meetings and annual conferences. The Guild members were active in their local co-ops. As with other members Guild activists could write for the Co-operative News. This was the monthly publication of the co-operative movement. Originally put forward by the individualist wing as a propaganda weapon it was actually financed by the CWS and largely used to promote CWS products and federalist proposals, it was never closed to supporters of producer co-operatives while it survived. The Co-operative News was launched with a print run of 20,000 achieving a high density of circulation in the region.

Despite the widespread presence of co-operative notions Booth was the only regional Labor politician to be closely identified with the movement. Booth sat in Parliament for nearly 40 years from 1922. He had impeccable labour movement credentials. His parliamentary colleagues were not hostile to co-operatives but rather fixated on the role of the state to mediate the regions’ problems. Among the leftist parties and sects, attitudes ranged from hostility to frustration. The Socialist Labor Party was the most negative. The SLP saw the co-operatives as a snare and trap for the workers. For the SLP co-operatives made the workers ‘small capitalists’. Whereas the SLP believed that the workers had to be educated and organised into the One Big Union. Instead consumer co-op members focused on balance sheets and dividends. Producer co-ops turned workers into competitors. Building societies made some workers into property owners and reduced class solidarity. An SLP pamphlet quotes Marx, from an unnamed text, as saying that the co-operative movement ‘seeks to bring about its (the proletariat) emancipation, behind the back of society, in private ways, within the narrow bounds of its own class conditions, and, consequently, inevitably fails’.

For the Communist Party the response was different as co-operatives formed part of the ‘socialist state’ in the USSR. While many party members shared the SLP attitude the question was would the co-operative movement fall into line and accept party leadership. This did not occur and at times such as the ‘Third Period’ (1928-35) there was a degree of sharpness in the criticism coming from the CPA as it classified any opponents in the labour movement as ‘social fascist’. However at other times the relationship was more positive and some leftists sought involvement in the co-operatives. In the early 1930s militants associated with the Newcastle Trades Hall organised tickets for the election of directors in the NS. They were unsuccessful although at times individual trade union activists were elected to the board. Former Trades Hall President Arthur Outteridge and his fellow ARU activist Ernie Jones were elected in the 1950s and 1960s. Jim Comerford, a Communist, was a long time director of the Kurri society.

By 1940 Newcastle and the Lower Hunter coalfields had a set of flourishing consumer co-operatives and several local building societies that were delivering solid economic benefits to their members. These benefits enabled workers to better manage their standard of living. In particular the widespread home ownership, brought about in part by the societies, reduced family vulnerability to the passing market. The worker owned producer co-operatives while important experiments for those involved did little other than provide a lens for the participants and others to evaluate the theories of mutualism.
For the managers and boards the results were very concrete. A number of co-operative secretaries worked their way forward often obtaining formal qualifications in the process. A whole group of board members also gained a general knowledge of commercial and economic affairs. This knowledge made possible their fuller participation in a wide range of community activities.

That the community left the administration of these societies, along with other organisations ranging from trade unions to local government, in the hands of such men meant that many democratic possibilities of the co-operative movement were under-realised. That these men were responsible and sound administrators also had an impact on how community affairs were conducted.

Endnotes

2. NC, 21 August 1861.
3. Ibid., 31 August 1861, 4 September 1861, 5 October 1861, 21 December 1861.
4. Ibid., 28 June 1862, 30 August 1862.
5. Ibid., 30 August 1862, 18 June 1862.
6. Ibid., 13 September 1862.
7. Ibid., 26 September 1863, 6 February 1864, 4 May 1864, 12 November 1864, 21 April 1866, 26 May 1866, 16 June 1866, 22 January 1867, 29 January 1868, 2 March 1869 and 27 May 1869.
8. Ibid., 1 February 1868, 11 December 1869.
11. Ibid., 18 April 1955.
14. NC, 27 January 1866, 9 June 1866.
15. Ibid., 6 October 1866, 17 October 1866, 3 November 1866.
17. NMH, 16 April 1901.
18. NC, 9 March 1861, 15 June 1861, 6 July 1861, 17 December 1862.
19. Ibid., 19 January 1869.
20. NMH, 17 July 1889.
22. NMH, 25 July 1924.
23. NC, 14 August 1869.
24. NMH, 28 July 1911, 8 September 1911, 9 October 1911, 20 September 1912.
25. Ibid., 15 October 1908, 23 October 1908.
27. NMH, 6 August 1910, 19 August 1907.
Exploring the role of ‘region’ in working class organisation through film: the South Coast Labour Council (Australia)

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This is a case study of an Australian peak union council (central labor council in American parlance) in the Illawarra region south of Sydney. It draws on a theoretical framework influenced by the increasing interest in labour geography, which claims region as a useful level of analysis of social relationships. The paper demonstrates the importance of the concept of region by indicating the historical embeddedness of organisations in a particular place.

The Illawarra provides one of the most significant historical examples of Australian regional peak unionism, which has usually not been a strong level of unionism in Australia. The strength of the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC) and its predecessors has been based on the industrial infrastructure which produced its extensive affiliated membership, but also on the strong sense of place of the Illawarra people. The place consciousness of the Illawarra has grown from a combination of its physically geographic distinctiveness, the heavy industry base which dominated the region for much of its modern history, the peculiarities of regional labour politics, and the strong sense of working class community.

In a strongly unionised region the SCLC has played a critical role in mobilising support for industrial and political campaigns. However, where the SCLC and its predecessors have been particularly successful has been as agents of social regulation, in developing campaigns for housing, education, the unemployed, etc. As an agent of social regulation the SCLC has relied on a strong sense of place consciousness. This has been supported by two critical, related factors: first, its ability through its role as agent of social regulation to mobilise more widely than unionists to embrace a working class community; and secondly, its ability to establish a broad left unity. This left consensus has set the SCLC somewhat apart from the dominant political grouping in NSW state labour politics since the 1940s, the Australian Labor Party right, which has also dominated the NSW Labor Council. As guardian of this politically based independence, the SCLC has powerfully reinforced place consciousness in the Illawarra. At the same time it has influenced and been influenced by the state, national and international levels of labor politics.

The paper is in two parts: a written paper, and a 15 minutes film, *Promise of Struggle*, produced by one of the authors (F. Laneyrie) to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the SCLC. The process of construction of the film, and its multi-layered components, are represented in Figure 1 below.

The four major elements of the film consisted of images; voice over; music (see Diagram 1) which respectively represented individual incidents and stories; regional meta-trends; and themes. Three different types of images were used to support the loose chronological structure. These were photos, representing the early history, WINTV newsreel footage to represent the middle and some later history, and handheld video footage recorded privately by a local Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) member was used to represent the present.

The key to film is contained in the voice over, by local professional actor Faye Montgomery, which emphasises the meta trends within the region. I did not want to focus on individual regional or personal stories. I wanted to focus on the bigger ‘meta picture’ that emerged in the patterns of stories such as those in the paper written for this conference. I wanted to communicate key changes and key influences – such as the influence of the Communist Party and the left of the ALP on regional politics. At the same time this allowed me to avoid a number of obvious political problems. One example of this is pressure from some union officials to include a large number of key disputes which would probably result in presenting a stereotypical and gendered depiction of unionists as white male unionists ‘in angry poses’.
A major proportion of the footage was drawn from the 1975/1980s time, a time when union movement was imbued with a sense of hope and belief that the power of workers struggle could change ‘the world’ achieving both industrial and social justice but also for the pragmatic reason that the archives only contained footage from 1967 to 1983.

The film attempted to capture union values in the choice of stories and editing decisions using a patchwork style. The patchwork style of presentation, inspired in part by metaphors used by labour geographers such as mosaic allowed the possibility of thinking about the story in terms of ‘relating of the parts to the whole’, while also allowing an easier incorporation of diversity and inconsistencies into the final construction. It allowed some contradictions of linear time to exist and more importantly the opportunity to use individual stories in such a way that they were representative of patterns of relationships in the region. Secondly, the artistic style and format of the film, was heavily influenced by my previous work with a company called Theatre South. Theatre South was the Illawarra region’s professional theatre company. One of it’s major strengths was telling regional and community stories in a patchwork style. These regional stories, included plays that became nationally acclaimed such as Windy Gully and The Last Voyage of the Gracie Anne by Wendy Richardson, and Once we Anchor in Twofold Bay by Katherine Thompson.

The film opens with footage from WINTV news archives from August 1967 with Ted Harvey, Secretary of the SCLC, being interviewed outside AIS Port Kembla. In this clip Harvey promises workers ‘nothing but struggle’ around the issue of work bonuses. This short clip is immediately followed by a patchwork of images from various clips used later in the film to lead in to the title of the film Power of Struggle: 75 Years of the SCLC. The music underpinning the patchwork of opening and closing images is from the song ‘They were right’, written by Maurie Mulheron, a popular local songwriter and musician, who also happens to be the headmaster of Wollongong High School. The music helps establish the feeling tone of the film. This powerful song recounts struggles of the MUA over its history, including the story
of how Robert Menzies, a former Prime Minister of Australia, became known as ‘Pig-iron Bob’. The song reinforces links between the past and present in a haunting tune that hangs in your head for days with lines such as:

- Keep their memories alive, and we’ll win every time.
- They’ve been right every time, and they’re right again now
- But the strength of one isn’t much of a power
- So united they stand against all odds
- Fighting for us all against the little tin gods

Other music included a selection from ‘Solidarity forever’ recorded by the local Union Singers.

The film was heavily influenced by the historical interpretations presented in this paper and the construction of the film has provided us with the opportunity to present the history of the SCLC to new audiences, for example commerce students who have little understanding of the significance of labour history and place consciousness, while also providing us with an effective research tool for eliciting qualitative data. The making of the film was also as much embedded in the power and social relationships of the production team constructing the film, as it was in the theoretical constructs shaping the film. The paper explores these relationships.
An invitation to a discussion of trade union and workplace culture

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The labour movement is in trouble. Many of the problems that Peetz identified in 1998 remain and some have intensified. Although it seems that the decline in union density has bottomed out, it is still historically low. While union sympathy is higher than density, there are several impediments to traditional collectivist strategies. Legislative changes since 1993 have set in train a demobilising momentum, especially the shift from industrial to enterprise bargaining, which placed intolerable burdens on many activists who were quickly burnt-out when their voluntary workplace involvement became a compulsory, core activity in the new bargaining regime. After the Workplace Relations Act 1996, union reach became more difficult and the centrality of industrial awards was progressively eroded through mechanisms such as the limit of 20 ‘allowable matters’, closed agreements and, of course, Australian Workplace Agreements. Unions’ capacity for collectivist militancy has been severely circumscribed by the declared bargaining period, outside of which strikes are likely to invite action for damages by employers. This can have catastrophic effects on unions’ financial reserves, which is part of the Coalition government’s strategy to bankrupt unions, whose privileged legal status allows them to provide an effective, publicly-supported subsidy to the ALP. More recently, the Industrial Inspectorate can launch prosecutions without the active connivance of the employers affected by union action, thus opening the way for politically inspired assaults in unions. Since much of this is happening as we speak, there is little point in a long recital of the neoliberal legislative offensive. From July 2005 is will simply become more aggressive in its pursuit of ‘labour market flexibility’ and enhanced employer prerogatives.

No account of the decline of Australian trade unionism can ignore the effects of the restructuring of the economy and labour market. The simultaneous privatisation and breaking up of government-owned entities along with the decline of large-scale manufacturing have affected union density, since both had been traditional strongholds of unionism. The growth in the services sector of the economy, along with the proliferation of small businesses, which prefer more ‘flexible’ hiring and firing arrangements, has seen a dramatic increase in the proportion of casual and part-time positions. Again, this is well documented, so there is no need to dwell on it here.

It is also a commonplace observation that unions played an active role in their current flirtation with irrelevance. As the structural and legislative changes confronted them, many unions assumed a backward-looking, defensive position that did nothing to address, for instance, the proliferation of casualised employment, which required more energetic and sophisticated recruitment strategies than traditional practice dictated. To complicate matters, especially during the Accord period, considerable energy was squandered on intra-union turf wars as they accommodated themselves to the amalgamation process. In some egregious cases, millions of dollars were spent on legal action to settle internal disputes. All the while, unions did not fully appreciate the inexorably corrosive effect that a dominant neoliberal paradigm was having. They tended to concentrate on the more formal legislative and institutional expressions of it, but were insufficiently aware of how its core principles of competitive individualism had come to shape popular discourse in the public sphere. They bemoaned young people’s apparent resistance to joining unions, but did not appear to understand that most youngsters began their working lives in ‘flexible’, casual sectors of the labour market. To them, it was the norm. Besides, these young people knew nothing other than the dominant neoliberal discourse. Many older trade union leaders, trapped in a Keynesian social democratic time warp, simply could not imagine themselves into the heads of the new generation of workers. They were similarly unable to see, in any strategic sense, the profound effects of the neoliberal conceptual shift in the labour market from employment to contractual relations. The libertarian idea of the ‘egoistic, rational utility maximiser’ entering into a freely contractual arrangement with other utility maximising individuals is profoundly different to the implicit, negotiated, if occasionally adversarial, reciprocity embedded in the wage labour employment relationship, with all the institutional and legislative infrastructure that sustained it. This is perhaps one of the most profound intellectual changes to signify the paradigm shift from Keynesian social democracy to neoliberalism in the labour market.
One lesson that trade union leaders and activists have learned well is the want of comradely reciprocity from the Australian Labor Party, the first effective sponsor of the neoliberal counter-revolution in Australian public policy. The orgy of self-justification from the Keatingite ‘reformers’ that followed the Coalition triumph at the 2004 federal election must have been sufficient for even the most reluctant students of political apostasy to appreciate that the ALP has long been wedded to a neoliberal conception of the national interest which is profoundly antithetical to the long-term expectation of many rank-and-file unionists that it would attempt to refashion a contemporary iteration of the wage-earners’ welfare state. All the while, the Coalition has cheerfully moved on to embrace, with increasing zeal, a belligerently authoritarian neoconservatism. Since 1996, the trade union movement has slowly come to realise that there is little joy to be had when you get into bed with the politically impotent.

The reasons for this are, of course, the matter of long and continuing debate. One of the best interventions was, ironically, from an Industry Minister in the Hawke government, John Button, whose Quarterly Essay Beyond Belief, canvassed many of the internal problems that confront the ALP. The ossification of the Party’s formal structure, the corrosive effect of the now obsolete factional organisation of intra-party competition and the debilitating results of preselection processes that simply serve the career ambitions of tribal warlords and factional hacks are all well known. Indeed, at the time of writing they were front-page news in the Melbourne press. In addition to Button’s argument, there is a set of wider issues, encapsulated in the cartel parties thesis, that have rendered the ALP anything but a workers’ party. The ALP has become enmeshed in a web of interdependent relationships with the institutions and processes of a parliamentary system that serves to sustain the major political parties, the institutions of parliamentary democracy dominated by the executive government, established interest groups and the core organising principles of a hegemonic neoliberal discourse. Among the many effects of this has been an enthusiastic embrace of neoliberal ‘reform’ by Labor’s policy-makers, a closure of the ideological gap between it and the Coalition, a hypersensitivity to business groups’ and ‘market’ opinion, a shift from financial dependency on membership dues and union donations to corporate sponsors, its own investment portfolio and per vote, public funding for election campaigns. All this has simply reinforced the tendency, that Button explored, to demoralise and alienate Party members and disprivilege the core interests of the Party’s working class constituency, many of whom were seduced to support Howard’s populist conservatism in 1996 and subsequent elections.

So, where does all this leave working class people, especially rank-and-file unionists who see collective action in common cause as their only hope of resisting an inexorable slide into working poverty and industrial powerlessness? If, as alleged, the ALP has deserted them and their unions failed to protect them, what resources, if any, do they have to rebuild a movement that will serve their interests and express their aspirations?

Let us begin with a thoroughly familiar cultural artefact.

When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run  
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun  
For what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one  
For the union makes us strong.  
Solidarity forever, solidarity …

Despite all the legislative, structural and ideological impediments to industrial collectivism, we experienced a resolutely determined and occasionally inspiring expression of solidarity during the 1998 maritime lock-out. When Patricks, the Coalition government and the National Farmers’ Federation sprung their conspiracy over Easter 1998, the cultural resources of the trade unions were mobilised. Within an hour of the lock-out, telephone trees were activated, as were e-mail address lists. Even the ASSLH was part of that. Leigh Hubbard, Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, rang me at home at 11.00pm and asked me to activate ours. While I hit the phone and the Internet, my partner, a veteran of a six-week picket line against the Kennett government’s slashing of jobs in the Department of Human Services, was collecting the camp chairs, packing the food and filling the thermos in expectation of a long campaign. By midnight we were on the picket line at East Swanston Dock where I recognised not only several labour history comrades, but numerous members of the NTEU, in addition to the usual suspects from the MUA, CFMEU, AMWU, ETU and other traditional blue-collar unions.
The scene was a familiar one. A flat tray truck was parked to one side of the picket line to act as a platform for the speeches, with the sound system’s speakers at either end. Jennie George was reciting the liturgy when we arrived, to sporadic responses from sections of the milling throng moving about in the eerie shadows cast by the portable arc lights. Banners and placards proclaimed the justice of the MUA cause, as well as the perfidy of Corrigan, Reith, Patricks and the Howard government. The speeches were punctuated with songs to fan the flames of discontent. Next to the truck was a tent where food, tea and coffee were available. Alongside it was the familiar CFMEU barbeque trailer, and the ubiquitous Albert Littler turning sausages and chops with one hand and holding his mobile phone with the other. Indeed, some of that meat had been donated by Gippsland farmers who had experienced the chill winds of dairy market deregulation and wanted to distance themselves from the NFF with a tangible expression of solidarity. Initially, a pact was agreed with the scabs to allow access to the toilets in the changing rooms on the other side of the fence, but before long ‘porta-loos’ arrived and were deployed in serried ranks along the other side of the picket line. As they filled rapidly, the Firefighters’ Union instructed some of us in how to connect, turn on and use the fire hoses to flush out the dummies, but also to deploy them should the lines of police at the other end of the picket be ordered to advance. As it turned out, they didn’t, partly because their own union was in dispute with the Kennett government over pay and conditions at the time. Moreover, the Kennett government didn’t want to alienate the police, on whom it relied so much to enforce its political assault on working Victorians. Incidentally, the police were not provided with either food or access to toilets, other than our ‘porta-loos’, which generated a kind of implied solidarity around the common decencies.

In case the police moved in to break the picket several preparations were made. We were instructed in the correct way to link arms to strengthen the line should it be pressed. Leaflets were distributed advising us of our civil rights and the appropriate way to act should we be arrested. A couple days into the dispute, Jimmy O’Neill and a few of his mates from the Metals welded some girders together into a formidable barricade against vehicles, and called it a ‘community arts project’. At one stage the diminutive Molly Hadfield stood in front of a train about to enter the gate to the docks and told the driver that he should be ashamed of himself. Chastened, he desisted.

The most dramatic stage of the picket was the night and early morning when the stand-off intensified, with helicopters sweeping searchlights across our ranks, and it seemed the police might be ordered to advance on us, whether they wanted to or not. At that point we had word that CFMEU members had walked off city building sites and were marching towards the docks. At this point the police line began to disassemble and the picket relaxed. We congratulated ourselves, and the building workers, on our solidarity in executing a deft pincer movement to surround the police and force their retreat. It was, of course, a bit of comradely hubris. The police had backed off because of legal proceedings in the Federal Court.

While we were ‘holding the line’ at the docks, the union’s legal team led by Julian Burnside QC was busy persuading Justice North that the union had a case in its claim that Patricks, the National Farmers’ Federation and the Federal Government had conspired, contrary to the freedom of association provisions of the Workplace Relations Act 1996, to dismiss the wharfies simply because they were members of the MUA. During the discovery stage of the litigation they found that Patricks had set up a highly contrived corporate structure in which the core company entity operated at arm’s length from a labour-hire company that, funnily enough, had insufficient assets to pay the termination entitlements of the dismissed union workers. By a strange coincidence, Federal government funds were available for redundancy payouts! As this increasingly common corporate strategy became widely known, there was a notable increase in public sympathy for the MUA position in the dispute. Other working people understood that they could well be next in line for such treatment from their employers. Had it not been for the negotiated settlement of the litigation, which included a confidentiality clause, the extent of the conspiracy would have been revealed.

In the end, Patricks did well out of the dispute. It got a reduced workforce, albeit a unionised one. Its share price rose significantly and it went on to expand its interests in the transport industry. The MUA, at the cost of significant internal pain, accepted the reduction but its members continue to work on the docks. The Government and the NFF didn’t achieve their primary objectives and the scabs were discarded, and remain embittered.
However, the point of this ramble through aspects of the 1998 dispute is to suggest that in a crisis we can see how some of the continuing cultural traditions of the trade union movement were mobilised in a collectivist defence of the right to organise in the workplace. In the course of the dispute it became clear that a historically constructed cultural infrastructure, although somewhat depleted, is still there, albeit more thinly distributed in the collective memory of working people. Although the lock-out was one of the more egregious neoliberal adventures in union busting, it both revived and reaffirmed the labour movement’s collectivist culture.

When the conspiracy was unleashed over the Easter break and the call-to-arms went out, we knew what to do and where to go. We spread the word by email and telephone and didn’t think twice about joining the picket line. To come together, literally arm-in-arm, in solidarity seemed the natural thing to do. There was no thought of alternative action or, worse still, doing nothing. An injury to one was an injury to all, despite Reith’s invocation of the stereotype of wharfies as under-worked and over-paid. The assault on the MUA and all that it represented was so audacious that we felt the need to do something active and physical about it, to give some tangible expression of our anger and determination to draw the line at this, the latest in a long succession of attacks on organised labour. Bill Kelty spoke for us when he talked about drawing ‘a line in the sand’.

When the nefarious objectives of Patrick’s contrived corporate restructuring became clear in the court proceedings, we understood how seriously and carefully our opponents had prepared their campaign. That revelation persuaded many people who had no direct connection with the union movement that this was a threat to all who sold their energies and skills for pay in some kind of employment relationship. It was a chilling reminder of the ultimate precariousness of wage labour, and it was widely understood. In many ways, it was a more persuasive argument than anything the unions and their active supporters had said or written. There were managers like this, and they meant it. Thereafter, it was easier for people to see the link between the trivial slights, minor indignities and petty tyrannies of their own daily working life, and the alarming power of truculently asserted management prerogatives. More and more people began to see that workplace collectivism might be a legitimate and necessary response to such tactics.

The speeches and the songs was not just morale-boosting ‘entertainment’ to stop us getting bored as we stood and waited for an attempt to breach our line. They presented both a direct and symbolic affirmation of the principles and values that bound us together in common cause. Whether it be the rallying cry of ‘Solidarity Forever’ or the celebrated martyrdom of Joe Hill, the music served to unite our past and present around those shared values and principles.

In many of the small incidents we could see larger issues embedded. Molly Hadfield’s train-stopping was an act in the long tradition of appeals to popular principles of economic fairness and social decency, or ‘moral economy’ as Edward Thompson described it for the 18th century crowd. While there were some on the picket line who took an equally traditional view that, ‘Moral suasion’s all humbug. Nothing persuades like a lick in the lug’, the moral arguments were more influential on this occasion and there was little or no ‘biffo’. In related ways, the tacit agreement between the protagonists over toilet access was an acknowledgement that there were some shared common decencies that need to be preserved and that unionists were more ready than most to observe them.

Underlying the explicit collectivism of the picket and the associated expressions of our shared culture was a more general impulse towards mutuality; that other pillar on which the labour movement was built. A picket, particularly one as extensive as this, can never work without sharing and mutual support. Collections were taken in buckets for the fighting fund and the support of wharfies’ families. Sympathetic individuals and organisations sent all manner of supplies to the docks, not just the Gippsland farmers’ meat. In many cases the help arrived unbidden. People seemed to know what was needed without being asked. It was a reminder of the old working class custom of seeing the need and just getting on with it. No ifs, no buts. It just happened, much in the way that everybody in working class communities knew, without being organised, what was needed when there was a death in the family or a bread-winner fell ill. This kind of response registered historical resonances that go back to the beginnings of trade unionism where the formation of benefit societies went alongside collective bargaining. Both were part of a mutualist culture that was developed to deal with the insecurities and unequal power relations inherent in the wage labour relationship. They provided a cushion against adversity and a
defence against exploitation. Benefit societies offered the dignity of mutual self-help in the face of unemployment, sickness, indigent descendants and the disgrace of a pauper’s grave. Although not as extensive as in England, the Australian labour movement also has a tradition of producer and retail co-operatives that, in a small way, represented a practical resistance to the exploitation of market relations in production and consumption. By a circuitous route, that heritage finds expression today in industry superannuation funds, which have equal members of employers and unionists on their boards. Collectively they have spawned their own bank, Members Equity, which now has a rapidly growing loan book and an expanding range of financial services to offer. Those of us with Members Equity mortgages can at least comfort ourselves with the knowledge that we are one step removed from the direct depredations of finance capital.

This co-operative, mutualist culture is tangible in many pieces of civic infrastructure where working class communities joined together in common cause to provide services that are not privately affordable or supplied by agencies of the state. Community health centres are a case in point. The indefatigable efforts of Meatworkers’ Union activist George Seelaff in the western suburbs of Melbourne show how this co-operative culture can enhance civic amenity through communal self-help. Although civic co-operation is by no means the exclusive preserve of working class communities (it is also common in rural areas), it is often disproportionately represented there for the simple reason that individual wage-earners do not have the resources to purchase these services for themselves from private providers. Community childcare, although under great pressure from the privatising zeal of the current Federal Government, was a similarly inspired innovation. The building of sporting, artistic and recreational facilities, despite being occasional expressions of dubious municipal patronage, might also be seen in the same light, especially the smaller, more localised ones that commonly involved ‘working bee’ voluntary labour.

In the workplace we can often see an easy overlap between mutuality and sociability where people sharing the daily experience of working life form reciprocal social bonds. The extent to which they might do so is partly dependent on the scale of the workplace. Some larger organisations can sustain more formal kinds of co-operative activity such as group buying schemes for goods or services. This may include group discounts on almost anything from consumer durables to services such as health or general insurance cover. Although this is not always autonomous of employer involvement, some schemes are set up independently by workers on the ‘shop floor’. Indeed, some are union sponsored, such as discount computer equipment through Virtual Communities or insurance cover through Labour Union Insurance brokers. It is not uncommon for workers to band together to raise funds to purchase additional facilities at work that are not provided by their employer. This might be anything from better appliances in the tearoom, sport and recreational equipment or audio-visual material. Occasionally, workers establish clubs or less formal groups that are founded in the workplace but also extend beyond it. Sporting clubs are a case in point. The ASU in Melbourne has a netball team that competes against teams from other unions and like organisations. One of my sisters who works in the meat department of a large Coles supermarket in Brisbane is a member of a netball team that calls itself the ‘Old Boilers’. This is a contemporary iteration of a long tradition of work-based sporting clubs that even supported a mid-week football league in Melbourne, and still sustains numerous cricket clubs. Music is another activity that can still bring workers together. Although there are not many equivalents of the Castlemaine, Thompson’s Foundry Brass band still operating, there appears to be a growing number of workplace-based choirs. As the musicians among us know, making music with others requires a good deal of co-operation and mutuality, not to mention generous-spirited sociability when some tin-eared bugger hits a bum note.

The tradition of the ‘works picnic’ seems to have declined with the fragmentation of workplaces into smaller entities, but there are still cases where regular social activities are organised, be they film nights, which might also have a fund-raising purpose, a dinner or the more exuberant ‘piss-up’ or ‘rave’ at a pub or club. But perhaps the most pervasive form of workplace co-operative sociability is the gambling syndicate or football tipping competition. While most syndicates simply buy lottery tickets, some are more tangible in, say, collective ownership of a racehorse, which requires a continuing, formal commitment. Although the impulse for joining such syndicates is the remote hope of a transformative windfall, the everyday satisfaction is more the mundane pleasure of a bit of a flutter that might produce a small win which, in many cases, is spent on a syndicate social outing or an additional piece of recreational equipment to improve workplace amenity.
In more serious circumstances there is sometimes mutual support for people with health, gambling or alcohol abuse problems. Unfortunately, it might occasionally be just to cover for them rather than confront the problem, thus presenting workmates with an ethical dilemma. Mutual support in difficult circumstances might be less formally expressed in such things as the ‘whip round’, help from a more experienced workmate in dealing with bureaucracy and other civic vexations, or simply ‘keeping an eye on’ someone who is known to be at risk.

The earnest pursuit of self-improvement has also been part of workplace culture, be it educational, health or fitness programs. The development of enhanced skills and knowledge has long been a part of life in the workplace, as much for reasons of genuine curiosity and professional pride as a means of career advancement. These sorts of activity have precursors in the history of trade unionism, specifically in the skilled, craft unions of the nineteenth century. Even beyond the boundaries of workplace and union membership the Mechanics’ Institutes provided the opportunity for these labour aristocrats to engage in respectable, edifying mutual self-help.

But these numerous activities are not simply expressions of workplace sociability, they are also evidence of the capacity to mobilise and organise collectively for the common good. They are tangible examples of the organising capacity of the workers involved and an informal training regime for those new to the workplace. Union bureaucrats ignore this substantial bank of cultural capital to their peril.

The point of this rumble through fragments of workplace culture is to make a link between the interconnected cultural resources of mutuality and sociability that still exist, and to open discussion about the potential for these to be the foundations for a revival of more formal and engaged workplace collectivism around core industrial issues. In a wage fixing system where unions and their members will have to fight to defend collective bargaining, even at the enterprise level, they will need to mobilise this cultural capital in a strategically focused and tactically acute way to resist the Federal government’s assault on collectivist industrial relations to replace it with individualised contractual relations. As there is little prospect that unions will get any ‘top down’ encouragement from Labor governments, and little, if any, from their own peak councils, they might well look to their rank-and-file’s customs in common as a central part of their strategies to bolster union sympathy, re-engage their membership and rebuild density. Without some kind of workplace collective mobilisation, many Australians face an inexorable slide into working poverty and the union movement’s flirtation with irrelevance will be consummated.

**Endnotes**

4. Helen Trinca and Anne Davies, *The Battle that Changed Australia: Waterfront*, Doubleday, Sydney, 2000 is the most substantial account to date, although Chris Sheil is currently engaged on a major study of the dispute as part of a large ARC Linkage project.
In 1999 the NSW Public Service Association (PSA) celebrated its centenary. Its 44,400 members made it the largest State-based union in Australia, and amongst the largest 15 unions nationally. It was the oldest continuous, general association of public servants in Australia, and an early example of both white collar and industry unionism. PSA female activists also played a leading role in the feminist movement and the long campaign for equal pay from World War I. For these reasons, the PSA foreshadowed at an early stage developments which became far more widespread in Australian unionism during the past 30 years.

Yet, the PSA has attracted little attention from scholars. Sheldon’s solitary article on the origins of the PSA characterised it as a ‘middle class’ union from the outset. Herein may lie the explanation for the PSA’s neglect, for Australian labour history has been dominated by ‘workerist’ themes of blue collar unionism. Sheldon notes a number of characteristics of the early PSA which distinguished it as ‘middle class’. Much of the rationale for the founding of the union was related to the protection of ‘social place and esteem’. The early PSA’s leadership was dominated by ‘privileged and conservative’ senior public servants, who were ‘well-connected’. Hence, the PSA developed an ‘interest group lobbying strategy’. In pursuing industrial ends, the PSA adhered to ‘traditional middle class concepts of loyalty to constituted authority’. Sheldon notes that ‘like other conservative unions, its motto was “defence not defiance”’. Yet, unlike other unions which sought to avoid industrial action, the PSA was initially opposed to compulsory arbitration for public servants for fear that notions of comparative wage justice may lead to public service salary reductions. Furthermore, ‘while it advanced many traditional union demands, the PSA Council was too self-consciously middle class to identify directly with unions outside the public service’, notably through affiliation with peak union bodies, such as the Labor Council of NSW or ACTU. Finally, the PSA ‘disavowed any political connection’ from its inception.

This depiction has resonances of the Australian debate in the 1950s/60s on the nature of white collar and professional unions. This debate has lost most of its interest because the differences between blue and white collar unions have largely disappeared, as the proportion of blue-collar workers and unionists has declined. It is more useful to conceptualise unionateness as a development on a historical continuum, rather than a condition which permanently separates different types of organisation. White collar unions clearly shifted in most cases along this spectrum, as did manual unions of craft workers in the nineteenth century. In this context therefore, it is instructive to examine the early development of the PSA in terms of its unionateness, and what made it develop in the way in that it did.

**Objects and membership**

The PSA defined itself as a union. The early objects of the PSA focused upon promoting the interests of public servants in employment matters, providing the means for combined action in pursuit of these interests, and conducting negotiations with the authorities to improve salaries and working conditions. Over the next 30 years the PSA’s list of objects lengthened, but the main focus remained upon collective bargaining and representation of public servants before industrial tribunals.

PSA membership grew substantially in its first 30 years to 7,000. This was based to a large extent upon growth in public sector employment, but fluctuations impacted upon union membership. The political complexion of government was also important. Sheldon notes the importance to the PSA of the supportive environment provided by the NSW Protectionist and Progressive governments in 1899-1904. In 1904 a conservative Liberal-Reform government was elected on a platform of curtailing public service growth, and retrenchments reduced numbers of departmental employees by 9 per cent, and it was less sympathetic to dealing with the PSA.
The political environment improved in 1910 with the election of an ALP government. Public service employment increased by 65 per cent from 1910 to 1914 and the government remained union-friendly for much of World War I. ALP governments in 1920-22, 1925-27 and 1930-32 were associated with strong membership growth. Friendly ALP governments usually were related to public sector employment growth, but PSA membership growth exceeded that in public sector employment under ALP governments.

Changes in the range of coverage for the PSA also influenced early growth. Water Board employees broke away after 1908, encouraged by industrial legislation. Larger statutory authorities developed their own organisational culture. The railways, for example, were covered by other unions when the PSA was formed. With some exceptions in smaller statutory authorities, therefore, the PSA was confined mainly to employees of public service departments. The proportion of members in statutory authorities where the PSA retained coverage subsequently began to grow from the late 1920s, as the range of authorities grew.

Nor was PSA coverage of departmental employees exclusive. The NSW Professional Officers’ Association (POA) accounted for more professional officers than the PSA,$^8$ although they represented a small proportion of public servants. Of more significance were the separately organised teachers, whom the PSA had hoped to include in its membership originally. Others not covered by the PSA included hospital employees and most of the blue collar employees of the Department of Main Roads. PSA coverage was confined to barely ten per cent of total public sector employment in NSW in the 1920s and 1930s.

Sheldon estimated the PSA’s membership density to be 25-30 per cent in its first seven years, which compared favourably with many blue collar unions.$^9$ Density increased to 57 per cent in 1913, but during the war declined. After the war it recovered to 40 per cent, and during the ALP governments of the 1920s grew to 55 per cent in 1929. During the Lang ALP government of 1930-32 density reached 64 per cent in 1932, after which it declined slightly before reaching 68 per cent in 1940. This represents a significant growth in a short period, notwithstanding the fluctuations.

In terms of wages in 1902 about 20 per cent of public servants earned below the 1907 basic wage standard, and about 50 per cent earned as much as a tradesman or less. Those earning above this, almost 50 per cent, earned in excess of working class wages, some very much so. In this limited sense we may say that almost half of the PSA’s membership was middle class, and the top 2-3 per cent merged into the ruling class. By 1929 the overall picture had not changed a great deal, except that within the working class level public service salaries there had been a redistribution: by 1929 about 34 per cent of all public servants earned marginally above or below the basic wage, a far higher proportion than in 1902.$^{10}$ In the intervening period important structural change in public service employment explains much of the difference.

Many of those who earned less than the basic wage were women, who had been employed in significant numbers since World War I, reaching 25 per cent of all public service employees by 1929. Only 6 per cent of permanent female public servants earned a salary at the rate of the female basic wage or below; the largest group, 60 per cent, earned somewhat in excess of that but still well below the male basic wage rate. In a relative sense, compared with women in the private sector, these women were well-off. However, a growing proportion of women was employed as temporaries. By 1929 they accounted for about 40 per cent of all female public servants, virtually all of whom were in the lower levels of the salary structure. There were more male temporary staff at that time, but they represented less than a third of all male employees.$^{11}$

Permanent public service employees enjoyed employment privileges superior to the average worker: superannuation, job security, and access to a career ladder on the basis of merit and examination. However temporaries, 60 per cent of whom were women, did not have access to these conditions, although they may have been temporary for very long periods. The greater proportion of female temporaries was employed as ‘female office assistants’, a category created by the Public Service Board (PSB) in 1921 to cheapen part of the labour force. Female office assistants were assigned low-level clerical duties to allow male clerks to progress to higher duties. In 1922 the Board also ended general entrance examinations for women’s access to the clerical division, restricting women’s entrance examinations henceforth to typists, shorthand writers and machine operators, and holding these examinations infrequently. This effectively closed access to permanent positions for many women.$^{12}$
Structure and leadership

Sheldon notes that the PSA’s early leadership was dominated by senior public servants, who were comfortable dealing with governments and other senior bureaucrats. The first president was a senior magistrate. This trend did not change much over the next 30 years. W.A. Flynn, president for 1928-33, was also a magistrate, and George Weir, president for 1936-39, was a barrister. Virtually all of the presidents from 1916 to 1940 came from the professional or administrative and clerical sections, but none came from the general section.

Initially the PSA was governed by a Council with representatives from each department, which constituted branches. When country branches were added on to this structure it became unwieldy. In 1917 the PSA was restructured into four sections – Professional, Clerical, Educational and General – reflecting the four divisions of the public service. Since teachers made up the vast majority of the old Education division, and they were organised in a separate union, the PSA abolished its Education section in 1925. In 1929 it established a fourth section, Government Agencies, to represent the growing number of non-departmental employees in authorities. These sections of the union replaced branches as the constituency for Council. The PSA which emerged after 1917 had four parallel centralised structures operating within the one union, each with their own officers. The rationale for this was the separate conditions of entry and career progression in public service divisions.

The clerical section was largest, with 53 per cent of members in 1929. The professional section was smallest, with 5 per cent of members, who were well-represented on the executive. The government agencies section had 14 per cent, and the general section over a quarter of members, including blue collar workers, such as cleaners, gardeners, and maintenance workers.

Industrial strategy and tactics

The 1902 Public Service Act provided for negotiations between the PSB and public servants’ representatives. The PSA and PSB were both committed to a hierarchical rational bureaucracy. This provided Dunlop’s ‘binding ideology’ necessary for a bargaining relationship, even if the PSA also challenged managerial prerogatives over appointments and promotions. A positive relationship was aided by the appointment of the PSA’s first chairman to the PSB in 1900. This relationship contributed to the relative industrial quietism of the PSA. Section 99 of the Industrial Arbitration Act rendered strikes by Crown employees illegal. The PSA accepted this legal restriction because it believed that it was unacceptable for public servants to halt the administrative processes of the State. However, the motto of ‘defence not defiance’ was common amongst all unions at this time.

Three main industrial issues emerged during this early era: salaries, access to arbitration and equal pay. Salaries became a significant issue for the PSA, as with many unions, during the high inflation of World War I and after. The PSB supported cost of living increases, but the government refused them. From that time the PSA sought access to the state arbitration system to gain basic wage increases. To this end it waged a campaign during 1919 involving mass meetings of public servants in Sydney, Maitland, Newcastle, Armidale and Orange. The Nationalist government allowed public servants access to the arbitration court in November 1919, but rescinded this in 1922 on the grounds that government should retain control over public expenditure and that public servants enjoyed privileges not shared by other workers. The PSA responded with mass meetings in city and country centres. However, they had to await the Lang ALP government to restore their access in 1926.

In 1929 the PSA became involved in a wider national campaign against the Commonwealth government’s intended handing over of its arbitration power to the States. The labour movement unanimously opposed the government’s proposals, claiming that their purpose was to abolish arbitration generally and diminish wages and conditions. The PSA agreed with this perspective, although not directly affected by the proposals, and played a leading campaign role, distributing handbills and placing large advertising hoardings at railway stations in opposition to the government. Many considered that public servants were instrumental in the defeat of the Bruce government in the October 1929 elections.
During the 1930s depression the main concern of the PSA was salary reductions. The reduction of costs to balance the budget represented sound orthodox financial thinking and public antagonism to the privileged position of public servants was evident in letters to the editor and newspaper editorials. In May 1930 the Bavin Nationalist government legislated to reduce most public servants’ salaries by 8.33 per cent for one year, claiming that the only alternative was wholesale dismissals, which had been experienced in some sections. The PSA condemned the legislation as ‘class taxation’ which singled them out, as a politically accessible group, to bear sacrifices which other sections of the community did not have to face. Further protests were made by the PSA when the government also ceased contributions to the State Superannuation Fund and paid its share of pensions as they fell due. For the PSA, this revived one of the major issues of the 1890s which led to its formation, when the government plundered the superannuation fund to balance the budget.

In February 1931 the Commonwealth Arbitration Court reduced the federal basic wage by ten per cent and further cost of living decreases occurred as prices declined. From mid-1932 the NSW Industrial Commission also reduced the State living wage, and NSW public servants were subject to these decreases as well. In August 1931 public service salary reductions were renewed on a sliding scale for the level of income, from 8.33 to 27.5 per cent. The combined impact of salary reductions, State living wage reductions and the unemployment relief tax reduced salaries by 25-30 per cent. Restoration of the legislated salary reductions was a long process. In July 1934 public servants received a 20 per cent restoration, in April 1935 this increased to 40 per cent, and in July 1936 to 70 per cent. In July 1937 full salary restoration occurred, although in 1940 public servants still earned less than in 1932 because the State living wage had not fully recovered.

The PSA organised a vigorous campaign for salary restoration involving intensive lobbying of government party members, deputations to the premier, petitions, a media campaign, and mass meetings throughout the State. This campaign developed momentum from late 1932, with thousands attending six mass meetings at the Sydney Town Hall and King’s Hall over the next three years, and 30,000 participating in a procession in June 1933. From 1935-37 organisation in the non-metropolitan area also intensified, with nineteen country centres holding rallies. A growing militancy in tone developed. The most spectacular demonstration occurred in June 1936 when a rowdy street demonstration took place outside Parliament House. Estimates of attendance varied between 1,000 and 5,000. Addressed by PSA president, George Weir, ‘wild cries arose’ from the meeting, ‘traffic was blocked, and people stood in front of the iron fence hooting and chanting. The Labor Daily proclaimed ‘Public Servants Storm Parliament House’. Another mass demonstration was held in September 1936 at Sydney Town Hall, with speeches relayed throughout NSW by radio stations.

As salaries were restored the PSA turned its attention more to equal pay and women’s employment conditions. From 1914-18 the PSA had consistently lobbied the PSB for equal pay and equal opportunity of appointment to all public service positions. In 1915 a PSA women’s organising committee was formed. A joint committee to work for equal pay was established with the Feminist Club (formed in 1914 by young university-educated professional women, public servants and artists, including Rose Scott and Jessie Street). This led to joint lobbying of the PSB with the Feminist Club, Women Teachers’ Club, and other women’s organisations. In 1920 a public service women’s petition called for a full cost of living increase to the female basic wage, and a women’s meeting urged the PSA to include three women members on the committee drafting the union’s first log of claims. At this time the PSA also adopted as an object ‘to secure equal payment of officers regardless of sex’. In the PSA’s first award case it sought recognition of the principle of equal pay for equal work. However, the PSA did not consider that the issue was taken seriously by the Court, which created a ‘career scale’ award for female only shorthand writers and typists and female clerks. Subsequently, PSA women unsuccessfully appealed the Court’s rejection of equal pay for equal work in the Clerical Award. In 1930 the informal Women’s Section became the Women’s Auxiliary of the PSA. Two women from the Auxiliary sat on Council from 1930, in addition to female delegates of the Clerical and General Sections.

In the context of high unemployment during the 1930s, equal pay remained a priority, and support for it grew throughout the union movement, particularly as male unionists feared that employers favoured cheap female labour to males where they had a choice. For women public servants on low wages the
reductions to salaries hit hard. The PSA salary restoration campaign, therefore, focused on the low-paid, including women and juniors. In 1934 together with the United Associations for Women the PSA called for an inquiry into the female living wage. In the late 1930s the equal pay campaign regathered momentum within the PSA and the union movement generally. The PSA was a major participant in the Council of Action for Equal Pay formed by a conference of 53 organisations. The Women’s Auxiliary strongly promoted the issue, with substantial support from the President, George Weir, who was joint President of the Council of Action during its first year. However, Jean Arnot noted that the Soviet Union was the only place where equal pay was widespread practice.

**Links with the wider labour movement**

The equal pay campaign demonstrated the PSA’s strong links with the wider labour movement, cooperating in joint campaigns and providing leadership. This can be seen in a number of other areas, such as the role of the PSA in the 1929 campaign against federal withdrawal from arbitration. In 1930 the Botanic gardens branch of the PSA also agitated for the removal from the gardens of relief workers who had been identified as strikebreakers on the coalfields.

As Sheldon notes the PSA in the early 1900s ‘identified very strongly’ with sister associations in other States. The PSA played a major role in the creation of the Australian Public Service Federation (APSF) in May 1917, provided much of the its early leadership of the APSF, and in promoted it amongst members. In 1917 the PSA president became first president of a federation of NSW public sector unions. In 1919 this was superseded by the Commonwealth and State Services Confederation, which the PSA joined, to campaign for access to the arbitration system and cost of living increases in salaries. The Confederation was mainly State-based, and when entry to the NSW Arbitration Court was gained it wound down its campaign for cost of living increases, to the PSA’s disgust. In March 1930 a Crown Employees’ Protection Committee (CEPC) consisting of representatives from the PSA, Teachers’ Federation, POA and other public sector bodies was formed in anticipation of salary reductions. It organised protest meetings in Sydney suburbs in April and May, and in the State elections of October 1930 the PSA cooperated with the Teachers’ Federation in circularising candidates concerning their intentions in this regard. The CEPC functioned throughout the 1930s. An emergency conference of the APSF in April 1932 formed a Council of Action to fight cutbacks in the public service as a result of the Premiers’ Plan, under the leadership of the PSA’s president. A joint Committee of Action was formed with representatives from the APSF and the Commonwealth Council of Action of federal public servants. Under the leadership of the PSA’s president the resulting NSW Public Service Defence Committee was active in the salary campaign. It included major blue collar unions, was based in Trades Hall, and enlisted support from the Labor Council.

**The PSA and politics**

The PSA’s rules explicitly prohibited identification with party politics. It was believed that affiliation with a political party would be untenable for the union, since governments change and public servants are bound to serve whichever party elected by the people. The PSA claimed that its identification with a political party would lead to the American ‘spoils system’, whereby a new administration would enter office with each change of government. Nevertheless, major public sector industrial issues inevitably led to political activity as a pressure group. The PSA also found some governments more sympathetic to its aims than others. From World War I this was likely to be ALP governments. Some key officers of the PSA were also ALP members, notably George Weir (president 1936-38), who went on to a parliamentary career. Nevertheless, direct political links were the exception.

After loss of access to arbitration in 1922, public service unions’ campaign for re-entry quickly assumed broader political overtones. In the federal elections of December the PSA made a thinly veiled call for support for the ALP, even though the result would not directly affect State circumstances. Stressing that it was a non-party political organisation, the PSA pointed out that the NSW Nationalists’ action in depriving them of access to arbitration, together with Prime Minister Hughes’ desire to substitute conciliation committees for arbitration federally, formed part of ‘the world-wide attack upon hours and wages of employees’.
The federal elections provided ‘a golden opportunity to strike a blow in defence of the privilege of Arbitration’. Significantly, the PSA declared that ‘Public Servants are Workers’. The vote of the workers of Australia can determine which party shall hold the reins of office’. This hostility towards the Nationalists persisted throughout the 1920s.

Relations with the ALP warmed from the time of the 1925 Lang government. Lang brought public servants back into the arbitration system, introduced preference to unionists, and paid a double contribution to the State Superannuation Fund to compensate for the Fuller government’s default. The PSA generally felt more secure with an ALP government, which was associated with growth in public employment as well as unionism. In contrast, the Nationalists were associated in the 1920s with public sector economising. In 1929 the PSA also clearly campaigned for an ALP vote in the federal elections where retention of Commonwealth arbitration was a major issue, although the PSA did not mention the ALP by name. During the 1930 State elections in NSW the campaign against salary reductions amounted to an anti-Nationalist campaign. Together with the Teachers’ Federation, the PSA published party policies on the eve of the election, noting opposition leader Lang’s promise to restore salaries, and concluding: ‘Public servants, reason these things out for yourselves and act as your common sense directs you’. The PSA emphasised that whilst its support for the ALP was political, it was ‘non-party political’, since it was simply supporting a party with which it had a community of interests at that time. In any case, it argued that the salary reduction legislation itself encroached upon the political independence of the public service by tasking control of the matter out of the PSB as the employer body. When Lang was elected premier in 1930 many, including Lang, considered that the public service vote had been the most critical element. The PSA’s stance attracted charges of ‘politicalisation’. From the 1920s this occurred within the PSA, particularly in country districts. However, at the PSA’s annual conference of April 1931 all branches expressed support for the executive’s actions, although the Botanic Gardens branch motion to affiliate with the ALP was overwhelmingly defeated. The charges of politicisation were more sustained from outside the PSA. In 1929 Nationalist Premier Bavin and Prime Minister Bruce accused public sector unions of becoming blatantly political against their own long-term interests and those of the community. The reaction of the press was often more extreme, predicting disaster for public servants and the community if a PSA/ALP alliance was cemented. Smith’s Weekly commented that ‘we cannot give too hearty a welcome to government of the people by the public servant for the public servant’. On the other hand, strong support for the PSA came from the labour movement.

The PSA congratulated Lang on his election victory in November 1930, viewing the future optimistically. Lang quickly re-introduced preference to unionists, and the PSA’s membership grew by 15 per cent in a year. However, Lang was unable to honour his promise to restore salaries. As the federal ALP government moved towards an orthodox policy of financial austerity, Lang produced his own plan to suspend interest payments to overseas bondholders and move from a gold standard to a ‘goods standard’ for currency. The Lang Plan split the ALP, and in June 1931 when the Premiers’ Plan for a 20 per cent reduction in all government expenditure was adopted, Lang planned alternative measures to cap public service salaries at $1000 and increase the Unemployment Relief Tax, but the Legislative Council rejected these. Lang then extended salary reductions on a sliding scale based on level of salary. However, he did prevent State cost of living hearings which would have led to further wage reductions.

The PSA continued to lobby the Lang government for salary restoration, but under the circumstances it was resigned to the fact that little could be done immediately. It did, however, attack Lang’s plan for capping salaries at $1000 as ‘one of the wildest pieces of legislation that has ever been seen in any part of the world’, although this clearly benefited very few public servants. The revised salary reductions on a sliding scale, was one of a number of options presented to the government by the PSA itself, in preference to the salary capping.

Public servants were four days late being paid at this time because of the government’s financial difficulties. Even more unusually, the newly-elected federal United Australia Party (UAP) government paid the overseas interest bill which the State government had default upon, and took measures to recover the funds from NSW. Prior to his dismissal by the Governor, in May 1932, Lang withdrew State
assets from the Commonwealth Bank to the State Treasury, whereupon transactions were conducted in cash, with country public servants paid by union cheque for which the unions were then compensated in cash. Lang was defeated in the subsequent elections of June 1932.69

The PSA issued a pro-ALP circular during the December 1931 federal elections, justified in terms of its concern over arbitration.70 At least the executive was non-party political in that it did not choose between Lang Labor and the federal ALP. At the 1932 annual conference three country branches objected to the executive’s political actions. Some dissatisfaction also emerged over its relative passivity under Lang over salaries.71

The Financial Agreements Enforcement Act which claimed State revenue to recoup the Commonwealth’s payment of State interest debts raised the question of loyalty for NSW public servants. The PSA stated that ‘the duty of maintaining peace and order in NSW is the function of the Government of this State’, pledging itself ‘to support the Government of the State in its determination to maintain the essential services of Government’. Consequently, it urged its members to ‘render every possible assistance to its employer, the State Government, in any emergencies or difficulties’.72 Annual conference unanimously supported this policy, and public servants from the time expressed a strong loyalty to the State.73

The PSA’s relations with the government declined after the UAP/Country Party coalition took office. The campaign for salary restoration then gathered momentum. When the Stevens government applied a living wage reduction to public servants in late 1933 on the grounds that it would be improper to interfere, the PSA noted the government’s inconsistency in maintaining legislated salary reductions which ‘violated every award of this State and every agreement in respect of its employees’, and the president claimed that they would have been much better off under Lang’s scheme.74 In the 1935 State elections the salary restoration campaign inevitably meant involvement by all public sector unions on the side of the ALP.

More generally, throughout the service was a growing feeling that basic social change was necessary, although the alternatives were seen vaguely. In-service examinations included a paper on ‘Social and Economic Problems of the State’. One examinee stated that ‘the throes of the depression section of the business cycle … is inevitable, and until a better system is found, the cycle of boom and depression will continue’.75 In early 1934 the PSA elected a delegate to the League of Nations Union, stating that it was ‘practically the only active body that stands four-square for the promotion of peace in the world’, and an article appeared in Red Tape attacking munitions interests for encouraging war.76 The greatest manifestation of a growing radicalisation was in the social commentary provided by the PSA’s Economic Committee established in 1929. The committee reported regularly in the union journal on economic and political ideas, and the prospects for social change to ensure economic stability. It was chaired by president Flynn, clearly not someone predisposed to radical rhetoric. Nevertheless, some of his and the committee’s statements were remarkable for public servants of the time. In 1932 the committee pronounced that ‘the depression of today is not due to overspending, high wages or high costs of production in any country. The evil is universal, and is caused, as we have seen, by an out-of-date, dehumanised system of world monetary control’.77 In 1934 the Committee declared itself in favour of greater state control of banking, quoting G.D.H. Cole in support of its argument. From 1933 to 1934 the Economic Committee published a number of articles on political economy, including consideration of Douglas Social Credit and other ‘funny money’ schemes, rejecting them ultimately as solutions to the depression. The economic policy which emerged from the committee’s articles was anti-deflationary, consistent with the union movement generally.78 Considerable sympathy emerged for socialism, however vaguely it was understood. Ultimately, the committee hailed Roosevelt’s New Deal in the USA as a viable strategy.79 Most significantly, these articles represented a searching for something to replace the social and economic system around them which seemed to be failing so badly.

Is there any doubt that the system is to blame? A system which permits the continual accumulation of profits made at the expense of the consuming public, to be used later as a means for exacting toll on future production, must a priori be defective, unjust and uneconomic. But when we add that it does not guarantee the subsistence and reasonable comfort of the willing worker living, except under circumstances over which the worker, even in the most democratic country, has no control, and we add the frightful indictment of the cycle of boom’s and depressions, one does not need to be a socialist to condemn the system.80
Conclusions

A significant proportion of the PSA’s membership enjoyed an income equivalent to the lower echelons of the working class, and this section of the public service labour force expanded significantly after the first decade of the century. By 1930 almost half of white collar public servants earned the equivalent of working class salaries. However, as with the beginning of the century, a significant proportion of the PSA’s membership enjoyed incomes which placed them amongst the middle class. Consequently, the PSA’s membership was mixed in these material terms.

The formation of the PSA in 1899 represented a major step for public servants. The middle class background which many enjoyed or aspired to, did not usually provide a strong base for unionism. The formation of the PSA represented a degree of radicalisation of public servants under extraordinary circumstances which actually threatened the material basis for their relatively privileged position. Over the next 30 years the union was sustained to a significant degree by the fear that this material basis of privilege would be threatened in substantial ways again, as government responded in ways similar to the 1890s when budgetary crises occurred.

The threats of the 1930s depression, took the PSA’s radicalism a step further. In that decade they mounted a major political campaign for protection of salaries, developed strong links with the wider union movement in joint campaigns over arbitration and equal pay, and became closely aligned with the ALP in practice, if not by affiliation. Most importantly, the PSA and its membership developed a more radical world view and willingness to examine substantial social change. This represented a considerable radicalisation, and in many ways predicted wider shifts in white-collar unionism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Endnotes

5. Based on annual conference reports plus after 1919 Annual Reports of NSW Industrial Register.
8. Sydney Morning Herald (hereafter SMH), 28 March 1930, p. 11.
15. PSA Annual Report to 1930 Annual Conference, Red Tape (hereafter RT), 13 May 1930.
16. Sections 14a & 49a.
17. Public Service Journal (hereafter PSJ), 1 November 1919, p. 4; Hedges, ‘Role of Public Service Associations’, p. 361.
19. PSJ, 1 October 1919, pp. 3 & 15, 1 November 1919, p. 25; SMH, 21 March 1919.
32. SMH, 3 June 1936; RT, 25 June 1936, p. 145.
35. PSJ, 1 August 1915, pp. 2-3; 1 January 1916, p. 15; 1 March 1916, p. 10; 1 August 1916, p. 17.
38. PSJ, 15 July 1921, p. 3.
45. RT, 25 February 1938, p. 27.
46. 1931 Annual Conference Minutes, RT, 24 April 1931, p. 105.
47. Sheldon, ‘Middle Class Union’, p. 111; RT, 1 Jan. 1914, pp. 1-2; 1 Sept. 1916, p. 2; 1 April 1917, p. 1; 1 May 1917, p. 1; 1 Sept. 1918, p. 39; 15 August 1920, p. 3.
48. Ibid., 2 January 1917, p. 11; 1 May 1917, p. 6.
49. SMH, 19 March 1919; PSJ, 1 June 1917, pp. 9-10; 2 January 1919, p. 1; 1 June 1919, p. 6; 1 November 1919, p. 5.
52. Ibid., 24 June 1933, p. 164; 26 March 1933, p. 51; SMH, 13,15 June 1933; Labor Daily, 25 May 1933.
54. PSJ, 15 November 1922, pp. 2-3.
55. Ibid., 15 March 1926, pp. 4-5.
59. For example, PSJ, 15 February 1926, p. 14.
61. SMH, 28 September 1929; 30 September 1929; 7 August 1930; 12 August 1930; 27 August 1930.
64. RT, 25 November 1930, p. 254; 25 April 1931; 25 January 1932, p. 86.
65. Markey, In Case of Oppression, pp. 188, 256-60; Louis & Turner, The Depression, pp. 52-53.
68. SMH, 4 August 1931, p. 7.
70. SMH, 17 December 1931.
71. RT, 25 April 1932, p. 146; also SMH, 17 December 1931.
72. 1932 Annual Conference Minutes, RT, 26 April, pp. 158, 167.
75. Bland Papers, Box 26.
76. RT, 26 March 1934, p. 51; 26 April 1934, p. 64.
77. Ibid., 25 April 1932: 118-9, original emphasis.
79. Ibid., 25 June 1933, pp. 173-75.
80. Ibid., 24 December 1932, p. 82.
Class and tradition in singing together: from Europe to New South Wales

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The musical culture of a nation is to be estimated upon the extent of participation of the whole population rather than upon the extent of the virtuosity of a fraction of it. The basis for musical culture is the vernacular of the broad mass of the people – its traditional ‘folk’ idiom; popular music and professional music are elaborate superstructures built upon the common base.¹

Though there is no strong reason to doubt what Charles and Pete Seeger believe, it is sometimes hard these days to see the ‘folk’ in the ‘elaborate superstructure’. Folk singing and folk songs are about human life in its every form and activity. They involve traditional tunes and words of and by the ‘ordinary’ people. More often than not these are passed on from one generation to the next.

Others talk of the subjugation or even disappearance of ‘folk music’ under the weight of industrial society and capitalism.

However, the development of modern (industrial) society created a new form of transmission of music that first influenced, then, in some societies, eliminated the original folk tradition²

What this paper tries to do is set the development of choirs in general and ‘workers’ choirs in particular into a context bounded by economic and political imperatives.

The process of the subjugation of folk music was linked to the industrial revolution which was marked by urbanisation, erosion of musical experience in the population and the overlay by ‘popular’ music. Tied directly into this is the rapid increase in population and technological advances and intensification of labour – in other words the labour process. The labour process, so adequately described by many authors, was the motive force for the change in fortunes of folk music as it was for so many things during the industrial revolution. The stricter regimes of employment and longer hours were the norm as industrial capitalism expanded over a very short period of less than 100 years. This tore apart traditional communities through urbanisation and centralisation of production and pulled apart the connection between traditional folk music, musicians and community. What developed was a new folk music with less direct participation and more of passive participation. Choirs were a part of this.

There are many examples of this process not just in the UK (ie Cornwall, Lancashire, Durham, The Tyne and Glasgow etc.) which has been one of the prime examples used but also in other countries undergoing similar changes such as Canada (Newfoundland), Holland and Finland.

In the UK, in the eighteenth century, much of northern England places like Lancashire and Durham were sparsely populated, somewhat remote & forested. The Industrial Revolution changed this forever. The North of England and South of Scotland came into their own. These areas became ‘the workshop of the world’ and the source of Britain’s global pre-eminence.

Industrial England was to a great extent Northern England. The government may still have sat in Whitehall…, but much of the nation’s wealth was being created in the factories and mills, coal mines and steel works, chemical plants and shipyards of Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle and Leeds.

A strong Northern culture developed, both in Lancashire and Yorkshire, with a flourishing local press, vigorous party political organizations, a rich dialect literature, a distinct musical tradition centred on brass bands and choirs, and a growing interest in regional history and archaeology³

As might be expected, European settlers in Australia tended to import and adapt the changes from European colonisers.

The influx of Welsh migrants into the Hunter Valley helped to develop particular working class cultural expression. In addition to the Welsh participation in the singing, dancing, and recitations, Eisteddfods and choirs were popular, even up until the 1950s.
The existence of workers choirs in the Hunter Valley in one form or another goes back well over 100 years. In the 1860s and 1870s the men and women of the mining communities used to gather at the mine gates and sing to the non union workers brought in by the coal companies as strike breakers. What the miners sang to the scabs was not ‘nice’ at all but certainly fitting for the occasion. Later on this folk tradition of singing about particular strikes or events became formalised (and toned down somewhat) and entered into the written and oral history of unionism. At times, for example in the 1880s, the unions sought respectability in relationship to, and promoted the culture of the owning class among their members. This tended to force the folk tradition underground, only to have it surface again during times of great conflict or economic upheaval.

The Welsh massed male choirs are a parallel development and a more acceptable cultural activity which was transported to Australia by migration. In fact much more is known about the Welsh choirs for that very reason – its cross class acceptability. Claire Robertss has recorded that an Eisteddfod involving singing groups was held at Wallsend (now a suburb of Newcastle) in 1863 and a choir was formed in Lambton (another Newcastle Suburb) in May 1865 under the auspices of the Lambton Choral Society. The titles of many of the songs performed by bands and choirs, at past Eisteddfods, bear testimony to the classical link. Songs included ‘Cum Rhonda’, ‘Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah’ and ‘The Heavens are Telling’. However on some occasions these bands and choirs did connect with trade union issues. Jim Comerford tells of the financial support from the miners’ that was essential in keeping some bands viable. He relates the role of the music during the 1929 lockout at Rothbury in the Hunter Valley when the Greta Miners Band played a song called ‘A Sad Day on the Coal Field’ about the death of Norman Brown who was shot by police. The same band also played ‘The Dead March From Saul’ (aimed at strike-breakers) on other occasions.

During World War I a radicalism developed in the Australian working class generated by the anti-conscription campaign and the Russian Revolution. It was this period that produced songs like ‘Bump Me Into Parliament’ and ‘Solidarity’. Some of these were borrowed from overseas others generated locally. This radicalism was fostered by the political movement and saw expression for many decades in the use of agit prop theatre and song, the production of union/political song books, as well as the advent of the workers choirs in the 1930s and 1940s.

Comerford has related that a ‘Marxist Choir’ was formed in Kurri Kurri in 1931 led by a cockney tailor with the surname Fetts. This choir of some 20 people sang songs such as The Red Flag’ and ‘Bump Me into Parliament’ at miners’ gatherings, but was active for less than six months. In 1936, a meeting of trade unionists at Newcastle Town Hall called for the formation of a workers’ choir. The reason for this request was a particularly bad rendition of ‘The Internationale’. There is no record of the call being heeded – until 1988 when a new generation workers choir was formed in the city.

This new choir was able to access a number of songs written about the Hunter Region such as the marvellous poem, ‘Weevils in the Flour’. This poem is about the 1930s depression in Newcastle and was written by the poet Dorothy Hewett. It has become a popular working class song, as has ‘Norman Brown’, a song about a miner shot dead by police during the Rothbury Lockout in 1929. One of the Hunter Valley’s best known poets, Jock Graham, has had a number of his works put to song including the poem ‘Man of the Earth’.

Specific workers’ choirs have existed for at least 70 years. It is on record that a ‘Peoples Chorus’ existed in Sydney in the early 1940s. This choir performed at various union and political functions and it was both agitational and a translator of the folk tradition. In the 1950s a revival of folk music occurred and the linking of it with theatre in the play ‘Reedy River’ is perhaps one of the better known examples. Versions of this play were performed in the Hunter Valley. In the mid-1970s the WCAC organised song groups to entertain and relate to workers and their struggles. One such group that included members of the ‘Maitland Bush Band’ played from a barge in the harbour to dockyard workers on the jetty after dockyard management had refused the band entry to the workplace.

In the mid-1980s an acappella working class song group from Britain called ‘The Flying Pickets’ toured Australia. In 1986 Paul Simon released his ‘Gracelands’ album that featured massed (African) choir singing. These influences and later (in 1987 and 1988) the formation in Sydney of the Solidarity Choir, in Brisbane of the Combined Unions Choir and in Newcastle of the Newcastle People’s Chorus, marked
the beginning of a new generation of workers choirs. The underlying reasons for such an upsurge can be traced to the generations of labour movement activists who experienced the Anti-Vietnam War Movement and the radicalism in the period of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. By the mid-1980s many of these people were concerned that the commitment to unionism and radicalism was waning under the influence of the conservative mass media and a labor party that was turning rapidly to the right. One way to keep alive a spirit of radicalism and imbue the working class with the traditions of struggle and a sense of history was to turn to the oral tradition, including workers choirs. It was to some extent these labour movement activists who led the upsurge and with few exceptions they were people from the rank and file of the unions, though they often worked with the full support of the trade union hierarchy.

**An example: the Newcastle Peoples Chorus**

The idea of a workers’ choir in Newcastle was discussed from September 1987 and the ‘Peoples Chorus’ was formed in July 1988 by the combining of a few Newcastle Trades Hall Council delegates, other unionists and fellow travellers (about eight people in all). In addition to the reasons noted above, the formation of this choir had as much to do with the perceived pathetic ‘off key’ singing of workers anthems at traditional May Day events and the identified need for a group of singers to lead the others in song.

Early repertoire included the convict ballad ‘Moreton Bay’, contemporary folk songs such as ‘Bare Legged Kate’ by John Dengate as well as the militant union songs which have been absorbed into the tradition, such as: ‘Bump Me Into Parliament’, ‘Red Flag’, ‘Internationale’ and ‘Solidarity Forever’. This Chorus now has about 25 members and has been functioning for 17 years. As well as singing at union events like May Day, the Chorus performs at Folk Festivals, Peace events and more recently at funerals where often politically progressive people wish to dispense with religious services and have songs more relevant to the life of the person concerned.

**Endnotes**

Equity Foundation, Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance

Genevieve Picot  
Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance

The Equity Foundation coordinates the professional development and publications program of the performer section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. It reports to the National Performers Committee (NPC), which is made up of performers.

In 2004 NPC decided to celebrate Actors Equity’s sixty-fifth anniversary. The Foundation commissioned Equity member Genevieve Picot, and Tony Watts of Parrot Management to produce a video recorded archive of the personal memories and experiences of present and past Equity member activists across the 65 years of its history. The project included distribution of highlights from the Archive in text and video.

Specifically the project comprised of:

- Three 4 page supplements in the Winter, Spring and Summer editions of Equity magazine, featuring variety and theatre and Equity highlights 1939-51, radio, film and television and Equity highlights 1951-67 and Opera Dance and Physical Theatre and Equity highlights 1976-2004
- 53 interviews conducted across all states except Tasmania and all artforms, theatre, variety, dance, classical ballet, circus, stunt work, opera, musical theatre and were recorded on video to be transferred to DVD format.
- A collection of the full 53 interviews on individual DVDs with additional DVDs containing photographs, newspaper cuttings, documents and other pictorial material associated with the interviews and the history of Equity, gathered from archives the union magazine and personal collections completes the archival set.
- Ten complete sets will be produced, three for the NSW/ Federal branch and one for each state branch, including Tasmania, with two sets being archived with ScreenSound Australia. The Performing Arts Collection at the Arts Centre Victoria will also hold a copy of the highlights DVD.
- Distribution to current members of Equity of an anniversary DVD. 10,000 DVDs were distributed with the Equity magazine in the second week of December 2004.
- Highlights DVD of 3-5 minutes were produced for the 65th anniversary celebrations in various states. A highlights package that was tailored to include relevant members and anecdotes from specific state was delivered for Equity parties in Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth.

2004 was a fairly congested year for Equity in terms of industrial campaigns. Members mobilised to campaign against the inclusion of cultural industries in the AUSFTA, and around Feature Film and Television Agreements, amongst other issues. Against this backdrop the archival project formed part of a raft of activities that celebrated the achievements and battles of Actors’ Equity’s 65 years.

This included:

- A 2004 calendar that celebrated key moments in Equity’s history and included member comments for each month,
- 65th logo and branding on all publications and membership cards, and

The project provides a major resource for future history related projects for Equity – into its 75th and 100th year anniversaries. Feedback from members has been positive.
We plan to invite an Equity member to outline the objectives and scope of the project, specifically the archive. Also we will briefly outline some of the issues and campaigns discussed in the course of recording and compiling the archive, and how some of these were directly linked over many years to current campaigns.

For example, the archive recorded members who were also campaigning for Australian content while they recorded their involvement in similar but much earlier campaigns. Speaking as the voice of February 2004 in the calendar Jason Donovan said ‘It seems absurd that thirty years ago my father was fighting to introduce Australian content to our film and television’s screens and now, thirty years on, I’m having to join with him to campaign to keep it there’.

We would also show an excerpt from the DVD that was distributed to Equity members in 2004.
The ACTU and the struggles of Indigenous Australians

Jeannie Rea
Victoria University

The motivation of Australian blue-collar unions in forming a national federation, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1927, was to better coordinate national policy and action and to influence national government. There was a need to operate at this national level for political as well as industrial leverage. Throughout it’s history the ACTU has taken major initiatives in campaigns beyond a narrow industrial ambit, including advocating for universal health and education systems to supporting international political struggles including that against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. However, with a few exceptions, there is little evidence in the history of the ACTU of support for Indigenous Australians in either industrial or political struggles. Rarely has national leadership been provided by the main national trade union federation despite the ACTU’s prominence in Australian national affairs. Most of the initiatives in supporting Indigenous workers and political campaigns have been taken by state and territory union branches, state and regional trades and labour councils and a few national unions. Aboriginal organisations, on the other hand, throughout the 20th century have repeatedly sought to bring their diverse and disparate regional organisations into national federations and alliances in order to influence national governments and the mass of Australian society. For Indigenous organisations the support of the ACTU has been considered important because of the national focus on legislative change, policy and resourcing of Indigenous affairs. Only occasionally has the ACTU put its muscle behind appeals for support from national Indigenous organisations or for specific industrial or political campaigns.

The trade union movement has a duty to fight for justice for Indigenous people in the same way as it has for workers’ rights

ACTU President, Martin Ferguson, 1993

In making this policy the ACTU and its affiliates are making a clear statement that we will campaign to improve the situation for Australian Indigenous people and that this process will be a priority for our unions. The 2003 policy represents a break from our past approach. We accept that we are accountable for the situation for Indigenous people of this country and that we will be called upon to both initiate and support campaigns for Indigenous Australians.

ACTU Congress 2003

North Australian Workers Union (NAWU) delegate, Jack McGinness was invited to speak at the 1951 All-Australian Trade Union Congress, about the struggle for decent wages and citizenship rights in Darwin following a series of strikes over wages and civil rights organised by Indigenous workers and supported by the NAWU. McGinness was probably the first Indigenous Australian to address the ACTU, and it was the first time that the situation of Indigenous workers was raised in open conference. Congress responded with a strong resolution:

Congress wholeheartedly supports and commends the requests put forward to Congress by Mr J. McGinness, representing the North Australian Workers Union, with reference to the plight of full Aborigines and half-castes. These demands are considered by Congress to be the minimum necessary to allow these classes of people in the Australian community to be self-respecting and to obtain a proper standard of living. Further the Executive be directed to afford any assistance necessary to the NAWU to present the case for these classes of people before the belated enquiry to be conducted by the Commonwealth Government.

Whilst the ACTU support assisted McGinness’s campaign, the ACTU seems to have remained silent on Aboriginal rights issues until 1963. The ACTU was not involved in the ongoing strike over wages and land by Aboriginal stockman in the Pilbara, which started around 1947 and gained some support from West Australian unionists involved in Aboriginal rights groups. The ACTU was also silent as Actor’s Equity, in a publicised process, negotiated the wages and conditions of Aboriginal actors in the 1955 film, Jedda.
More than another decade was to pass before the 1963 ACTU Conference went on record and made
decision to ending wage discrimination against Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Several
years of pressure through the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait
Islanders (FCAATSI) and affiliated unions led up to the 1963 policy. The 1963 congress agenda paper
had proposed motions from 13 affiliates addressing a raft of issues from education and housing to
‘making reparations’ to handing over control of land. This policy was subsequently updated over the
decades and provided a basis for affiliates seeking ACTU intervention in various issues.

The first serious industrial intervention was in 1965 when the ACTU sought amendment to the Federal
Pastoral Industry Award for equal pay for Indigenous cattle industry workers, following the initiative
of Aboriginal pastoral workers to go on strike supported by the NAWU in the Northern Territory. The
outcome of the case was equal pay but only with a three year phase in period, which precipitated the
famous walk off by the Gurindji at Wave Hill led by Vincent Lingiari. The ACTU’s negotiations on
behalf of the NAWU continued but were unsuccessful and so the ACTU came to be associated with the
three year delay and lost faith with Aboriginal workers and their supporters. The ACTU was party to an
agreement that perpetuated the inequality and the racist construction of the ‘efficiency’ of Aboriginal
workers as compared to white workers. The NAWU rejected the agreement, as did the FCAATSI whose
secretary, Stan Davey claimed the ACTU had ‘sold out’ the stock workers.

A high point of active intervention by the ACTU leadership was that of the then ACTU President Bob
Hawke in the Noonkanbah case in 1979-80. Whilst Hawke found a resolution to the specific industrial
dispute, the campaign failed. The Yungngora of Noonkanbah, even with their union and broader support,
were unable to stop the exploratory drilling on their land. That violation, coupled with the trauma of the
campaign had devastating adverse effects upon the community.

The Gurindji and the Noonkanbah campaigns were both initiated by Indigenous communities with
support of non-Indigenous allies including unionists, and significantly were about land rights and self-
determination and not a narrow industrial claim. The support from unionists and the broader community
around Australia were for Aboriginal rights and a redressing of the wrongs as much as for the recognisable
industrial issues. As the Gurindji settled at Daguragu (Wattie Creek) and sought to make a claim for their
land, the Waterside Workers Federation levied its members to contribute to build a fence around the
claim. Understanding of Indigenous politics had broadened in this union and others with long records
of support like the Seamen’s Union (SUA) and Queensland Trades and Labour Council.

The ACTU did support the 1967 Referendum, but this would be expected as political support was
bipartisan and other institutions in Australian society including the Churches were also advocating
its passage. However as the high hopes of the referendum went unfulfilled and by 1972, in despair
and anger, a new generation of Indigenous activists set up the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawns of
Parliament House in Canberra, the ACTU was not involved. Coordinated from Sydney, progressive
unions and unionists did support and assist the embassy.

It was to be nearly 40 years after McGinness, before another Indigenous delegate addressed the national
conference of the ACTU. In 1989 Patricia Fowell from the Australian Teachers Federation, in a stirring
speech advised delegates that if they adopted the revised Aboriginal Affairs strategy they must also
make a commitment to its implementation. She added, ‘Do not put your hand up and vote yes and then
feel good because you have felt as though you have “dealt with” Aborigines and can then dismiss it’.

There were a number of initiatives over the 1990s including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Commission (ATSIC)/ACTU partnership in the Aboriginal Employment Development Program,
coordination of the drive for Award coverage for Aboriginal organisations during Martin Ferguson’s
presidency, and more active involvement in campaigns in defence of Native Title and through the
Council for Reconciliation, on which Jennie George represented the ACTU. The Aboriginal Affairs
committee became the Indigenous Committee with Indigenous members. However, at the end of the
century Lowitja O’Donahue, Chairperson of the ATSIC, argued to an ACTU Women’s Conference that
there was still much to be implemented of the ‘worthy aims’ of the ACTU policy.

By 2003, when Patrick Dodson addressed ACTU Congress, there was comprehensive Indigenous
policy developed and advocated by the standing Indigenous committee chaired by Joel Wright of the
National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) who was also the elected Indigenous representative on the
ACTU Executive. There were now enough Indigenous delegates representing affiliates to form a caucus and have some influence on the floor of Congresses. Several ACTU affiliates had recognised their responsibility to recruit and support Indigenous workers and a few allocated some resources and staff time to such roles at a national and state level. A few unions had made structural changes to better include Indigenous members in decision-making and resource allocation. Back in 1983 the Australian Teachers Federation had set a benchmark with the appointment of a national Aboriginal education officer.\textsuperscript{14} Twenty years later only the NTEU and Independent Education Union (IEU) had full time dedicated officials at a national level, while several unions had an Indigenous project officer at a state level to work on particular issues. As part of the Reconciliation process, in 2003 the Maritime Workers Union (MUA) and Independent Education (IEU) had both established memorandums of understanding with the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission (ATSIC). Arising out of Dodson’s participation in the congress, the executive of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) had met with him to work on new ways for the union to support Indigenous communities.

Over the last 40 years despite a policy record actual campaigns for Indigenous workers and support for political campaigns and intervention in particular disputes or campaigns has remained largely ad hoc to the present day, despite the consistent efforts of a small number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous union leaders.\textsuperscript{15} Whilst it can be argued that this made sense in terms of on the ground organising, Aboriginal activists and their supporters were always trying to change discriminatory change state and federal laws. There was a clear role for the ACTU as a national federation of trade unions to listen and stand alongside national Indigenous organisations and advocacy organisations like FCAATSI. This has been better demonstrated in the more recent period with joint actions with national land rights organisations and the National Council of Aboriginal Organisations in the 1980s, and ATSIC and support organisations like the Council for Reconciliation and ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation).

Until this recent period, the ACTU has tended to be reactive to pressure for action from affiliates and outsiders, rather than taking on initiatives as the national trade union federation. The ACTU’s reluctance to stand alongside Indigenous leaders has been variously attributed to the racism of the Australian working class and the support of the White Australia Policy (WAP), the internal politics of the trade union movement and the control of the ACTU leadership by the labour right, to the lack of interest by Indigenous people in seeking union support. However, there is a long record of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking union support on the reasonable assumption that unions supported equality, fairness and justice. Many Indigenous people have been union members because of their working class location in mainstream Australia – and there is plenty of evidence that people confined on missions and reserves organised strikes and sought outside union support. People were not in unions, when they were specifically excluded by racist union policy or because they were denied access to jobs with union coverage. There is no evidence that Indigenous workers are reluctant joiners even with most union’s poor records in supporting them industrially or politically. There are many stories to be told of the exclusion of Indigenous workers, of ignorance and racism and neglect. However, there are also stories of inclusion, of struggling together, of mutual support and understanding between Indigenous workers and their communities and non-Indigenous unionists. Unfortunately the national federation, the ACTU has generally disappointed Indigenous campaigners.

\textit{Endnotes}

1. \textit{The Age}, 22/6/93, p. 4.
2. Biannual Conference of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).
4. Jack McGinness was a leader of the Australian Half-Caste Progressive Association in Darwin in 1951. He was a member of the NAWU executive from 1952 and elected President in 1955, probably the first Indigenous person elected to senior office in an Australian union. \textit{The Northern Standard}, 4 July 1952; \textit{People}, 4 September 1957 (Papers held by daughter Kathleen Mills).
6. Interestingly though the ACTU manages to take some credit for these in it’s 2003, 75th anniversary booklet. D. McLeod, *How the West Was Lost: The Native Question in the Development of Western Australia*. Self published, Port Hedland, 1984 comments on unionist backing, but it does not seem to be much. The *Jedda* case remains controversial, as there is the view that it was the pressure from the American Screen Actors Guild rather than the local union that led to the equal wages outcome.


13. Patrick Dodson had established a relationship with the ACTU through working with Jennie George ACTU Assistant Secretary 1990-96 and then President 1996-2000 in the Council for Reconciliation during the 1990s. George had resigned from the Council in protest when Dodson was not re-appointed as Chair by the Prime Minister John Howard in 1997. Dodson had previously addressed ACTU Congress in 2000.


15. The NSW Trade Union Committee for Aboriginal Rights (TUCAR) founded by Kevin Cook and others in 1977 and coordinated by Kevin Tory since 1986 has consistently sought to assist unions in defending Indigenous workers and to seek the support of unions for Indigenous rights campaigns. They have always considered support at the peak union level, the ACTU, to be important – and that it should be expected.
'It was a partnership, really. A partnership in the true sense of the word': working relationships and gender balance in Scottish fishing families.

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The history of the Scottish fishing industry has focused on the roles taken by male workers with little or no mention of its female workforces: licensed traders, called fishwives, and herring industry workers, called gutters and packers. A puzzling exclusion not shared in many fishing communities where women's work was both visible and valued. They do, however, make appearances in Scottish literature and art and their images have been further marginalised as silent icons in the contemporary Scottish heritage industry. These identities are also embedded in popular culture and language. Herring workers are usually portrayed as the ‘always cheerful, always knitting, guttin’ lassies’, terms which deny both the harsh physical conditions of their working environment and the age range and maturity of the female herring worker. Fishwives are mostly famously identified by two diverse images: either the pious, demure subjects of the Scottish pioneering photographers, Hill and Adamson or the demonic trading imagery of the phrase ‘screaming like a fishwife’. Neither of these identities bears any resemblance to the realities of their work experiences and the importance of their skills to the Scottish fishing industry. The patterns of their work experiences which relied on business acumen, negotiation skills and strong peer group identities undoubtedly influenced gender relationships and this paper will comment on the signs and symbols of the gender balances which were woven into the structures of their economic and social relationships.

The British herring trade of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depended for its success on the skills and abilities of the thousands of Scottish women who processed the herring for national and international markets. These mobile workforces travelled around mainland and island ports during an eight to nine month period of the year providing trained personnel to work out on the quaysides, grading, gutting, salting and packing fish to British Crown standards. The advanced design of Scottish fishing boats and nets helped Scottish fisherman become the major suppliers of fresh herring for the curing trade. However, this trade depended most crucially on the speed and quality of its gutting and packing methods carried out by an almost exclusively female Scottish workforce. They developed a type of Scotch cured herring into a brand with a worldwide reputation. The importance of their skills, mobility, childcare practices and political activism not only were important contributions to the success of the British herring industry but supported male employment and helped improve wages and conditions for fishermen and shore based male workers as well as themselves. Their land based occupations were as harsh a working environment as their male counterparts endured at sea. They used their position in the essential processing sector as political voices on behalf of themselves and the male workers of the Scottish fishing industry.

In most Scottish fishing communities work was not defined as an exclusively male occupation. The working life of fishermen involved regular absence from home with no guaranteed income and families had to be provided for. Women in the family were expected to manage and sustain households and employment was not restricted by age, childbearing or marital status. Both the roles of the fishwife and the herring worker were carried out in the public domain, required specific skills and demanded a high level of quality control. Neither group considered age or childbearing as a barrier to employment. Employment was not confined to unmarried or widowed females. Both groups had incomes which often surpassed those of men in the same industry and it would be these women who were often the main family breadwinners.

These gendered work patterns can be clearly illustrated in the traditional occupational roles of Fisherrow, the fishing community of the town of Musselburgh, adjacent to Edinburgh, Scotland’s capital city on the shores of the Firth of Forth. In Fisherrow, fishing operated on a kin based share fishing model with one boat owner or lease holder managing the business and men who supplied the nets owning shares in the boats income.
Families were organised and maintained by female members who worked as self-employed entrepreneurs selling fresh fish in the surrounding towns and countryside. These were not casual workers but astute businesswomen with structured practices based on traditional working models which had been place for several generations. These fishwives worked long hours under physically challenging conditions, supporting families whose traditional fishing trade had no guaranteed incomes. They continued to work throughout their childbearing years and had control of family finances. Fishwives sustained their families while husbands, brothers and fathers worked away from home for months at a time.

Single women still living with their family handed over their incomes to their mother. Financial independence was achieved after marriage and ‘keeping the purse’ was considered to be a distinctly female role. A man who took charge of the family income was considered to be interfering with the natural order of human relationships. In this respect a fishwife was a good ‘catch’ as a partner. She brought both her status as a trader and regular income into this merger but retained her financial independence. ‘Your income with the creel was a very well guarded secret. You never told your nearest or dearest how much you earned. Ever’ Refusing to divulge income levels to partners meant that academic researchers could ask in vain, but Peggy Livingstone, a retired Fisherrow fishwife, provided this helpful hint, ‘there was no great hardship if you went with the creel. You could always keep a roof over the head, even when times were bad’. As working women they had high levels of self-esteem which translated into high expectations of male members of the family in the area of income provision. The share fishing methods adopted in this region meant that boat owners could return home from a poor fishing season with no income after paying shares to the men with fishing nets as well as his vessel’s running costs. If a man returned home without any money he had to stand outside the front door of his home, announce his failure to return with an income, and wait for his wife’s permission to enter.

There was a long tradition of female traders, called ‘fishwives’ in this town going back for several hundred years whose group working practices bear all the hallmarks of a female guild. They trained the next generation of fishwives and bought fish at auctions as groups before setting off around town and countryside selling their wares to a broad customer base. These women were licensed as fish hawkers and operated as independent business women, classified in the census records under the category ‘own occupation’. Practical skills and business acumen was handed down through the female line in a ‘closed shop’ system. The fish bought at auction was paid for by an experienced fishwife on behalf of a group of fishwives before it was divided out amongst them. This allowed a variety of fish types to be purchased, allowing each woman to have a diverse customer base. It also avoided the need for business start-up finances as the purchaser of the fish was reimbursed later that day after the fish had been sold. Each fishwife would pack her creel, holding around 56 kilos of fish and set out for her own dedicated selling area. A new fishwife would be given a few of her mentor’s customers and was then expected to build her own client base by cold door knocking. Before leaving school at 12 or 13, girls would be trained in filleting fish and carrying the creel. Ordering a set of working clothes and a creel was an important rite of passage for the apprentice fishwife. The fishwife in her distinctive occupational clothing came to symbolise a reliable trader providing fresh fish.

Fishwives clothes have been a source of great interest to artists and photographers alike but as well as providing a trading identity they were designed to adapt to the rigours of the job. A dress version with the working coat replaced by a large colourful shawl was worn to church and at gala events such as the Annual Fishermen’s Walk in Fisherrow, and traditional practices on these occasions reflected the gender power balances. Couples raced against each other from one line to another while holding hands. The male would be blindfolded with the fishwife’s shawl. Men and women walked in separate groups in the parade at the beginning of the gala day but parading through the town at the end of the day the genders were mixed. Some men would be wearing a fishwife’s shawl tied over their dark navy fisherman’s jersey. This indicated a fishwife’s interest in that particular male on which she had bestowed the honour of wearing her shawl. Married men would wear their wife’s shawl as a mark of possession.

These women were neither excluded from the public workplace nor kept in the home to fulfil expectations of masculinity and respectability. Notions of femininity were not governed by a woman’s place in the private sphere of the home. Rather, women who worked to support or sustain the family income took pride in their achievements and were admired for their tenacity. As Peggy Livingstone, asserted,
‘you gloried in your ability to do a hard job – carrying heavy loads- one that a male person could do. It was a matriarchal society, really’ Alan Marr’s’s’ mother was a herring gutter who lived in the town of Wick in Caithness, on the far north east coast of Scotland. Originally from the Shetland Isles she settled in her husband’s home town of Wick and started working at the gutting after her husband died and she had three young children to support. Wick was called the herring capital of Europe during the boom years of the herring industry and around 3,000 women both locals and incomers would work gutting and packing fish. Tina Marr also travelled away every year for the autumn and winter fishing in East Anglia on the south east coast of England and earned a reputation as a hard worker and negotiator.

There was no lack of awareness on the male side of the contribution of women’s work, ‘the women had most of the work to do’. And this was equally reflected in the female assessment. Amy Orr, the last woman to work as a fishwife in a family where women carried out this occupation in an unbroken line since the beginning of the eighteenth century, offered the following equality declaration: ‘my mother used to say to my father, ‘it’s a good job that you go to the fishing because if you were a shoemaker, I would have to be a dressmaker, because if you sit, I sit’.

It was not uncommon for all female members of a family to ‘go with the creel’ and to have a weekly meeting to agree on the prices for the following week. With a guaranteed income there was no economic necessity for early marriage and the census records affirm either late marriages or unmarried female heads of the household as a common pattern. This influenced social patterns where women brought occupational skills and guaranteed incomes to the marital relationship. A fishwife brought both her status and regular income into this merger but retained her financial independence. The Scottish writer Walter Scott struck a true note in one of his novels when one of his characters said that fishwives, keep the man, and keep the purse, and keep the siller too. Them that sell the goods guide the purse, them that guide the purse rule the house.

In its heyday, the herring industry was a major player in Britain’s economy. In 1928, during a period of severe economic recession, it could still make a contribution of over seven million pounds and with around 6,000 women workers; it was one of the largest employees of female labour during this period. With the biggest demand for processed herring coming from East European countries, it would be the political effects of two world wars which would eventually bring about the decline of this sector of the Scottish fishing industry.

The most important group of these workers were the thousands of Scottish women working on the quaysides of fishing ports around Britain, processing and packing herring for national and international markets. It would not have been possible to build and sustain the British herring industry in any form without the skills, tenacity and physical endurance of these female fish workers. Despite the essential nature of their work, these women appear to have been one of the most visible of Scotland’s workforces yet, curiously, the most historically marginalised. Their visibility could not be avoided since they worked out of doors, on the quaysides, in their thousands, gutting, salting and packing fish for British and European curing companies. This industry experienced major development in the late nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century period prior to World War I the Scottish herring fisheries were world leaders in the production of cured herring. There was a huge market for this cheap nutritious preserved food especially to eastern European countries and exports made significant contributions to the country’s economy. Over 80 per cent of catches were gutted, graded and pickled in wooden barrels on the quaysides as soon as the fish were landed. The Scottish fishing fleets had more highly developed fishing vessels which allowed them a speedier return to port than their English counterparts and more efficient fishing nets, manufactured and patented by a Scottish company. This meant that the Scottish catches were fresher, and if processed rapidly, could command higher market prices. As a fatty fish herring deteriorates rapidly when taken out of the sea and swift gutting, salting and packing were essential elements of the operation. These processing and curing operations were carried out almost exclusively by Scottish women who had the necessary skills and experience for these jobs. They were engaged on pre-season contracts which entitled them to a signing fee, a weekly wage, piece rates for filling up barrels and an end of season contract. In some places accommodation was provided along with free travel. In return, however, they had to complete the processing in one working shift which could last 10 to 12 hours with only short breaks and often inadequate sanitary provision.
During its reproductive season, herring travels in large shoals and, during the time span under consideration, one of the spawning areas for these fish was the coastline and islands of Great Britain. They swam up from Ireland to the west coast of Scotland, round the Northern and Shetland Isles, down the east coast of Britain to the Norfolk ports of Lowestoft and Yarmouth in a fishing season which could span from eight to ten months of the year. The herring industry required a huge skilled workforce to catch and process these fish. As well as the boats and crews to follow and catch the shoals of herring, thousands of men and women provided a land based mobile workforce to prepare the catches for the home and foreign markets. Herring was cured using traditional pickling methods and packed into barrels for home and foreign markets. The largest proportion of the cured fish was exported to Europe and the West Indies. East European countries were the largest importers of cured fish, especially Germany and Russia.

In the British herring industry, the key workers were the women who stood on Britain’s quaysides during several fishing seasons each year, grading, gutting, salting and packing fish for lucrative home and foreign markets. Scottish women formed over 90 per cent of workforces who carried out the vital grading, gutting and packing processes for the successful late nineteenth and early twentieth century British herring industry. A highly skilled mobile workforce who travelled around Britain’s mainland and island fishing ports fulfilling pre-season contracts negotiated with British and foreign curing companies, they provided financial support for their families and political support for their male herring industry colleagues. As the most highly paid and skilled workers they were able to use their position as key workers to negotiate terms and conditions. They processed the fish landed by the Scottish fishing fleets who dominated the herring fishing sector under the terms of their contracts negotiated with curing company representatives who visited coastal towns and villages before the main herring fishing seasons began.

Cured herring, in its various forms was both a popular and nutritious food and quality control of the gutting, grading and packing process was carried out to achieve the British Crown standard mark which guaranteed markets and earned the industry world leadership status. Thousands of women travelled to fishing ports during the herring seasons where the influx of herring industry workers could more than double the population. At many ports, this boosted local economies by extending accommodation and leisure provision into the winter months. However, overcrowding also created more opportunities for the spread of disease and tensions often arose between locals and migrant workers.

Female herring workers were recruited in Scottish coastal towns and villages but were not necessarily from fishing families. Rather their willingness to travel away from home to work reflects both limited local employment opportunities and a highly developed work ethic. They were paid more than many of the male workers in the curing yards and were often able to sustain family members back home as well as returning with end of season bonuses. The work ethic had no gender divisions rather the family was a supportive group with all able members making contributions. Occupational mobility was an accepted fact in a country where the main industries were located in the central belt and highland, coastal and island communities had high levels of unemployment. The rise and success of the herring trade created chances for work which were seized upon despite the difficult conditions and challenging working environments. Women worked in teams of three, called gutting crews and travelling and working together, situations which established strong peer bonding as well as prospect of social bonding with male employees. While many relationships developed in this work environment it would be in the field of industrial action that these women would most support the men. Aware of the powerful position their essential work roles offered them, they did not hesitate to take direct action for better pay and conditions for themselves and lower paid male workers. Without contracts and confined to a maritime working domain, the male fishing industry worker had little choice when it came to taking industrial action. However, as the workers with legally bound pre-season contracts and key skills, Scottish women herring trade employees were able to be the conscious and the political voice of the British fishing industry.

Endnotes
4. Herring, a common staple food in Scotland, increased in popularity with the advent of the ‘bloater’ a smoked herring common in English holiday towns. Extensive increases to the railway systems brought more efficient goods transport systems.
5. Eastern Europe provided the largest markets, where herring could be anything from a staple winter food to a delicacy. The West Indies imported ‘red’ herring, a cure which coped with the extreme heat. A variety of cures had to be developed to account for different ethnic tastes and female processors had to have a range of skills to manage these changes and pass the quality control measures.
9. ‘It’s Handed Doon’, VHS video funded by Channel4, researched and directed by Margaret Ritchie, 1984 (Women’s Film Workshop, Edinburgh).
10. In the 18th century they travelled on foot, then by tram, train and bus. They were offered concessionary fares but also paid a separate charge for their creels. In the early 1950’s one hundred fishwives still travelled each day into the city to buy fish at the market.
11. I would argue that this group bears all the hallmarks of a female guild with control over membership, training, business practice and price setting.
12. Always a family member.
19. Some 80 per cent of the catches went to Europe in 1913.
20. Margaret Ritchie, ‘Scottish female herring workers’.
Ever controversial – as much now when the union no longer exists as any time during its turbulent history – taking sides in the debate over the Builders Labourers’ Federation’s (BLF) story still matters. It matters because what is contested, what is controversial goes to the heart of the future of the society we live in – capitalism. A society of two main classes – workers and the bourgeoisie – whose interests are in fundamental conflict. While this clash of interests is daily engaged in by workers and employers, a ‘ceaseless economic struggle [by workers] with the capitalists’ as Rosa Luxemburg puts it, less often but more explosively, are the major clashes that are a key measure of working class militancy.

Whether about industrial or political issues, what matters most in the confrontations between classes is how these struggles are waged. Through the workers’ own organisations, the trade unions, the class can ultimately only win reforms within the system, so it is the way they win that can either open up the basis for the possibility of revolutionary change or leave unchallenged a society of exploitation. Because, as Luxemburg goes on to argue, militant industrial struggle keeps workers’ ‘fighting energy alive in every political interval: it forms, so to speak the permanent fresh reservoir of the strength of the proletariat classes from which the political fight renews its strength’.

So where does the story of the 1986 deregistration of the BLF fit? Was the Federation a destroyer of unionism, of undermining the possibility of challenging the system and therefore deserving of deregistration and destruction, or a union fighting to keep the tradition of militancy alive in Australia, keeping alive the potential for revolutionary change? According to the Builders Labourers (BLs) they were keeping these traditions alive, as the words from their own song testifies:

*It's class to class and face to face, our limit is the sky.*
*We've got a fighting history and we never will be cowed.*

But, counters Tom McDonald, former national secretary of the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU), under BLF leader Norm Gallagher’s influence ‘the building industry was sliding into anarchy. The BLF was undermining support for unionism…and threatening the jobs of building workers’. His union had no choice, he argues, but to ‘go to war’, to do ‘what we had to do to destroy Gallagher’s BLF’.

Of course we can’t resolve this question by just putting forward quotes for each point of view. In *Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win*, I trace the whole history of deregistration and go into these arguments in more depth, coming down on the side of the BLF. Here, I particularly want to contrast the politics of the forces that supported deregistration, a politics that became dominant in the labour movement by 1983, against the politics of militancy that informed the BLF, a politics that was pushed to the margins. It’s only by understanding this process that I think we can learn from the past, to re-build the kind of militant unionism in Australia that Rosa Luxemburg spoke about.

To do this we have to start with from the late 1960s, early 1970s. Like many militant unions around the world the BLF was taking the fight up to the bosses – improved wages and conditions, green bans and ideas of workers’ control – at times opening up possibilities for challenging the capitalist system itself. Within unions’ rank and file groups sprang up, including inside the BLF itself, and this militant resurgence by workers was feeding into the political organisations that carried the banner of revolution. Union activists like Dave Kerin and John Cleary remember a very exciting time, when, says Dave ‘students and young workers were heavily engaged in the anti-Vietnam war movement, there was a resurgence of the left’. He adds, ‘We were very excited by the left wing of the Communist Party of Australia… workers’ control and the green bans really captured our imagination’.

This was not to last. After peaking with the revolution in Portugal in 1974, a revolution that was defeated amidst the collapse of the post-World War II economic boom, working class militancy ebbed and capital began to reassert itself. The crucial question then was which way would a still combative workers’ movement go. Would the fight be rekindled to reach new heights or would the retreat continue?
It wasn’t long before the answers began coming in, with the latter half of the 1970s marked by a series of union defeats and political retreat by many on the left. By the beginning of the 1980s, as the BLF wrote ‘Workers throughout the western world are experiencing a thoroughgoing employer attack on their wages and conditions, initiated by the US Reagan and British Thatcher Governments’. In fact, in Australia by 1975 the Whitlam government had already turned on workers with its ‘dole bludger’ demonisation of the unemployed and a Budget that cut spending, public works and social welfare. Policies that Labor’s successor in power later that year, the Fraser-Howard government, didn’t hesitate to implement. Long time BL George Despard saw the hostility towards militant unions like the BLF mounting. ‘I really noticed a big change from ’75 onwards…They were really out to get us. It was relentless’.

Despite this, Australian workers were still prepared to back the ALP Government, particularly when the ruling class blatantly turfed it out of office in late 1975. But instead of leading the militant response to the sacking, ACTU head Bob ‘the fireman’ Hawke channelled working class anger away from the streets and jobs into an electoral ‘maintain the rage’ campaign. It led to a disastrous defeat for the ALP at the polls.

Electoral defeats in 1975 and 1977, the 1974-5 recession, the decline in the level of class struggle, as well as the nationalism of the majority of the left, combined to bring about a collapse of revolutionary radicalism within this left. In its place came class collaboration, from the People’s Budget in 1976 to the 1983 ALP-ACTU Accord, once memorably described as a ‘transitional program for socialism’. Leading left wing unionists and CPA officials actively participated in all these projects whose logic was primarily about restoring capitalist profitability at workers’ expense.

And yet just before the Whitlam government’s sacking in 1975, the Communist Party had criticised Treasurer Jim Cairns for arguing that ‘workers and socialists should help solve capitalism’s crises, then raise the struggle for a socialist solution when the system has recovered’. This was, they insisted, ‘clearly a futile exercise’. And as late as 1981, the CPA could still affirm that ‘Social contracts’, deals between employers and unions regulated by Government and which restrict workers’ rights to fight for a better deal must be resisted.

The shift to class collaboration wasn’t straightforward and indeed at times it looked as though working class militancy was on the rise. Unions were still combative, so that defeats over economic demands led to political demands becoming the focus of industrial action. The Medibank general strike of 1976, industrial action against the export of uranium, against the power station in Newport and support for the Queensland civil liberties movement in 1977 and 1978 were some of the battles. This could have been the basis from which to rebuild, to take up the fight over wages and conditions, as well as the more political issues, but instead the leaders of the labour movement turned in a different direction.

Increasingly they and many on the left had gone from industrial militancy to drawing up alternate political programs for the labour movement, programs to be implemented by governments, as a means of overcoming the problems the movement faced. It could seem reasonable, even a shift to the left, to build for some overall approach as there was clearly a failure of the system to provide for workers. This was especially the case when the prospects for winning gains on the job, let alone spreading it through the class, seemed to be fading. Unionists such as Bruce Hartnett outlined a ‘socialist strategy for Australia [which] must include…firstly an alternate economic program which is realistic, credible and achievable’. A form of ‘socialism in our time’, behind the backs of the ruling class!

That these kinds of programs could appeal to the trade union leaders is also explained by Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, who extended earlier Marxist writings on trade unionism that had concentrated more on their militant role. ‘Under capitalism’, wrote Gramsci, ‘when individuals are only valued as owners of commodities, which they trade as property, the workers too are forced to obey the iron laws of general necessity; they become trades in their sole property – their labour power and professional skills’. Exposed to ruthless capitalist competition, workers combine ‘their property’ – their labour – ‘in ever broader and more comprehensive “firms”…and impose prices and hours and discipline the market’. These ‘firms’ or unions take on features of the capitalist company, with ‘a trusted administrative staff…able to dominate market conditions, to lay down contracts to evaluate commercial risks and to initiate profitable economic operations’. Their officers, the union bureaucracy quite logically emerge as protagonists of capitalism and defenders of the capitalist system. Forever seeking as Luxemburg says, theories or programs such as the Accord which ‘would open up an illimitable vista of economic progress to the trade union struggle within the capitalist system’.11
This is evident in what was actually proposed, in reality a means of restoring profits with the hope that this would filter down to workers. Hartnett argued that without a wider focus, wage claims could merely reinforce the existing social order. Better he said, for unions to undertake challenges to that concentration of power, as the BLF had done with its Green Bans. A fair point, but then Hartnett’s actual proposal was to use union super funds to prop up manufacturing industry. His real aim was ‘intervention’ at the top to cement new alliances between capital and labour, using workers’ retirement money to secure the bosses’ profits.12

This meant that even when in 1981 there was an explosive resurgence in union campaigns around hours, wages and conditions, the left’s ideas that were influential focused on reforming capitalism. Rather than, as the CPA had argued in 1975, insisting that socialist involvement in trying to solve the system’s crises was futile.

The opportunity lost here can be seen from reports in Tribune, which detailed shorter hours wins by metal trades workers at Altona Petrochemicals, ALCOA, ACI and on the waterfront in 1980, with plans for ‘mining engineering, engineering, fabrication and rolling stock, foundry moulding, industrial gases and other industry sectors’ in 1981. And when it looked like the ACTU was trying to scuttle the campaign and accept the latest wage cutting arbitration decision, the paper wrote ‘many workers and unions are not going to rely on arbitration or even wait for an inquiry [into the wages system]. This is a reality the ACTU will have to contend with’. The paper added that already there had been dozens of strikes round the country. Alan Reid in The Bulletin claimed the country was ‘in the grip of militant madness’ warning that campaigns such as the building industry site allowance claim ‘mark the swing of bargaining power towards the union movement’13

The swing was to be short-lived. The economic bubble burst in 1982 as the world economy moved into recession. As the rush to invest in 1980 had been based on an expected high demand for energy resources, the international recession hit Australia particularly hard. Production fell off more drastically than at any time during the ‘70s and unemployment reached postwar record levels. Ignoring the international character of the new crisis, the Fraser regime blamed it on the wages surge of 1980-81. With the press, the ALP leaders and even some union officials echoing this line, and with unemployment leaping from six to ten per cent, workers suddenly lost confidence and Fraser was able to impose a wage freeze.14

With this latest and sudden decline in their bargaining power, union leaders renewed their interest in deals which promised industrial peace in exchange for a policy on wages and prices. Such an agreement was even discussed with the Fraser-led government, but didn’t materialise until the ACTU-ALP Accord, that helped usher Bob Hawke and the Labor Party to power in 1983. A pact based on the notion of capital and labour ‘walking arm in arm into some lovely world’, as rank and file BL Bob Mancor so scathingly put it.15

A far cry from the ACTU’s objective as late as 1973 for ‘the socialisation of industry, that is, production, distribution and exchange…’. Or that of the Queensland TLC to ‘wrest from the capitalist class the economic powers which it, as a class, possesses and to use them in the interests of the workers’.16

At each step of the way, from class struggle to class collaboration, was a political economic program that provided the framework, the political justification for the shift. Regardless of the refinements of each, they basically all held the promise of restructuring the Australian economy within the framework of capitalism. They were characterised by demands for nationalisation of key corporations, collaborations with some sections of business, conspiracy theories about the dangers of unregulated multinationals to ‘our’ economy and nationalism in the form of calls for greater government planning and intervention to save Australian manufacturing and other industries such as shipping. Often included were calls for greater control over interest rates, foreign investment and credit. As time went on the more ‘radical’ of these demands such as nationalisation were dropped.

There’s no doubt that these economic programs can be ‘successful’ in capitalist terms. Tom Bramble writes about the Accord, that far from failing, ‘inasmuch as any economic strategy can succeed for the capitalist class, the Accord was a great success!’ He spells out its achievements. ‘By the end of the 1980s, the profit share had swung considerably in capital’s favour, unionism was atrophying both in terms of membership and grassroots vitality and the Labor Government was pursuing a highly orthodox, Treasury-line economic programme’.17
It wasn’t just profit share that swung the bosses’ way to rates comparable with the 1960s, the Accord resulted in a similar increase in the rate of profit. A fundamental problem faced by the capitalist system is that its very success actually fuels its own crises. As the system grows, investment in means of production (the factories, equipment and so on) increases, only to cause the rate of profit to drop. This leads to the economic crises which the capitalist class, using often extreme measures such as war or fascism, desperately tries to resolve. One of the obvious ways of driving the rate back up is to drive down the component costs, which of course includes labour. While Fraser had certainly tried to do this, he only lifted the rate slightly only to see it drop catastrophically by 1982/3. The ALP-ACTU Accord, on the other hand, achieved precisely what the Liberal Coalition could not.18

There was also no shortage of government intervention in industry. The Steel Plan, the Waterfront Plan, to name just two, poured federal funding into company coffers at the expense of thousands of workers’ jobs and cuts to wages and conditions of those remaining. Not to mention, of course, government ‘intervention’ in the building and airline industries to shore up company profits in the face of militant unionism, using the forces of the state (police and RAAF) to smash through union resistance. As long time BL – and later CFMEU official John Loh put it ‘Where the state says we can bring capital and labour together, the state will always intervene on the side of capital’.19

What was basic to all these post-1975 ‘working class’ programs was a flawed understanding of what the struggle for reforms within capitalism was about. There was, they argued, the ability to win ‘revolutionary reforms’ of capitalism that were to be the stepping stones to socialism. Radical sounding, but as Rick Kuhn argues capitalism has proved more than capable of incorporating a wide range of ‘revolutionary reforms’ including shorter hours, wage rises and the like. Even though, of course, the capitalist class initially fights tooth and nail to stop them and have always looked for every opportunity to turn them back.

The problem lies with seeing the reforms, in and of themselves, as being the radical step, the key to change. Certainly the reforms are worth fighting for, but it is struggle that counts, the struggle that builds working class combative and confidence and the possibility of radical change.20

While the earlier programs did still support the need for struggles outside parliament, industrial action and mobilisation on the streets, by the Accord this was all but gone. In 1982 the CPA Congress even condemned pacesetting wage campaigns because ‘these claims foster disunity and competition’. While at the same time the party’s ‘Strategy for the 1980s’ called for metal unions to ‘play an active and positive role in formulating, winning support for and implementing some form of prices and incomes policy under a Labor Government’. By 1986, Lindsay Tanner from the Victorian Socialist Left abandoned any local struggle altogether, arguing that ‘external forces…will move the Australian economic and social system towards socialism’.21

It is no wonder then that the BLF, whose members had early on become ‘so aware that their interests and the interests of the employers are in fundamental conflict’, was an obstacle to such visions of class harmony.22 In 1983 then journalist Bob Carr had no doubts that ‘Norm Gallagher stands in the way’ of the government’s economic strategy and its attempts to shift Australian industrial relations ‘in the direction of more consultation and tripartism and to entrench an incomes policy’. The union had a ‘catch and kill your own’ wages strategy, not ‘giving a damn about the ACTU’ and he condemned it for this ‘free market approach’. But it was the Federation’s wages militancy spilling over to other unions that he saw as the biggest threat. ‘The BLF was forging ahead with the current campaign even before the federal election…forcing other unions to adopt its policies and tactics’. The BWIU would normally toe the line, but now ‘can’t be seen to be behind the BLs’.23

Actually, as the AFR said, the union was ‘not doing very much out of the ordinary’. But by 1983, what was ‘ordinary’ had changed, as most union leaders accepted the straitjacket of the Accord, the agreement to hold back industrially. The BLF, a union the paper described as ‘the most effective industrial fighting machine in Australia’ which continued to ‘brazenly challenge the restrictions’, threatened both the class collaboration of union supporters of the Accord and the bosses’ profits.24

The militancy of the BLF did not just happen around the time of the Accord. Instead, as many have documented, it had been built up over decades. From the 1950s, when a determined push by rank and
file militants had succeeded in turning the union from a right-wing moribund organisation, to one whose members, ‘BLs’, had become ‘the toast of the workers’ movement’ by the 1970s. 25

Over the years, as Norm Wallace, a long time Victorian BLF organiser and official, recalled, ‘we had to go out and sell them unionism…show them we were a good union. We had no other authority. That’s one of the reasons why we were what we were’. It was the combination of militant tactics and building the union from the ground up that Rene van Dalen remembers as making the unions strong. The organisers ‘had to be out of the office, out on the road, talking to somebody… That’s what they’re paid for isn’t it? Not to sit in the office writing bloody letters. Go out there and talk to members, sign them up!’ And as for the Federation’s tactics, Rene doesn’t hesitate in describing those like guerilla tactics as ‘magic’, because as WA secretary Kevin Reynolds notes you ‘find where the [builders] are most vulnerable and hit them’. 26

On the highly contentious stoppages of concrete pours, the union remained unapologetic. ‘Breaking concrete pours was dramatic’, says long-time BL Ivor Lawrence. ‘But when you got a pay rise of 20 or 30 bucks a week, that was dramatic too. The odd concrete pour here or there was nothing compared to what it did for the membership’. And adds BLF – now CFMEU – official John Cummins, ‘people outside the industry think it’s criminal to break a concrete pour, where we think it’s criminal to main and kill a construction worker and put at risk more’. 27

On the job every day too, because they had to win everyone in an industry with an ever changing workforce. Many like Kevin O’Connor didn’t come to unionism naturally. He’d been taught at school that unions were ‘like the devil – horns on their heads’. He was finally convinced to join and once he was in, he said ‘no-one called you a wog, or an Irish bastard…the union took that out. It was all brothers, all working class, it brought everyone in’. 28

As well as the industrial issues, the union took a strong stand politically. NSW secretary Jack Mundey, who had been part of the rank and file group that won office in the 1960s explains that they built members’ understanding that there was no separation between the industrial and political, you couldn’t divide it like ‘cutting a cake’. On issues like wages, where ‘independent’ IRC judges were political appointees, acting in the interests of the ruling class, he asks ‘How could you see arbitration as a purely industrial area?’ Involvement by many BLs in the anti-Vietnam War movement – with the speakouts, draft resistance, demos and arrests where many like Mundey were active – also helped politicise the union. 29

And the politics stayed with them. A typical issue of the union journal in December 1982 linked war and capitalist crisis and attacks on workers. ‘Those capitalists who control a country seek one of two ways out of their crisis of overproduction. They either make a war to use up the excess goods, or they make the workers take wage cuts… Either way, it is the workers who suffer, not the few with the riches’. The back cover took up the same points with a rallying call to building workers to ‘Oppose the wage freeze cut! Make the Rich Pay!’ Members ‘saw the BLF as the basis on which you rebelled against society’, says Ralph Edwards. And the union had organisers and officials like Harry Karslake who ‘hoped to change the world … I hoped to convince people how’. 30

Lessons of the past ... for today

Adherence to the Accord politics and its forerunners left a union movement directionless and weakened, encouraging the type of unionism that BL Ivor Lawrence dismisses as ‘just revenue making, like the bloody poker machines’. And in the end that was what even the architects of the Accord were forced to acknowledge. Tom McDonald wrote in his autobiography that the Accord ‘dismempowered workers and in the end undermined unionism – it took away workers’ right to struggle for higher wages and conditions with everything decided at the top echelons’. 31

Counter to this is the legacy left by the BLF. Although the Federation was frequently shut out and demonised during its history, it was precisely because they held to their militancy, their political opposition to schemes like the Accord, that their legacy has lasted, that we are still talking about it today. [Just insert another union’s name instead of the BLF’s, and apart from the Waterfront unions and the Miners, this point becomes obvious.]
Not that the Federation didn’t have its weaknesses, didn’t make mistakes. The BLF was steadfast in its opposition to the Accord. Its representatives voted against it in the lead up to the election of the Hawke Government and continued to oppose it afterwards, in action if not in words. But only the NSW Nurses’ Federation actually refused to sign the deal. The BLF thought it could avoid the restrictions, thought it could work around it. And they did in Western Australia, as Tony Masseria notes, winning huge site allowances that effectively made up for the Accord’s wage cutting formula. But in NSW and Victoria, states that were crucial to the ALP’s plans to revitalise the Australian economy, there was no chance the union would be allowed to break through the Accord’s restrictions.

There were a number of other unions that did stand against the Accord during the Hawke years and like the BLF they fought and were vehemently attacked by the pro-Accord forces. The Food Preservers, the Plumbers who were fined hundreds of thousands of dollars, some in the federal public service who were accused of holding the country to ransom and most spectacularly the Victorian Nurses Federation fighting both state and federal ALP governments, to name just a few. The BLF didn’t hesitate to back them industrially and support them on the picket lines. But as one militant commented it needed more, it needed ‘something organised coming from the BLF’, a rallying call for all unions opposed to the Accord, to fight together, to fight the whole thing industrially and politically.

There were attempts to build something coordinated through the Fightback conferences in 1986 and 1987, but by then the Federation, though still battling, was weakened by the deregistration, with most of its energies engaged in fighting for its life. Within the union there had been no strategy from the start to politically combat the class collaboration of the Accord and its precursors, while Accord promoters like the AMWU had already spent several years educating their members and a wider left audience. It was the AMWU politics rather than those of the anti-Accord forces that held sway on the job and amongst left activists.

Canberra BLF secretary Peter O’Dea believes the Federation’s propaganda, their political and industrial leaflets and arguments were better than most, ‘but it never did translate into a lot of extra knowledge… We fed on people’s gut instincts, on labourers’ distrust of the system, of their experiences of being harassed by the police, of growing up in poverty’. And although the far left CPA(ML) had a major influence in the union, some saw an ‘Irish-Catholic, nationalist larrikinism’ as the union’s basic political stance, rather than a revolutionary unionism that could fundamentally threaten the ruling class. Also the Maoist politics of some of the leadership did encourage the kind of nationalist thinking about ‘foreign multinationals’, that resulted in calls to support Australian employers against these companies. This meant members being open to some of the nationalist arguments of the Accord and its precursors.

Some of the alleged mistakes of the union, however, reflect more on the BLF’s critics than the union itself. Most of the Federation’s opponents and even some of those more sympathetic to the union, argue that it was the go-it-alone stance, the BLF’s reliance on industrial action that isolated it from the rest of the labour movement, that caused its downfall. That, in fact, it was only by cutting the Federation adrift that the union movement could be saved from destruction. However as Tom McDonald documents in his autobiography, under Pat Clancy’s and his leadership, it was the rival building union, the BWIU that was key to isolating the union from the rest of the labour movement. In many instances it was the failure of the rest of the union movement to support the BLF’s struggles, while they eagerly put their hand out for the gains the Federation won, that enforced a certain isolation on the union.

More to the point, as the CPA(ML) paper Vanguard wrote at the time, far from saving the union movement, isolating the militant unions plays right into the hands of the ruling class and can only lead to further repression of the whole movement.

Some say militant industrial action encourages the reactionaries to attack all unions and workers; that it gives some substance to cries of unions running the country. Sacrifice such unions, this reasoning goes, and the reactionaries will be appeased.

All history in Australian and elsewhere shows this approach is wrong. There always has been and will be more militant sections of the working people. They [capitalists] will always single out the most militant workers…attacks on such militancy are always part of an attack on working people as a whole and are a prelude to further and more ferocious attacks. They cannot be appeased. They can only be beaten back.
Some in the labour movement even joined with the ruling class in blaming the system’s economic woes on the Federation’s industrial gains. Fighting for wage rises was seen as threatening the Accord’s social wage promises, even leading to recession. It’s not just in the Accord era that this criticism was raised. Tom O’Lincoln argues in his book on the Fraser era, *Years of Rage*, because the system itself, capitalism, actually causes its own crises, ‘it is a nonsense to blame wage rises for recessions… The labour movement was and is right to defend wages and conditions. [The movement’s] failure lies in not challenging a system that makes crisis inevitable’.35

But for all the faults and political weaknesses, it’s the union’s strengths that are the lasting legacy of the struggle against deregistration. As John Cummins concludes, if it wasn’t for the rank and file who ‘gave it their all… if we hadn’t fought, hadn’t run the distance, it all would have been lost’. Disability rights activist Lesley Hall says: ‘The BLs were leaders. Even today you look at a lot of their conditions… what we’re fighting for now in our unions – were won a long time ago by the BLs’. With all they’d won Lesley adds ‘you could see what struggle could actually do’.36 It was a union where many of the rank and file saw their union ‘as the basis on which you rebelled against society’, members who would have had no trouble agreeing with Engels when he said ‘as schools of war…the unions are unexcelled’.37

Not just over deregistration, it was the battles beforehand that were critical to making the Federation what it was. In *Rolling the Right*, Paul True talks as well of what we can learn from the earlier history of the union. Faced with a highly casualised workforce and a union leadership that was in some cases openly corrupt, virulently anti-Communist, inactive and hostile to the membership, a few activists started organising in the early 1950s. It was a hard slog. After 18 months of trying to build the group, their first public rank and file meeting had 15 people come along, 5 in the Communist Party and 10 other union members. It was to be seven years before they stood against the incumbents. But during that time they organised on the job, built up a network of delegates and put out regular activist newsletters (*Hoist*) and leaflets. Getting the newsletters on the jobs was hard and they often had to rely on visiting people at home, rather than be seen on site. But as Paul True comments: ‘Through having to raise finance to produce *Hoist* and a job network to distribute it, the newsheet acted as a vital organisational vehicle for the group itself’.38

The involvement of Communist Party members from the start was crucial to building the rank and file group, particularly developing the political level of the militants. The Party had a political authority, explains Paul True, ‘that derived from an unequalled body of experience in the trade union movement’. From that came a ‘a method of work’ that won over the militants, was supported by the rank and file.

The early struggles within the BLF show it is possible to turn around even the most right wing, moribund unions, with a determined rank and file based political leadership prepared to patiently build and then seize the opportunities to go forward. A union with rank and file militants prepared to have the political and industrial fights necessary to build the kind of union the BLF became.

For today the BLF’s history from 1961 to the end in 1994 shows that holding onto such ideas will make you a target for attack. But, more importantly, that even in periods of greater organised hostility to left-wing ideas, the Cold War period, with equally draconian anti-union laws on the books, it is possible to build on the basis of rank and file militancy and revolutionary ideas – and win.

**Endnotes**

9. Ibid., p. 10.
12. Hartnett in O’Lincoln, *Years of Rage*, p. 196. Similar proposals by construction unions to use BUSS and C+BUSS funds to invest in the industry to create more jobs have only given real benefits to builders and developers, saving them risking their own capital. These kinds of schemes have done nothing to save the jobs of Walter workers around Australia in 2004-5, nor stopped their unions being one of the prime targets of Howard’s anti-union agenda. Nor have they resulted in investment in more ‘socially necessary’ projects such as hospitals, schools and the like, another goal of left interventionist schemes.
13. *Tribune*, 4 April 1981; Reid in Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 40.
15. Cliff Dolan for the ACTU, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1981. Though the ACTU, as can be seen from the date, was already preparing to do a deal before the unions’ bargaining power declined, before there was any prospect of Labor winning power. Mancor in Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 275.
18. For the detailed figures and arguments on this point see R. Kuhn and T. O’Lincoln, *Journal of Australian Political Economy* no. 25, 1989, pp. 44-69. And it is precisely this problem that the Howard government is now trying to resolve with their IR reforms. For details to 1994/5 see D. Moore and J. McGunnes, *Are Profits ‘High’?*, Institute of Public Affairs, South Yarra, 1996.
19. Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 275.
21. Tanner as quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 17, 19. While the pro-Accord forces did call for mobilisations to enforce the Accord they never happened. Some demands such as superannuation were hard fought for in a number of industries, but superannuation is somewhat of a poisoned chalice for workers, wages foregone to fund their own retirement. However most unions taking action faced opposition not just from employers, but the government, the ACTU and the rest of the union movement, with some honourable exceptions such as the BLF. The Food Preservers, the Victorian nurses and federal public servants were amongst those. The various programs were: Peoples’ Budget 1976, People’s Economic Program 1977; AMWU publications that spelt out the subsequent shifts: *Australia Uprooted* 1977, *Australia Ripped Off* 1978, *Australia On the Rack* 1982. All these publications and programs had heavy involvement by the CPA leadership and prominent CPA members of the AMWU.
22. Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 281.
23. *ibid.*, p. 278.
25. True, *Tales of the BLF….Rolling the Right*, p. 73.
26. Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 285.
27. *ibid.*, p. 27.
30. Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, p. 287.
36. Cummins, in Ross, *Dare To Struggle, Dare To Win!*, pp. 281, 284.
37. Engels as quoted by T. O’Lincoln in *Trade Unions and Revolutionary Oppositions*
The call for reform: explanations for the introduction of non-union collective agreement making

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In recent times the Australian industrial relations system has undergone some of the most significant changes since its conception. The legacy of the 1890s strikes that crippled the Australian economy led to the introduction of Australia’s unique system of conciliation and arbitration. Under this system, unions were seen as a legitimate industrial actor. For most of the twentieth century this role has remained unquestioned. However, a raft of legislative reform undertaken since the 1980s has signalled a challenge to the central role unions play in representing the interests of workers. The purpose of this paper is to examine what factors led to new forms of representation, such as non-union collective bargaining becoming a plausible alternative to union based agreement making at the enterprise level. One of the most common explanations as to why industrial reform was required related to the failure of the Accord, a unique prices and income policy, conceived by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). This was used to adapt and accommodate the economic pressures faced by Australian industry during the 1980s as well as ensuring that union concerns over productivity improvements were delivered in exchange for wage increases combined with tax relief.

A closer examination of the process of establishing a decentralised system of industrial relations reveals that many other factors played a significant role in facilitating this industrial reform. These include the impact of globalisation, the emergence of new ‘market-based’ ideologies and ideologues commonly referred to as the ‘New Right’, the prominent role given to policy agendas developed by influential employer associations such as the Business Council of Australia (BCA), the approach to enterprise bargaining adopted by the ACTU, and the inherent problems associated with attempting to regulate conditions of employment through a centralised award system. By examining these issues we gain a greater understanding of why a transition towards a more decentralised system of industrial relations was so rapid and why resistance to such a system remained ineffective in maintaining a level of social equity. More importantly this enables a more critical assessment of whether adopting an enterprise approach and particularly regulating for a non-unionised bargaining stream, has really delivered the productivity and flexibility enhancements claimed by workplace reform advocates.

The Accord: the key to an effective centralised system of wage fixation?

One of the main explanations as to why the Australian system of industrial relations adopted a decentralised approach relates to the alleged failures of the Accord system to produce increased productivity as well as generating a more co-operative industrial relations landscape. However, this paper will show that during certain periods of its operation, the Accord did in fact produce the desired productivity increases whilst also minimising industrial conflict. In essence, a wage policy is something that is created within the political, social and economic environment that exists at one time in order to regulate any conflict that may stem from disputation over wage rates between employers and employees. By regulating the lower and upper limits of any wage outcome that may be agreed by the parties, these types of policies institutionalise ‘appropriate limits of employee aspirations’. Macro-industrial relations instruments such as the Accord not only helped to define the boundaries of national wage increases, they also helped to develop a more harmonious industrial relations landscape within Australia. For example, between 1983 and 1987 the Accord was promoted by the Hawke government as the essential ingredient for the regulation of wage rates across Australian industries. More importantly, it was the main mechanism for reducing strike rates during this period. Working days lost due to industrial disputes fell from 797 days to 228 days per 1000 employees.

The main elements of the Accord constituted a commitment by the ACTU for ‘no extra claims’ by any of its members in exchange for award wage increases indexed to changes in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC). This was coupled by a commitment by the ALP to enhance the ‘social wage’ and provide significant taxation reform for workers.
Overarching this agreement between the Labor federal government and the ACTU was a general commitment to enhancing the process of continuous consultation in policy making. This would hopefully result in higher levels of co-operation being developed between the parties. Also by reinforcing the importance of tribunal-based wage increase determinations, the legitimacy of the centralised system of conciliation and arbitration that had been developed in Australia since the passing of the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act* (1904) remained relatively unquestioned. It also allowed unions to maintain a position of prominence within this highly centralized system of wage determination by allowing them to remain as the main form of collective representation for employees in relation to wages and working conditions.

**Economic woes: the problems of the domestic economy**

However, it is at this point that the broader macro-economic problems mentioned at the outset of this paper begin to highlight the deficiencies of a centralised wages policy. In particular, the Australian economy remained dependent on ‘primary products and an uncompetitive manufacturing sector’, which led to a blow out in the already inflated current account deficit. This balance of payments problem became even worse as commodity prices continued to fall during the early 1980s. This made the task of economic management even more difficult. Concurrently, the ALP pursued a policy of financial deregulation involving the floating of the Australia dollar in 1983, which suffered an enormous devaluation of 40 per cent during 1985-86. As economic trade conditions worsened the ALP reviewed the wage increase outcomes that were to be delivered under the Accord process in an attempt to minimise any further inflationary pressure being placed upon the domestic economy. Real wage outcomes delivered under the Accord were slashed and, to make matters worse for unions, consideration was given to the possibility of further reductions in real wage rates in order to fend off any future increases in the balance of payments deficit that were lurking on the horizon. As a result, various employer interest groups criticised the federal government for failing to display the appropriate level of economic stewardship in terms of its monetary and fiscal policies. Policy that alleviated productivity pressures and the erosion of real wages needed to be developed. The call for a more decentralised approach to regulating wages policy began to emerge.

Despite criticism of such a centralised system, the Accord proved to be incredibly robust in attempting to deal with the difficult economic climate that existed during the 1980s. In response to calls from all of the industrial ‘players’, Accord Mark 3, developed in 1986, provided for a two-tier wage system that provided minimum wage increases based on changes in the CPI. An additional wage increase was also offered in exchange for achieving productivity-related changes within industry-based awards. The first use of such a system involved a flat $10 national wage increase (tier one) and an additional 4 per cent wage increase (tier two) in exchange for an agreement that facilitated the improvement in work as well as management practices. This two-tiered system eventually became known as a ‘managed decentralised’ approach of achieving some compromise between wage restraint and the need to improve the productive capacity of Australian industries. It has been argued that one of the main reasons why this centralised system of wage regulation eventually failed was that the AIRC failed to promote this two-tiered system and was generally unresponsive to a more competitive economic environment. Thus, the increasing level of ‘passivity’ displayed by the AIRC not only contributed to the demise of the Accord system but also led to a view that the AIRC’s role in regulating industrial relations should be restricted.

**International pressure: the role of globalisation**

So far, we have identified some of the domestic economic constraints that affected the longevity of the Accord. However, before examining the pressures brought to bear on the AIRC, global factors that had some direct correlation to the economic pressures faced by the federal government during this time also need to be assessed. Firstly, the Australian economy did not operate in a vacuum. Australia had steadily become more integrated into the global economy since the 1970s. Ever since the decline in post-war boom economic growth, international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) attempted to develop economic policies that would assist OECD as well as developing nations fend off the new economic trends of high inflation, high interest rates and the subsequent growth in balance of payment deficits. Key elements of this agenda included the move towards a more open economy that had done away with perceived ‘excessive’ government regulation. Thus economic imperatives included
the reduction in domestic tariff protection, the reduction in restraints on international investment and the implementation of a monetary policy that resulted in placing more deflationary pressure on domestic economies. Coupled with this was the call for the development of a more decentralised approach to the regulation of labour markets throughout the economy.13

Economic rationalism: a policy pursued by the Australian government?

Both the ALP and Liberal governments over the last decade have put in place a ‘systematic regulatory system’ aimed at enhancing the power of capital itself rather than attempting to limit its effect in placing downward pressure on wage rates and employment conditions in an attempt to remain competitive on the global stage. Direct intervention, through the passing of various legislation that targeted youth wages, work for the dole, unfair dismissal, union rights and the creation of a minimum standard of conditions have all been aimed at achieving higher levels of productivity by allowing labour costs to be kept low through redirecting more industrial power to employers.14 This has led to a strengthening of the power of capital in general which remains a crucial aspect of the ‘pro-business’ platform. The creation of non-unionised enterprise bargaining as well as the encouraged use of individual employment contracts are two prime examples of where the ability for employees to negotiate an agreement through the effective exercise of bargaining power is severely restricted. This disparity in the level of equality of outcomes is confirmed when even the most basic comparators such as wage increases are used to determine which types of agreements have been producing the highest outcomes. Union negotiated agreements continue to provide higher wage outcomes for workers than non-unionised collective agreements.15 Thus, the Australian government would never be able to cry ‘victim’ in relation to the impact that global forces have had on its broader economic policy position as well as the industrial relations reform that has taken place over the last 20 years. Instead of attempting to limit Australia’s integration into international systems of regulation, the governments of both political persuasions have implemented reform that has not only increased regulation but which have also led to the increased accommodation of international capital flows whilst continuing to place downward pressure on the wages and living conditions experienced by Australian workers. It could be argued that the main aim of this reform could be no other than to legitimise the power of capital and indeed the global economic system. It was with this over-arching pressure to increase levels of productivity that the Australia government looked to reforming the centralised system of wage setting that had operated up until the early 1980s.

The emergence of a new ideology: the New Right

The ‘New Right’ approach to labour market regulation argued that labour markets were no different from any other element within a capitalist economy. In other words a market or economic rationalist approach was fundamental to this theory. Labour would simply be sold to the highest bidder. Competition would ensure that full employment would be maintained whilst wage rates would reflect the needs of the market. The external regulation that the state and trade unions played was viewed as unnecessary as well as interfering with the right for employers and employees to reach a bargain over their working conditions.16 There was some scope for an over-arching system of regulation, but that was to be provided by the operation of the rule of law. Thus, the law could be used to enforce any contractual bargain that had been agreed upon by the parties that formed the employment relationship.17 Although this approach was viewed as something ‘new’, the same laissez-faire type principles form the basis of the common law system of contracts. Thus, some have argued that, in reality, the development of such an approach to labour market regulation is not necessarily new, rather it is an approach to labour relations that simply advocates freedom to contract in a different guise.18

It was the adoption and modification of such an ideology by employer associations such as the BCA that triggered a call for the abolition of the failing Accord system and for it to be replaced with a more enterprise specific approach to regulating the employment relationship. The BCA did not initially call for the total removal of all regulation; rather it offered a comprehensive set of reform policies aimed at substantially changing the award system and minimising union interference in the bargaining of employment conditions. The ultimate goal of the BCA was outlined in one of its very influential reports, Enterprise Based Bargaining Units: A Better Way of Working which was released in 1989.19
What the council argued for was a shift in the focus of the Australian system of industrial relations that had developed over the last 100 years. They argued that the system of conciliation and arbitration that was used to regulate the process of bargaining between employers and unions was inherently ‘adversarial’ in nature due to the diametrically opposed interests that each party wished to pursue. On the one hand employers wished to make awards that maximised profits whilst unions aimed at achieving the highest wage increase as well as ensuring overall working conditions were improved. Instead the BCA had been heavily influenced by a unitarist theory of industrial relations that assumes that conflict between the two parties is avoidable and is often only the result of poor management and communication. The BCA argued that the uniform conditions of employment established by the AIRC on an industry basis restrained the parties from creating working agreements that delivered higher levels of flexibility as well as inhibiting the development of a more co-operative approach to work arrangements. Again, a major impetus for further deregulation of the Australian industrial relations system was tied to the necessity for Australia to remain competitive within a globalised economy. The introduction of an enterprise based system of bargaining would ‘allow for the smooth handling of conflict and change at the workplace and encourage adaptation rather than resistance to evolving economic realities’. It is this connection of industrial policy to broader global economic pressures that led to some writers arguing that the emergence of the New Right ideology and prominence of the BCA was not so much the cause of the shift towards a deregulated approach to industrial relations, but instead was the mere ‘catalyst’ for such a transformation. The increasing pressure for Australian industries to compete with low cost international competitors would most likely have dictated to the government to withdraw from such a centralised system regardless of whether such organisations as the BCA had become so influential or not.

Of course the culmination of this move towards a deregulated approach to industrial relations was realised in the creation of the Workplace Relations Act 1996 (Cth) which came into force under the Liberal-National Party Coalition government. Further dismantling of the award system took place by legislating to limit the number of ‘allowable matters’ that could be included in any award, which formed a ‘safety net’ or minimum standards of employment that would operate across an entire industry. Thus, if the parties wished to create a legally binding instrument that attempted to regulate the employment relationship, they would have to elect to create an enterprise agreement, which could be formed under s.170 LJ or 170LK of the Act. This provided a further ‘push’ to ensuring that the relations between the employer and a union, or group of non-union employees, were played out primarily at the individual enterprise level. The introduction of such arrangements meant that the locus of power changed from being determined at the industry level to one that was determined at the enterprise, where in many cases the employer was simply in a more powerful position to determine conditions of employment. Trade unions were no longer seen as the broad representative of workers, but as the bargaining agent for their members only, which was a significant, albeit discrete way of narrowing their role in the traditional system of conciliation and arbitration.

The power of employer organisations: the call for reform

The current legislation provides the most obvious example of the intersection that occurred between the policies advocated by employer associations such as the BCA and the adoption of such policies by the Liberal Party. The BCA during this period advocated key industrial changes such as ‘aligning of bargaining units’ to the enterprise, the determination of conditions of employment at the enterprise only subject to a very limited number of ‘safety net’ conditions, and a reduction in the role that unions played in bargaining on behalf of employees. However, the call for industrial change went further than just removing some of the collective arrangements that had been integral to the operation of Australia’s industrial relations system over the last 100 years. Organisations such as the BCA also called for the creation of individualised contracts that could be reached between an employer and employee. This type of arrangement not only represented the highest degree of flexibility in relation to working conditions, but it also reinforced the notion of perceiving the employment contract like any other commercial contract. That is, an agreement that would be regulated by the common law and the appropriate recourse for any breaches would also be pursued within the courts rather than through the AIRC. This typified the economic rationalist approach adopted by such institutions,
which placed the individual’s needs, skills and bargaining power as the main determinants of the type of employment conditions that an individual might contract for. This ‘contractualist’ approach was crucial to the platform and policy agenda advocated by such parties. It also ensured that more people would slowly be moved from under the protection of any safety net and instead utilise market conditions in order to achieve their maximum level of utility. Although these assumptions maybe fundamentally flawed, they were reflected in the provisions of the Workplace Relations Act. As mentioned previously, this Act provided for the reduction in allowable matters, enterprise bargaining agreements that could be formed by using union representation or employee representation or the creation of individual employment contracts under s.170VF of the Act, which were referred to as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). As described in the reform statements released by the BCA, AWAs provided for the negotiation of individual agreements that regulated the employment relationship in its entirety, in effect, ‘contracting’ these employees out of the award and allowable matters system if the parties agreed. No third parties such as unions needed to be involved unless the individual wished for a union representative to bargain on their behalf. Thus if one of the roles played by trade unions was to address the inherent bargaining power imbalance that exists in employment relationships, then AWAs are the ‘antithesis of that logic’. Thus, the success experienced by certain employer groups in lobbying the government cannot be underestimated. The BCA created a strong argument for workplace reform that promoted its own agenda but was also perceived to address Australia’s poor productivity performance. One of the key catalysts for the creation of a deregulated system of industrial relations that was premised on the promotion of non-unionised collective enterprise agreements.

**Awards: collective representation of the Australian workforce?**

There were many people in the Australian workforce who did not fall under the scope of the awards that operated in various sectors of the Australian economy. Thus, the award system had provided a ‘patchwork’ approach to the regulation of employment conditions for workers. Some of those categories of workers that were not accommodated within the award system included non-employees, which constitute up 15 per cent of the Australian workforce. In addition awards did not regulate the conditions of employment of another distinct non-employee group that was composed of managerial and executive employees. This group of non-employees constituted a further 20 per cent of the workforce, which meant that the effectiveness of award coverage remained limited to regulating the employment conditions of only about half of the Australian workforce. The emergence of enterprise bargaining was seen as an appropriate industrial instrument that could be used to incorporate these types of workers into some form of collective regulation.

**Enough is enough: the role of unions in the move towards enterprise bargaining**

An in-depth study of post-Fordist production methods was undertaken when the two-tier productivity based approach to wage setting implemented under the Accord failed to address the issues raised by unions and their members in relation to rewarding gains in productivity. Thus a model of high-wage, high-skilled workers as well as a restructuring of the award system to facilitate skill based career paths and multi-skilling and labour flexibility was developed by the ACTU, which resulted in their national policy titled *Australia Reconstructed*. However, despite the release of such a proposal, these initiatives were not fully adopted by the AIRC in the 1989 national wage case decision that followed the release of their policy. The AIRC did allow for the bargaining over penalty rates and working hours, which were in line with the structural efficiency principles that were laid down in the Accord process. However these allowances fell way short of what was prescribed in *Australia Reconstructed*. As a result the ACTU forged on with a strategy of removing the constraints on productivity based payments being negotiated at the enterprise as it not only provided the union with a way of ensuring the needs of its members were met but enterprise bargaining also provided unions with a mechanism to increase membership levels in order to retain a role in bargaining at the workplace. Without the removal of a centralised system, inefficient work practices would remain. This in turn would inhibit improvements in innovation, the introduction of new technology and the acquisition of new skills. These factors were considered to be crucial to obtaining higher levels of productivity that would ensure Australia would remain internationally competitive.
After numerous years of conflict with the ACTU, the final blow to a lingering positive relationship came after the AIRC handed down its decision in the 1991 National Wage Case (N.W.C.). After the ACTU had made a lengthy submission explaining the benefits and needs for enterprise bargaining, the AIRC refused to endorse such a plan and instead argued that the plans for productivity improvement that were to be completed under the award had not been completed. Also, the likelihood of having an enterprise based system of wage regulation could also lead to pressure being placed on a national blow out in relation to wages rates which the economy could simply not afford. However with the ALP and some of the major unions within the ACTU refusing to accept this decision, the introduction of an enterprise based bargaining stream was approved in the N.W.C. cases heard in October 1991.

**Conclusion**

The previous discussion has demonstrated that the shift towards enterprise bargaining was the result of economic, political and social changes that have occurred over the last 20 years. On the one hand, the argument that globalisation and free markets required Australia to adopt a decentralised approach to the regulation of wages and conditions may not be as watertight as once thought. No doubt, the movement of international capital flows across state borders can have a significant impact on the pressures for any one nation state to remain internationally competitive. However, as this analysis has shown, instead of the state being ‘powerless’ to combat global pressures, the Australian government has taken quite an interventionist role in facilitating this process of deregulation with the goal of guaranteeing economic growth. Combined with the inherent weaknesses of the award system, there would be few that could argue a move away from a highly centralised approach in relation to the regulating of conditions of employment was required in order to reach the productivity and flexibility demands that employers, employees and unions wished to address especially after the demise of the Accord process. Coupled with the emergence of a new ideological approach aimed at the eradication of unions among the Coalition parties, the introduction of legislative use of non-union collective enterprise agreements seemed inevitable. Although unions played an important role in facilitating the move towards a decentralised system of industrial relations, it is unlikely they imagined that the reform agenda would result in their exclusion from representing employees all together. Non-union collective bargaining symbolised the triumph of strong employer associations over the union movement in relation to the direction of industrial relations reform policy that continues to take place.

**Endnotes**

11. T. Macdonald and M. Rimmer, ‘Award restructuring and wage policy’, in *Growth*, vol. 37, 1989, p. 120.
27. BCA, *Enterprise-Based Bargaining Units*.
30. Section 170VF (1), *Workplace Relations Act 1996* (Cth)
33. *Ibid*.
Electoral politics and the Broken Hill labour movement, 1921-50

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When the conscription fight of the World War I splintered the Labor Party in Broken Hill as it did nationally, the local member, procrastinating over the issue, was forced to quit. One of the leaders of the anti-conscription campaign, the internationalist Percy Brookfield, won the ensuing pre-selection ballot and then secured the State seat of Sturt for Labor in January 1917. In July, the militant and charismatic Brookfield spoke for the first time in the Parliament. He left members in no doubt as to his world view. Rebellion and radicalism were the marks of the labour movement from which he had sprung:

I would think very little of you if you were working down those mines in Broken Hill, your health failing, leaving your work, wondering whether you would live long enough to see your little ones grow up and work for themselves – I should think very little of you if you would not rebel and try to improve your position.¹

Brookfield was returned to parliament again in the 1920 election and played a decisive part in improving the ‘position’ of his mining constituents. He was central to the Broken Hill miners’ victory that year when they secured a compensation scheme and 35-hour week after their 18-month long strike. A few months later, on his way to Adelaide, Brookfield was shot and killed, trying to calm a gunman who had terrified rail passengers. Broken Hill had long been an industrial and political stronghold for the Labor Party but soon after the strike and Brookfield’s death, the nature of the labour movement began to change. This paper charts and explains these developments from Brookfield’s death to the onset of the cold war in 1950. Broken Hill’s voters returned Labor candidates in State elections throughout (and beyond) these years but their view of themselves and their town, along with their expectations of those elected to represent them, became more insular and locally specific.

Making a Labor stronghold

With capital-intensive mining dominant on the Broken Hill ‘line of lode’ from the outset, and with unionism establishing an almost immediate presence there (1886), the lines of class division rapidly solidified in this industrial town. Within a few short years, working class consciousness was manifesting itself through strike action and, in 1890, the local unions extended their activity to the political sphere by forming a Labor Parliamentary Committee. These early developments set the stage for the town’s emergence as a regional, State and national epicentre of unionism and labour politics. The very fact of Labor’s longstanding electoral dominance in Broken Hill and, largely through this, in the Far West intensified the contests for ascendancy within the local labour movement. Indeed, for much of the period to 1950, electoral politics were played out as much within the local labour movement as they were between the forces of labour and anti-labour. These struggles are the central concern of the paper. We set out to answer this question: what happens to a local labour movement when the electoral ascendancy of its party seems all but assured?

By 1891 Broken Hill had a population of just under 20,000. The town’s population plateaued at around 27,000 after World War I, and while the population in the rural Far West rose substantially in the interwar period, in the years immediately after World War II, Broken Hill’s residents still comprised almost two-thirds of the total population of the Far West. Mining was and remained the single most important site of economic activity for Broken Hill males, accounting for two-thirds of male employment in Broken Hill. Yet it would be wrong to consign Broken Hill to the category of a single-industry locality. The town sector became an increasingly important secondary site of male work activity. At the time of the 1921 and 1933 Censuses, years of depressed employment on the city’s mines, 45 to 47 per cent of the total local male workforce were engaged in activities other than mining. During the interwar period, commerce and finance replaced manufacturing as the single largest site of male employment outside of the mines. Most town employment was provided by small employers, although the town sector also had two relatively large institutional employers, the (private) Silverton Tramway Company and the Municipal Council. Equally significant are the spatial contrasts and temporal changes in women’s work.
While manufacturing, bar work, ‘entertainment’ and personal and domestic service were the main sites of paid work for women in Broken Hill prior to World War I, thereafter the emphasis switched to shop and office work. This was accompanied by a union-enforced prohibition on paid employment by married women.

In the mining sector, the ruling class was absentee. Those who owned and directed the companies which operated the local mines inhabited a thoroughly different world: that of the affluent suburbs and boardrooms of Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and London. The physical absence of the mine owners meant that anti-Labor political organising in and around Broken Hill fell mainly to salaried mine managers and a coterie of small business operators. The town was also home to a substantial petty bourgeoisie of property owners and small employers. Many of these family businesses seem to have been operated by female family members, while male family members engaged in outside waged work. Women also ran many of the town’s numerous small boarding houses.

Religion was another important source of social differentiation both in Broken Hill. Many of those who pioneered metal mining in the Region were immigrant Cornish miners from the copper-mining localities of Moonta and Kapunda in South Australia. For most of these ‘Cousin Jacks’, the Methodist chapel, the temperance lodge and the friendly society were ways of life. Their religion was also a major formative influence on unionism and Labor politics in Broken Hill. Prior to the 1930s Catholics were also less strongly represented in Broken Hill’s population than amongst other inhabitants of the Region but by the 1940s their numbers had stabilised at around 25 per cent across the Region and by this time the leadership of the Broken Hill labour movement lay primarily with those of the Catholic rather than Methodist faith. These tensions, and ideological divisions within the unions, did at least as much to explain electoral dynamics as did inter-class relations in Broken Hill.

The first rumblings of industrial conflict on the mines drew the lines of class division into sharper focus. A union organising campaign, extending through the latter half of 1889 and culminating in brief strike action, saw 2,500 of the 3,000-strong mine workforce unionised. The locality’s first overt industrial conflict, the 1889 strike, established new minimum time wages for underground miners and surface workers, with mine management also undertaking to collect union dues. Further strike action in September 1890, in response to a company lockout coinciding with the Maritime Strike, delivered a reduction in the standard working week from 48 hours to 46. These disputes gave the mine workers their first taste of the fruits of solidarity, and their leaders valuable experience in industrial tactics. In Broken Hill, as elsewhere, the Maritime Strike led to direct parliamentary representation of organised labour. Yet in this locality, this move was undertaken not with an air of despair; rather, it arose from an underlying sense of confidence amongst local labour movement activists, an optimism underpinned by the continued high price of silver and strong union membership.

From 1890, when J.H. Cann won the Seat of Sturt, there was an all but unbroken Labor dominance over electoral politics in Broken Hill. Labor’s achievements in Broken Hill were simply stellar through the 1890s compared to Labor fortunes elsewhere, with comfortable wins time and again. Until World War I, Labor only faltered when internally divided as, for example, in the lead-up to the June 1901 poll. In the years before, as well as during the war, Broken Hill became a radical heartland. Socialists, syndicalists flocked to the town as its unions took on and often bested the mining companies.

The war years brought to a head the ideological tensions in the Broken Hill labour movement. The local Party branch, now styled the Barrier District Assembly of the Australian Labor Party (BDAALP), was declared ‘bogus’ by an emissary from Labor’s State executive. This intervention followed the involvement of Brookfield himself and the AMA’s vice-president O’Reilly at a proscribed conference of militants sympathetic to syndicalism in Sydney. From this meeting had sprung the Industrial Socialist Labor Party. When Brookfield resigned from the Parliamentary Labor Party, the Party’s State Executive retaliated by expelling him and O’Reilly from the Party altogether. A mass meeting of members of unions affiliated to the BDAALP, held at the request of the Labor Party State Executive in January 1920, made clear where local loyalties lay. The meeting voted by 790 to 19 to retain the two dissidents as endorsed Labor candidates for Sturt. However, this convincing vote did not deter the functionary sent by the State Executive to oversee proceedings. He promptly made off with the Branch’s books and re-established the Branch with the support of officials from the local craft unions. The majority of
the ‘bogus’ party remained behind to form a local branch of the Industrial Labor Party – the self-styled ‘Trades Hall ALP’. The dissension in and around the Labor Party made quite explicit the political nature of the divisions between the local unions. In Broken Hill, the AMA was the sole organisation behind the Industrial Labor Party and, subsequently, the One Big Union. All the other unions, affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council, supported official Labor.

The militants’ consciousness of place was cast not in terms of physical isolation or localised class collaboration but of a working class bastion centrally located in global capitalism, a place from which Australian capital might be challenged. And their champion had won a seat in parliament – albeit held only for what turned out to be the last four years of his life.

**The politics of place: Labor on the Barrier, 1921-30**

At first it seemed that the success of the ‘Great Strike’ of 1919-20 would enhance the power of the most militant and internationalist section of the local working class movement, the syndicalists. However, syndicalism’s zenith was quickly followed by its nadir after a collapse in ore prices and mine employment, along with a wider retreat from syndicalism across the country.

Brookfield’s seat in Sturt went automatically to Labor’s Jabez Wright, the fourth-placed candidate at the 1920 election. At the State elections of March 1922, held in the depths of a slump in world metal prices and hard economic times on the line of lode, Sturt was contested by 11 candidates. The three endorsed Labor candidates were Davidson, Wright, and E.M. Horsington, ex-secretary of the Broken Hill branch of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen’s Association and a leading figure in the ‘official’ BDAALP. Opposing them were several Nationalists, including Doe, and Broken Hill mayor J.H. Wicks. Opposing both were three Industrial Labor Party candidates: Brookfield’s associate Ern Wetherell, who now edited the *Truth*; Donald Grant, one of the ‘IWW Twelve’ whose convictions Brookfield had campaigned so tenaciously to overturn; and William Couch. For the radicals, however, the result was nothing short of a disaster. Despite support from seasoned campaigners like Mick Considine, the Industrial Labor candidates failed to win a seat. Official Labor fared much better, outpolling Industrial Labor by more than two to one. Even in Broken Hill itself, the latter managed only 28 per cent of the vote, with the Nationalists winning 30 per cent. Davidson topped the Sturt poll for Labor, with Wright coming in third behind Doe, and Horsington finishing eighth. Davidson performed particularly well in Broken Hill and in mining and pastoral towns in the eastern and northern parts of the electorate, including Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Nyngan and Wilcannia, while Doe topped the poll in the southern parts of the electorate. When Wright died suddenly six months after the election, Horsington took his seat as the next ranked Labor candidate.

Within months, the Industrial Labor Party was defunct. In Broken Hill itself, however, the institution of most importance in healing the rift in the Barrier labour movement and in driving developments in organised labour in the Far West, was not so much the local Labor Party itself; rather the prime mover was a new local peak union body, the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC), formed in 1923. Ironically, it was against the backdrop of the defeat of syndicalism that the new peak body, one providing the ‘closer organisation’ for which many militants had hungered, was born. The full story of the making of the BIC is immensely complex and has been detailed elsewhere. The critical aspects of these developments, played out from 1920 to 1923, were that the influence of the syndicalists was contained, and the WIUA was unable to dominate the labour movement as it had before. The delegate structure was weighted to minimise the possibility of the BIC being dominated by the WIUA.

Hereafter, the local labour movement began to turn in on itself. The BIC remade the Region by controlling access to Broken Hill’s labour markets in terms of place of birth and exercising powerful control within those markets. It came to direct almost every aspect of social life, encompassing control over women’s employment and the regulation of consumption, from beer and bread prices to entertainment and betting, as well as production and the formal processes of industrial relations. Broken Hill would become etched in Australian consciousness as the ‘union town’ *par excellence*. What did this mean for how people voted and for the shape of representative politics?

If the new unity actually undercut the radicals’ power, it also thwarted any hope for a combined industrial and political body. At first, this seemed possible with a new all-encompassing peak body styled as the ‘Barrier Industrial and Political Council’, absorbing the local branch of the Labor Party.
This Council was formally launched in March 1924 but its dual brief was short-lived. The Labor Party State Executive intervened, just as it had over Brookfield four years earlier. This time, the resolution was rather less dramatic, in large part because it appealed to the ascendant moderates. The Executive insisted that the local party remain a separate entity and simply refused the Council’s application for affiliation. In November 1924, the Council was unobtrusively restyled the ‘Barrier Industrial Council’.9

The dominant figure in the BIC was, far more than Labor’s parliamentarians, the key player in the local labour movement. E.P. (‘Paddy’) O’Neill, a municipal council employee and leader of the local Municipal Employees Union, held the BIC presidency from 1923 until his retirement in 1949. While O’Neill had initially aligned himself with Brookfield and the Industrial Labor Party, his political allegiances were transformed utterly by the Industrialists’ electoral rout in 1922. What O’Neill did retain was an unshakeable belief in the importance grass-roots organising. In the first years of his presidency, the BIC set itself down the path of ‘further organisation’. By 1925 both underground and surface operations on the mines were fully unionised through closed shop campaigns coordinated by the BIC which ensured that all miners on the job joined unions. What was new was the ensuing organisation of town employees, a process which drew upon the power of the mining unions and their families as solid participants in boycotts of non-union businesses. Without the support of mineworkers, these organising drives would not have succeeded. Despite the collapse of the syndicalist vision, this was still not a matter of cross-class alliances. Rather, the local bourgeoisie was subordinated by the organised working class through consumer boycotts and union support for small businesses with family connections to mine workers. By the late 1920s, this strategy had made all Broken Hill into a virtual closed shop. It also did something else which shaped the internal form of this Labor stronghold: it strengthened the power of non-WIUA unions within the BIC. The miners no longer shaped and drove local politics in the same decisive ways that they had since 1891.10

The BIC’s role in making a new sense of place in Broken Hill built upon these successful drives to organise the town’s workers. The BIC secured control of collective bargaining on behalf of local unions, serving general logs of claims on all employers, mine and non-mine alike. The first of the mine agreements, in 1925, set the pattern for a system of triennial agreements which lasted until 1986. The singular achievement and defining characteristic of the organised working class in Broken Hill – central parts of how voters saw their place and themselves – was control of labour market access. The unemployed movement and the communists posed challenges to this male dominance of local politics but those challenges were intermittent and ultimately unsuccessful.11 The imposition of a strict residential qualification for union membership and, hence, access to paid employment, was as complete and sustained as the marriage bar. In the late 1920s, there was an intense struggle within labour’s ranks between militants, moderates and outright racists as mine jobs became scarce.12 Finally, the WIUA and the BIC introduced closure of local labour markets to those born outside Broken Hill. The militants had resisted racial exclusion but now, reluctantly, embraced this form of exclusion. This was introduced in 1931 and refined over the years, beginning with a rule which restricted union membership to males born or educated within a 25 mile radius of the town Post Office and who had resided within this area for at least five years.13

As syndicalism fell away, another influence within the Broken Hill labour movement became more prominent, Roman Catholicism. While the Catholic proportion of the town’s population increased only slightly after World War I, there was a discernible increase in the presence of Catholics in labour’s industrial and political leadership, and a marked decline in the influence of Methodism. O’Neill, for instance, was devoutly Catholic and his brand of industrial assertiveness and Catholic social conservatism left an indelible mark on the BIC. Both Ted Horsington and Mat Davidson were also Catholic. All three were Labor conservatives and staunchly anti-communist.

These developments resonated through Broken Hill’s electoral politics. The industrial control wielded by the BIC was paralleled by that exercised in political affairs by the BDAALP, in which O’Neill and other union leaders were also key players. At the State elections of May 1925, which saw Labor take office under the premiership of J.T. Lang, Davidson and Horsington were both returned comfortably in Sturt, with Labor securing 72 per cent of the vote and relegating Doe to third place. Labor campaigned strongly on several issues of particular interest to local miners and town workers, including the introduction of
a 44 hour week, an improved compensation Act for mine workers, a long-mooted water pipeline link to the Darling River, completion of the Sydney-Broken Hill rail link, and resumption and subdivision of large Western Division leaseholdings. Both Davidson and Horsington were fierce opponents of the ‘land monopoly’ and the issue would become one of their main causes in government. Both were also strong backers of Lang’s leadership of the Party, with Davidson being Party whip from 1923. Labor’s stocks in the west received a further boost in late 1925 when the Lang cabinet appointed Barrier Daily Truth general manager, W.E. Dickson, to the New South Wales Legislative Council. The subsequent ructions in the Lang cabinet seem to have done Labor little harm in the West. Indeed, in May 1927 Lang rewarded Horsington’s loyalty by making him Minister for Lands.

The return to single-member electorates in 1927 entrenched Labor dominance in the West, notwithstanding the fall of the first Lang government. The old multi-member seat of Sturt was redistributed between three smaller electorates: Lachlan, to the east of the Darling River; Murray, taking in South Broken Hill and extending to the Victorian border; and the new seat of Sturt, with 14,000 voters, taking in Broken Hill city and north-west corner of the State, including Wilcannia and White Cliffs. In Sturt, Horsington, with 70 per cent of the vote, easily defeated his Nationalist opponent, stock inspector A.R. Gorrie, while Davidson took the adjoining seat of Murray. In both seats, the voter turnout in 1927 – the last election for which voting was not compulsory – was also extremely high: over 70 per cent in Sturt and over 80 per cent in Murray.

This is not to suggest that Labor’s political and industrial dominance was complete. In Broken Hill itself, the Nationalists (or rather self-styled anti-Labor ‘Independents’) remained a force to be reckoned with, regaining control of the Municipal Council intermittently throughout the 1920s. There were also challenges from within of a far less tractable sort. From 1926, when the mines began to feel the initial effects of what would be a seven year decline in international base metal prices, the two local Labor members faced demands for state financial relief from the growing number of unemployed mine workers. In September 1927, at the height of the election campaign, three of the largest mines suspended operations, throwing over 1,000 miners out of work and forcing Horsington and Davidson into hasty attempts to secure special relief work programs for the district. Lands Minister Horsington also ramped up the rhetoric for leasehold resumption and land redistribution.

Broken Hill remained a Labor stronghold through the local and national upheavals and political realignments of the 1920s. It was, however, one of a very different hue at the end of that decade compared to the start, particularly in terms of the orientation of its organised working class.

**Electoral hegemony and ideological conflict, 1930-50**

Compared to what had gone before, the history of electoral politics in Broken Hill during the 1930s and 1940s is in some respects quite anti-climactic. Further redistribution saw the reconstitution of the seat of Cobar, which extended north to the Queensland border and east to Nyngan, but with a corridor extending westwards to the South Australian border taking in Broken Hill’s Railwaytown and South Broken Hill, as well as Menindee, while Sturt continued to cover central Broken Hill and Broken Hill North, as well as Silverton and a reduced portion of the north-western corner of the State. With 12,000 voters each, these two seats were now confirmed as Labor’s western citadels. At the election of October 1930, which saw Labor returned to office and Lang restored to the Premiership, the advent of compulsory voting strengthened still further Labor’s electoral performance in the west. In Sturt, Horsington won an astonishing 93 per cent of the formal vote against Communist candidate, L. King; in Cobar, where the Nationals did run a candidate, Davidson won with 73 per cent, and became Minister for Public Works in the second Lang administration. Davidson retained Cobar until his death in early 1949; Horsington continued to represent Sturt until 1947.

Yet appearances can be deceptive. These two electorates, and Broken Hill in particular, were sites of the intense ideological, factional and personal dramas that were played out across the Labor Party between the Great Depression and the Cold War. In the context of Labor’s overwhelming dominance, electoral politics was fought out more within the local labour movement than between the parties of labour and capital. If the main challenge to Labor’s dominance in the far west in the 1920s had come from the Right, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, the principal threat was from the Left.
A branch of the Communist Party formed in Broken Hill in 1924 had worked cooperatively with the BDAALP and the local unions. All of this changed, however, with the advent of ‘Third Period’ influence on international communism at the end of the 1920s. From 1930, local Communist Party cadres and Militant Minority Movement (MMM) activists were openly critical of the BIC leadership and the BDAALP. In early 1930, at the height of the lockout on the Northern coalfields, WIUA left-wingers succeeded in disaffiliating the union briefly from the Labor Party. At the October 1930 State elections, both Horsington and Davidson were opposed by Communist candidates. In Sturt, Communist candidate Les King scored a mere 7 per cent of the vote. In early 1931 MMM activists made a bid for control of the local Unemployed Union, but Labor supporters maintained control. In late 1932 WIUA communists sought to disaffiliate the union from the BIC but the proposal was roundly defeated.

Far more serious in its potential consequences was the bitter split between Lang Labor and Federal Labor. Like the BDAALP itself, both Horsington and Davidson remained staunchly Langite. With Lang’s dismissal, the WIUA also threw its weight solidly behind Lang Labor and in the elections of May 1932 Horsington and Davidson secured 93 per cent and 60 per cent of the final vote respectively. Federal Labor ran in Cobar, as did the Country Party, but neither ran in Sturt, where Horsington’s only opponent was Communist F.A. Miller. The two Lang Labor loyalists repeated this performance at the 1935 State elections. In Sturt, Horsington secured 88 per cent of the vote, although his Communist opponent, S.J. Coombe, managed to push the protest vote up to 12 per cent. In Cobar, where Davidson was again opposed by both a Federal Labor and the Country party, Lang Labor’s vote rose to 70 per cent.

The period 1932-35 saw a gradual recovery in mine employment and mining union fortunes. In the four years after 1931, total mine employment doubled to more than 5,000. The recovery was accompanied by a series of complex and divergent political realignments in the mining unions and the local unemployed movement. On the one hand, in 1932-33, BDAALP moderates won control of key WIUA positions, and from 1932 on Labor had an unshakeable grip on municipal government in Broken Hill. On the other hand, in 1934, left-wingers captured key leadership positions in the second largest mining union, the Federated Engine Drivers – Horsington’s old union. To this point, though, not one union in the Far West supported Federal Labor.

Wider political developments now supervened. For Horsington and Davidson, as for many others, Labor’s failure at the 1935 poll was a bitter disappointment and by 1936 their faith in Lang’s leadership had all but dissipated. In August of that year, both were summarily expelled from the State Party by Lang for attending a proscribed conference of unions organised by the Labor Council of New South Wales, at which the BDAALP was also represented. In 1937 both were readmitted to the Party by the Lang-dominated State Conference but the rift with Lang was now beyond repair. With BDAALP backing, both subsequently supported the Heffron Group’s attempts to wrest control of the Party from Lang’s Inner Group to end the warfare with Federal Labor, and on Lang’s final defeat in 1939 Davidson was elected secretary of the Parliamentary Labor Party. Both carried the local labour movement with them and both were returned unopposed in 1938. When Lang himself arrived in town prior to the election to try to influence the preselection ballots, he incurred the indignity of repeated heckling from a miner armed with a megaphone and suspended from the ceiling in a bosun’s chair. The BDAALP refused to send ballot boxes to the State Executive, counted the votes itself, and declared Davidson and Horsington duly elected as the endorsed Labor candidates.

Without doubt, though, the most formidable threat to the BIC’s industrial hegemony in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the rise of Communist-inspired rank-and-file job committees on the line of lode. First appearing in 1934, the job committees challenged not only the BIC’s role as the pillar of the local labour movement but also its role as local mine workers’ principal agent in negotiations with mine management. Again, the Labor ‘establishment’ withstood the challenge, due largely to some deft behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by Paddy O’Neill himself.

On the political front, however, the Left’s renewed momentum was less easily blunted. By 1940, Left-activists associated with the job committees had achieved a dominant position within the BDAALP itself, and following Federal dissolution of the Left-dominated State Executive, and the consequent formation of the break-away State Labor (‘Hughes-Evans’) Party in mid-1940, the BDAALP came out in support of the break-away Party. At State elections of May 1941, which saw the Labor Party
take power under the leadership of W.J. McKell, both Horsington and Davidson were opposed by BDAALP-endorsed Hughes-Evans candidates. Both sitting members were re-elected, this time as endorsed Federal Executive candidates, but in Sturt, State Labor’s A.R. (‘Floss’) Campbell, a miner and local alderman, won almost 30 per cent of the vote, leaving Horsington’s standing seriously, perhaps irreparably, damaged. Although Barrier Daily Truth editor, Ern Wetherell, bucked by the old Labor men, both sitting members were attacked by other figures in the local labour movement, including mayor Percy Rowe, for deserting the BDAALP, for residing in Sydney rather than in their electorates, and for doing too little to combat unemployment and attract munitions work to the Barrier. Official Labor’s problems were compounded after the election when Mat Davidson, a strong Heffron supporter, ran against McKell in the caucus ballot for leadership of the parliamentary Party. As a consequence, Broken Hill and the Far West failed to secure a position in the new Labor ministry and Davidson, the old Cobar war-horse, was relegated to the status of a disaffected backbencher.

The Left successes on the Barrier continued into 1942, when job committee activist and communist candidate John Virgo wrested the presidency of the WIUA from ALP moderate, Wally Riddiford. Although Virgo held the post for only two years, the fact that the BIC’s largest affiliate was now communist-led left official Labor in a most precarious position in the Far West. By 1944, however, the political tide had turned. The State Labor Party had gone, the job committee movement was in terminal decline, and the BDAALP had returned to the ‘official’ Labor fold. Although the job committees remained active until at least 1954, their leadership was taken over by Labor moderates and Industrial Groupers.

The anti-communist Right was now in the ascendancy within the Broken Hill labour movement. By 1948, the presidency of the WIUA had passed to Industrial Grouper Norm Dunlevy, and within the space of another year, the old political order in the Far West had passed forever. In December 1946, Ted Horsington, now aged 68 years, lost preselection to the stolid right-winger William Wattison. Although Horsington, a WIUA man and the first MLA to have been born in Broken Hill, had opposed Horsington in BDAALP preselection ballots for Sturt on several occasions since the early 1930s, when he had been active in the Broken Hill Unemployed Union. Dogged by ill-health, BIC president Paddy O’Neill stood down in 1949, aged 72, dying four years later. The redoubtable Mat Davidson died in harness in January 1949, aged 79, having served the Labor cause, as he saw it, for more than a generation. While his achievements in government had fallen well short of his own aspirations, one of his most path-breaking parliamentary actions had been his outspoken criticism of the treatment of the Aboriginal people of the Far West and elsewhere by government agencies.

In this sense, at least, Mat Davidson was a politician well ahead of his time – and ahead of many of those who entrusted him with their vote.

Many of the key transitions in the Regions’ politics are encapsulated in decisions made in 1949. In Cobar, Davidson’s successor was none other than Barrier Daily Truth editor of 30 years standing, and one-time syndicalist firebrand, 56 year old Ernest Wetherell. Elected with 65 per cent of the vote at a by-election held in March 1949, Wetherell’s slow but sure political conversion mirrored that of Broken Hill itself, just as the by-election campaign that delivered him, at long last, to parliamentary office resonated with the ideological strains that were soon to tear the wider labour movement asunder. The Sturt by-election was a particularly acrimonious affair, with Wetherell, the BDAALP hierarchy, and a procession of Ministers from the McGirr Labor government squaring off against the Country Party’s H.E.O. Campbell, a Gilgandra newspaper-owner, and Communist Party candidate, Dr H.P.J. Campbell.

Weeks later, the McGirr and Chifley Labor governments were locked in a struggle with the Communist-led coalminers and their union, the Miners Federation. The BDAALP declared its support for the actions of State and Federal governments. This decision, repeated in the BIC and the Federation’s own affiliate, the WIUA, was of course merely the logical playing out and expression of the increasingly dominant tendencies in the Region’s labour movement. In his maiden speech, delivered the height of the coal strike, Wetherell decried the communist ‘conspiracy’ and insisted that ‘there can be no compromise whatever’ with ‘those who are not in favour of arbitration’. He reinforced this message when he spoke at a BDAALP meeting in Broken Hill: they had just emerged from the most serious enternal [sic] fight that had occurred in the history of the Nation. These ringing denunciations were a measure of just how far Broken Hill had changed since the days of Percy Brookfield.
Conclusion

The record of electoral politics in Broken Hill from the death of Brookfield to the mid-twentieth century is a register of the flow and ebb not only of the generations, but also of the radical principles and practices that have come to be seen as the defining features of industrial and political life on the Barrier. The unusually early and quite comprehensive establishment of waged work as the norm on Broken Hill’s mines meant that unionism and support for labour and socialist parties were quickly established as norms. Its union movement drove labourism quite relentlessly — and very successfully. From time to time, religion, particular voting systems, and the issue of empire may have checked Labor’s dominance but support for the Labor Party was and remained the habit of most voters. The last great strike in 1919-20 and the gains won in Parliament by Broken Hill’s radical champion, Percy Brookfield, confirmed that the labour movement could achieve much for local workers and their families. However, this proved to be the height of the radicals’ success, not the beginning of a new chapter for socialism. The moderates re-grouped. Most people continued to vote Labor most of the time but with fewer demands of their candidates.

Electoral politics came to be played out as much within the local labour movement as between parties or between classes. What changed from the highpoint of radicalism was the outlook and character of the local labour movement itself. The making of this union town and in particular the closure of its labour market from the 1930s created a sense of region which was in large part about isolation and difference. By 1950, Broken Hill was, in every sense, a local labour stronghold. The town’s labour movement had conquered its own radical past. Senses of place and difference were powerful — and voting Labor was central to them.

Endnotes

7. For details, see Barrier Daily Truth, issues for March 1922.
8. Ellem and Shields, ‘Why Do Unions Form Peak Bodies?’.
10. Ellem and Shields, ‘Making a “Union Town”’.
11. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 29 September, 3, 4, 5 October 1927.
16. Ibid., 27 October 1930.
17. Ibid., 13 May 1931, 21 November 1932.
18. Ibid., 22 May, 6, 13 June 1932.
19. Ibid., 13 May 1935.
28. BDAALP, Minutes, 22 August 1949.
Much has been written in Australian historiography about the socially turbulent years of the late nineteenth century in Sydney, with significant work being done on the issues of crime, policing, drunkenness, insanity and social welfare in this period. Similarly, Australian labour history recognises these years as highly significant in the development of the Australian working class, and several thousands of pages tell the story of the changing nature of work and the increasing radicalisation of the workers of Sydney from 1880 onwards. However, it is rare that these two aspects of life in Sydney in the nineteenth century are studied together. This paper seeks to problematise the way we think about one particular phenomena in Australian history, and this is the set of behaviours and cultural practices referred to as larrikinism. By larrikinism, I am referring to groups of working class youth much complained about by the Sydney press and police for their attacks on ‘respectable’ citizenry, in the form of insults, assaults, loitering, riots and resisting arrest. I am also referring to larrikin culture as it was described by contemporaries: a culture of overt sexuality and conspicuous dress, drinking, dancing, gambling, violent sports and a quasi-gang organisation. This paper suggests that it is possible to see larrikins as an active resistance to changing social relations which were founded on ideas of respectability and discipline. These concepts were the cornerstones of industrial capitalism’s project of transforming the human subject into a compliant force for ‘the factory’. Larrikin culture, then, can be understood as an active reclaiming of collective and personal identity which sought to flout both social respectability and ‘factory’ discipline.

While there has been much work in the vein of social history in Australia, labour history remains largely concerned with the institutions of organised labour, and its related culture. This could be problematic, because when we study only the organised working class, we end up talking about a particular kind of working class, where it is assumed that a ‘correct’ consciousness is the kind that agitates for better wages and conditions and seeks to ameliorate the working experience in general. Those who fall outside this area are at best invisible and at worst guilty of a kind of ‘false consciousness’; they stand accused of failing to reach their potential, or of taking energy from the revolutionary cause. This kind of history ‘reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not in fact as it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated successful evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten’. Are larrikins a lost cause; a blind alley? For the majority of Australian historians, they have fallen victim to the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’ and this is because, I would argue, Australian labour history traditionally studies the respectable. This is not entirely a contemporary problem as it reflects the importance of respectability in the language and practice of class throughout the nineteenth century in Sydney itself. Unions could only hope to affect change in working conditions if they were seen as respectable, an inheritance of their skilled artisan tradition. Respectability was often a way of maintaining dignity in the face of capitalist exploitation. Respectability, however, has always been a double-edged sword, and this is because it is so intrinsically a part of capitalist rhetoric and is tightly connected to the project of imposing labour discipline.

This was particularly evident in late nineteenth century Sydney. Most of the complaints about larrikins come from the new middle class who needed to legitimate their new, consumerist lifestyle. Moreover, Australian cities were dominated by the values of this new middle class and their multitude of social and moral reform movements. These movements were based on the belief of human progress and improvement, that all people were capable of being productive members of society if they were self-disciplined, hard workers, moral and proper. Human energy should be put into work and self-improvement, mastering of the mind and body, not dissipated into sexuality or alcoholism, and moral reform movements took up the cause of intemperance and prostitution with religious zeal. Respectability was seen as the cornerstone of modern civilisation, an integral part of Australia’s nation building.
As Janet McCalman has shown, ‘respectability prescribed disciplines in behaviour which could alter the conception of the self. In demanding cleanliness, sobriety, extra-marital chastity, thrift, time-consciousness, self-reliance, manly independence and self-responsibility, it promoted an ego that was self-regulating, responsible and mature’. As Gramsci suggests, there was more to this than just building a modern nation. This process of changing human behaviour marked:

- a continual victory over man’s animality, an uninterrupted and painful process of subjugating the instincts to new and rigid habits of order, exactitude, precision... In order to achieve a new adaptation to the new mode of work, pressure is exerted over the whole social sphere, a puritan ideology develops which gives to the intrinsic brutal coercion the external form of persuasion and consent.

This is the nature of hegemony, where the factory is more than just a physical production line; it is a whole way of life. It is not just a structure, but a whole set of social relations. The factory is everywhere, it is in culture and education, religion and leisure – all social relations and institutions become imbued with the rationality of capitalism. This entails a deliberate attempt to ‘to create, with unprecedented speed and a consciousness of purpose unique in history, a new type of worker and of man’. To effect this change, man must be persuaded, coerced or forced into accepting new kinds of morality, ideology, behaviour and discipline. For Gramsci, this process is dependent on a concomitant cultural hegemony – when the practices and discourses of every day life are so pervasive as to convince man that he changes himself by his own will and brings about self-discipline.

For most, the incentives of evolving capitalism were strong enough to bring about a complete transformation in work and social life. However, as Freud argued, ‘modern life’ is a kind of nightmare, made bearable by ‘palliative measures’ which deflect, substitute for, or numb the pain of living. This is because ‘Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks’. If man is driven by the pleasure principle, and if it is via pleasure that happiness is achieved, its attainment in the world around us is problematic. The world is not built for the unqualified happiness of every individual; to pursue it brings only suffering.

This suffering is twofold; it stems from the suppression of man’s natural instincts, what Gramsci called his ‘animality’ – sexual pleasure, physical comfort, psychic joy – and it stems from the frustration of expressing those instincts in a world which has disallowed them. For Freud, ‘the task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world’. These frustrations are relational, they occur because the instincts or impulses are antagonistic with existing social relations which are working to suppress these impulses. Most people then, use substitutions to acquire happiness. For Benjamin, this is the dream-world of consumption, and Freud considers most substitutions as provided by the external world no less a fantasy.

Interestingly, Freud suggests that the idea of work has become central to man’s pursuit of happiness: it is the one thing that may connect man most to reality, to other humans, to community. However, professional activity is still a sublimation. Most forms of work require an extensive repression of instinctual impulses. It is, for the majority of people, not freely chosen nor personally satisfying: ‘as a path to happiness work is not highly prized by men. They do not strive after it as they do after other possibilities of satisfaction. The great majority of people only work under the stress of necessity, and this natural human aversion to work raises most difficult social problems.’

As Freud and Gramsci suggest, there are strong links between respectability, sexuality and discipline which impact on our understanding of larrikinism. It has already been noted that respectability meant a transformation of the self – not just outwardly but also of the way in which people thought and felt about themselves. I am suggesting here that larrikins refused to make that transformation. Personal psychology and collective culture are not disconnected, especially if culture can be taken to mean the way in which people express their experience of life, the way in which they make meaning of the world around them.

How, then, does larrikin culture fit into this schema? Firstly, larrikins need to be set against the changing nature of work at this time. While it must be recognised that Australia was not an advanced industrial or manufacturing country, and that the greatest intensification in labour discipline such as that exemplified by Fordism and Taylorism would not make itself widely felt until after World War I, an important change had occurred in the Australian workforce and this was the decline in the importance of skill.
The notion of skill is a slippery one, and during this period its meaning was highly contested as the divisions between levels of skill became blurred. It is not that work did not require skill, but that there was an increase in ‘factories’ owned by businessmen, rather than ‘workshops’ owned by men who had once been artisans. This meant a greater division of labour, along with an increase in mechanisation and in casual employment. Employment figures are disappointingly sketchy in this period; there is no real breakdown of actual occupation, nor the ages of those employed, however it can be said that in 1891, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled (what we would call blue-collar) work accounted for 56 per cent of the male workforce, employing a total of 66,573 men in Sydney alone. It has been shown that there was little chance of upward mobility and that a large proportion of the semi- and unskilled labour force were not native born but largely immigrants, especially Irish.

Other changes in this period were in the management and organisation of labour, with management styles moving away from ‘custom and practice’ to more systematic forms of simple control with paternalistic and authoritative overtones. This was the more so when the owners were in direct control of production and a subsequent heightening of labour discipline and labour exploitation occurred. This control often took the form of increased workplace rules, heightened surveillance, dubious employment methods and ‘penalties for bad work, damage to property, lateness, insubordination and …attempts to reduce wages’. At the same time, a more organised labour movement was making itself felt, and unions in this period were increasingly concerned with these changes to the labour process and more aggressive attempts were made to wrest control of the workplace away from employers. Much of this tension was exacerbated by heightened employer control made possible by the depression of the early 1890s.

At the same time, complaints about the larrikin nuisance became widespread. In 1878, in his Annual Report to Parliament, Edmund Fosbery, the Inspector General of Police, referred to them for the first time as a distinct social group with specific problems:

No one can read the complaints and comments in the Press respecting the increasing annoyance suffered by the Public from the disorderly conduct and petty misdemeanours of youths who assemble together in large numbers…without being aware that the nuisance of the so-called larrikin element is greatly on the increase.

What exactly was the nature of this nuisance? It is not surprising to find papers such as the Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph throughout the 1880s lamenting ‘this class, whose ages range from about 15 to 22 years, and of whom it may be stated that they gain their livelihood by working in separate gangs or firms of about half-a-dozen at the occupations of loafing, gambling and petty-thieving’. Yet it would be dangerous to assume that they are correct in their descriptions or analyses of the phenomenon. It is interesting to find that the most vitriol towards larrikins came from The Bulletin, which was, perhaps surprisingly, ‘little different from more conservative publications in its responses to what was termed urban larrikinism’. In 1892 it described larrikinism as epitomised by:

Idleness, destruction of property, acts of violence, obstructing the highway, bad language, the assumption of an aggressively disrespectful attitude, noise, dirt, profanity, ignorance, an unshaven aspect, a retreating forehead, a fishy eye, a braided coat, a soft black hat, bell bottomed trousers, high heeled boots and a general and promiscuous cussedness of demeanour (emphasis added).

Larrikins’ greatest crime, according to the press, appeared to be their blatant disregard for respectable society and for respectable leisure activities. Their propensity to be seen in public wearing garish clothes in overt displays of sexuality with equally garish women offended the moral majority no end. They were more interested in boxing and dancing than cricket and rowing. In their assessment of larrikins, Connell and Irving note that ‘the pushes’ (as larrikin ‘gangs’ were called) may have taken energy away from a more organised attack on property relations, ‘but they were still culturally the least tractable section of the working class’ and were ‘channelled into serious crime mainly by police harassment’.

This is an observation supported by a study of crime figures in this period. According to Police Inspector General Fosbery, larrikinism ‘prevails to such an extent in some of the principal suburbs of the city as to seriously interfere with the comfort of life…the police are frequently subjected to serious ill-treatment in the discharge of their duties, some have been permanently injured and in Sydney alone during the past twelve months forty-four members of the force have been incapacitated for duty thereby’.
This is a large number of assaults against police, if they are all true, yet initially, technically speaking, there was very little in larrikin behaviour that was criminal. Complaints against larrikins do not mention organised crime, theft or violent assault, and the only things they could be arrested for were public drunkenness and riotous behaviour, the latter of which even the police agreed they were not guilty of.\textsuperscript{35}

In the beginning of the period under study, a group of crimes existed labelled ‘Crimes Against Good Order’, including drunkenness, drunk and disorderly, and indecent, riotous or offensive behaviour.\textsuperscript{38} During the decade 1860 to 1870 in NSW there were 37,318 arrests of men and 11,209 arrests of women, with 20,809 male and 5,658 female convictions for offences under this category.\textsuperscript{39} By 1891, this category had been extended to include crimes such as vagrancy, threatening or abusive language, being an idle or disorderly person, gambling; prize fighting; public mischief, escape from custody, conduct lewd or scandalous, and hindering or resisting arrest. Arrest rates rose accordingly: in the year 1885 alone there were 32,078 arrests and 28,417 convictions of males alone. In the decade 1880-90 there were 272,364 male and 60,332 female arrests and 242,544 male and 54,692 female convictions under the Offences Against Good Order category.\textsuperscript{39} This represents an 86 per cent increase on the number of male arrests over the decade, and an increase of more than 81 per cent in convictions Female arrests increased by 91 per cent, while convictions increased by 89 per cent. This cannot be accounted for simply by an increase in population, since during the decade 1880 to 1890 the population of the colony rose from 747,950 to 1,121,860\textsuperscript{41}, an increase of only 33 per cent. In the Sydney metropolitan area, population rose from 225,200 to 380,040\textsuperscript{42}, still only an increase of 40 per cent. What is most telling about the arrests under Offences Against Good Order is that whereas in 1861 arrests in this category accounted for 52 per cent of all arrests, in 1899 they accounted for an astonishing 88 per cent of all arrests.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite the above crime figures (using the 1885 example, police arrested an average of 87 people per day), the police lamented that their powers in this area were inadequate, as were the consequences for which larrikins showed little regard. As Fosbery lamented, ‘What dread is there of a fine of a few shillings, promptly subscribed by the defendants comrades, or a few days simple imprisonment which is deemed by the offender to be no disgrace and but little punishment?’\textsuperscript{44}

What was to be done about larrikins in terms of reform or punishment was a question that occupied successive Comptrollers General of Prisons. Early prison wardens favoured harsh physical punishments,\textsuperscript{45} including whipping, spread-eagling, the treadmill and the use of the gag, an instrument designed to stop the tirade of offensive language that inmates were accused of. These practices were part of the belief that prisons were a place of punishment, and because of the perceived need to create prisons which acted as deterrents to larrikins. However, by the 1890s official thinking about the role of prisons had begun to change, and debate ensued about whether prisons should be places of reform rather than deterrence or pure punishment.\textsuperscript{46}

It was with this idea in mind that Frederick Neitenstein, who had been the Superintendent and Administrator of the Industrial School Ship, was appointed Comptroller General of Prisons from 1896. Neitenstein brought with him an extensive knowledge of international prison systems and some of the latest penological theories, as well as strong views on the issue of larrikinism. He was more tempered in his assessment of the problem, blaming the press and popular fiction for perhaps overstating the issue:

\textit{No doubt…some exaggeration occurs when the assailed tell of their woes. Quarrels occur, and the defeated parties magnify the number of their assailants, while every street disturbance is put down to larrikinism.}\textsuperscript{47}

This does not mean the Neitenstein did not believe larrikins existed, indeed he knew they did and suggested that ‘it is an undoubted fact that there is a great deal of undisciplined animalism on the part of certain of our young men’,\textsuperscript{48} but he believed the current prison regime would do little to put an end to their ‘animalism’. Accordingly, he amended the harsh physical punishment system and, while keeping the inmates separate, set them on a course of physical and moral improvement ‘on the principle of “the sound mind the sound body” theory’.\textsuperscript{49} However, Neitenstein was also quick to point out that prison was not the answer for larrikinism:

\textit{In the suppression of larrikinism, too much has been left to the police and to the prisons; but other measures should be taken before the disease is allowed to attain full development. … In most cases there is no real vice or harm about the majority of these lads. They have the spirits and virility}
natural to their age. Society should consider that it has some obligation to them, and should not neglect its duty.  

Neitenstein was not the only official to try and link larrikinism to changes in the nature of Australian society. While Police Inspector Fosbery continued to call for increased police and court powers, his ideas about punishment also came to incorporate the need for social change as well as physical discipline. As early as 1880 he had commented that:

The idle and dissolute habits of many of the youth in large cities may I think be also attributed to a change in the tone of social organization and an absence of restraint upon the young, especially exemplified in the discontinuance to a great extent of the practice of apprenticing boys to a trade or handicraft, in substitution of which, large numbers of young people of both sexes can now find employment in factories where they can earn good wages, giving them a command of money and long hours of leisure, unrestrained by parental control.

There is much in this worth considering. Firstly, Fosbery makes quite clear the link between larrikinism and the changing nature of work. This was a problem noted 15 years earlier with the establishment of the Industrial Schools, where Neitenstein had already recognised the futility of teaching vagrant youth specific skills when there was no longer any employment for them in these areas. Hence, the forms of punishment instituted in prisons and reform schools were centred on mental and physical discipline. There is no coincidence in this. Foucault has shown quite clearly that changes in thinking about discipline are linked to changes in social requirements, and I would go further and suggest that a more specific connection can be made to the creation of the new human subject required by industrial capitalism.

Neitenstein’s and Fosbery’s assessments of larrikins are revealing in this aspect. The problem was not that larrikins were unemployed or refused to work, it was that they conducted themselves outside of work in ways that showed they were not moral or respectable, they were not disciplined. Murray suggests that the larrikin escaped ‘from the scene before psychology could get its hands on him’ but this is not entirely true. Social reform movements were heavily concerned with the psychology of deviance and sought to act as much on the mind as on the body. This was also reflected in new forms of medical treatment for alcoholism (doctors were beginning to consider it a disease of the mind and not just a moral weakness) and in new forms of punishment in prison, which, as we have seen, became increasingly concerned with mental discipline and reform of the criminal mind rather than pure punishment. Of course, larrikins did not often find themselves on the therapist’s couch; however, it is true that psychoanalysis emerged at the same time as changes in the organisation of work.

This is significant because in his theories of the development of the self, Freud stresses the importance for ‘modern civilisation’ of the ability to control the human passions. Overt expressions of sexuality, violence and aggression, the lack of self-discipline, the use of alcohol – all of these things in larrikins Freud would have found revealing. It is no coincidence that one of the most frequent complaints about larrikin men and women was their lack of morality, their physical and sexual aggressiveness and openness. Gramsci suggests that:

The new industrialism requires monogamy; it does not want the workingman to squander his nervous energies in the anxious and unruly search for sexual gratification. The worker who goes to his job after a wild night is not a good worker; excitement of the passions does not go with the timed movement of machines of productive human motions.

If, as Freud suggests, there are three ways to deal with the repression of impulses required from work – to deflect, to substitute or to intoxicate them – then it is possible that larrikinism is a combination of all three of these responses. At one level they can be seen to be substitutions for happiness – if larrikins found their work so unfulfilling then it is not surprising that they would turn to wild forms of leisure which can be seen as ‘essentially a protest against their own submission to labour discipline throughout the week’. It is also possible to express those instincts, but as Freud suggests, this becomes increasingly difficult in a world that can not tolerate those outside the ‘norm’. This norm is relational – it relies on the hegemonic nature of the social relations which guide human behaviour at any one time. For Freud these relations are familial in the first instance, the importance of the child-parent relationship in self-development is primary. But these relations, as well as being externally imposed, are also social relations. The point here is that there is no set human nature, but one moulded and influenced by the circumstances into which we are born.
We cannot know if larrikins really submitted to labour discipline throughout the week until a more thorough analysis of workplace records is conducted. And protests against labour discipline at work also came from organised labour, who did not ‘let off steam’ and find themselves in gaol for doing so. Freud suggests that aggression, a natural human instinct, is an important aspect of healthy sexuality, and that the forces that would tame this aggression and sexuality, such as disgust, shame and morality, are imposed from the outside. The forces that ‘civilise’ the instincts, then, are hegemonic ones. Freud is quite clear that these are social forces at work; they come from the family in response to the dictates of society, not from something intrinsic in human nature.

It is, then, the overt expression of ‘animalistic’ impulses, which even officials in their own time noticed, that makes larrikins so threatening. While the organised working class in Australia tried to fight hegemony on the factory floor, larrikins fought it on the streets, and for this they were demonised and eventually criminalised. The fact that the forces of the state came to bear on larrikins speaks to the real threat they posed, the level of fear with which they were perceived, and the forcefulness with which they made themselves felt in Australian society.

Endnotes


2. A recent survey of research interests and projects in Labour History revealed that of 60 researchers surveyed, 21 expressed interest in industry studies, 20 in political movements and 13 in trade unions and activism. See Melissa Kerr, ‘Current research interests In Australian labour history’, Labour History, no. 87, 2004, pp. 245-51.


4. Ibid.


13. Ibid., vol. 1, n. 158, p. 236.


16. Ibid., p. 16.


19. Ibid., p. 17.

20. Ibid.


25. Fitzgerald, *ibid.*, p. 120.


39. Mukherjee, *Sourcebook*, p. 252. Arrest and conviction statistics do not relate to single offenders, so there are doubtless multiple arrests and convictions of the same people. The figures relate to the whole of NSW and do not provide breakdowns for suburbs.


41. *NSW Statistical Register*, 1890, part V, table 2, p. 266.

42. *Ibid.*


45. Garton, ‘Bad or Mad’.


58. My thanks to Dr Richard Howson for assistance in developing this idea.


Making space: municipal socialists’ challenge to elite rule in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, 1890-1920

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In early May 1913, as the dust settled following a hard-fought municipal election in Christchurch, New Zealand, local labor activists surveyed the results with some satisfaction. They had elected five of their members – referred to in the liberal press as ‘Social Democrats’- and by their own estimate garnered nearly 6,000 votes, 40 per cent of those cast. Although still a minority on the Council, they felt empowered by the victory. And in the election’s aftermath, the staid tenor of Council deliberations took a dramatic turn.

The election of the Council’s standing committees, usually a routine and uncontested matter, ‘caused a lengthy and at times warm discussion’, according to one press report, ‘in which party feeling now and then ran high’. An unspoken tradition of non-partisanism, at least in name, had been the norm in Council deliberations. The governing class regarded parties as an inappropriate and unwelcome intrusion in municipal affairs. When labor member James McCombs accused the ‘Citizens’ Association’ of taking more than its share of committee positions, Mayor Holland lashed back, ‘There is no Citizens’ Association here ... I want to say here that there are no parties in the Council’. Jim McCullough, newly elected Labor member, raised the temperature of the debate a few more degrees, ‘If the other party wanted to fight they would get it on the floor of the Council. The Social Democrats were not there to be snuffed out and if they could not get justice one way they would fight it out on the floor of the Council’. Before the councilors resorted to fisticuffs, cooler heads prevailed and a compromise was reached.

Christchurch was no anomaly in the universe of early twentieth-century municipal politics. Across the industrialising world, labor and socialist activists targeted city government as an arena within which the project of building a new working class political movement might gather strength and in the bargain challenge the norms of governance by propertied elites whose customary urban privileges had seemed unassailable.

If cities as urban spaces had come to be occupied by large, increasingly diverse, and mostly disfranchised working class people, the legacy of bourgeois control nevertheless hung heavily over their lives. In particular, city politics remained a domain of privilege dominated by the propertied classes, whose ‘community interests’ presumably insured sensible and even-handed government. But new forms of working-class politics had emerged out of the labor turmoil of the late nineteenth century. As congestion, disease, and economic insecurity became even more concentrated in urban districts with decrepit housing stock, narrow, poorly drained, unpaved streets, and miasmic stench, workers began to re-imagined the urban space they inhabited and the claims they might make for political control. They turned first to the streets and meeting halls to battle for a broader franchise that might enable their voices to be heard. They also challenged – first in piecemeal and then in more systemic ways – the norms, rituals, and policies of bourgeois urban governance. In making space for their voices and their programs, they reconceived the city and the promises it might hold for social improvement.

This paper looks at several cities in the first decade of the twentieth century where such challenges unfolded. Each story has its own peculiarities, chronology, and degrees of success. But, Christchurch, New Zealand, Brisbane, Australia, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin illustrate a remarkable congruence as sites of fledgling municipal politics that claimed space for workers’ interests and their right to participate directly in local governance.

Handicapped by restrictive municipal franchises, frequently unsupported by parliamentary leaders in their own parties, and needing on occasion to build alliances with undependable liberals, municipal socialists struggled against formidable barriers. Elected as small minorities to city councils and various municipal boards and commissions, individual labor and socialist party activists negotiated small victories, particularly when they could align their claims with those of liberal reformers. Such Lib-Labism ‘from below’ nonetheless destabilised elite traditions of municipal governance in quite unexpected ways.
**Christchurch, NZ: ‘Which side are you on?’**

The bitter City Council debate over committee assignments in 1913 signaled a new political order and a new ‘decorum’ that might now govern civic affairs in the city. The change had not come overnight. In Christchurch, as in other cities in New Zealand and Australia (as well as western Europe and the USA), labor had long since targeted city councils as arenas for political contestation. In both countries Political Labour Leagues had formulated and periodically revised municipal platforms.

Candidates had run for Christchurch Council seats with explicit labor backing as early as 1907. Between election campaigns the interests of labor remained focused on the municipal arena, with periodic petitions and interventions in Council affairs over such matters as fees for public baths, the need for a municipally-owned market for fish and fresh vegetables, a half-holiday for shop workers, and the enfranchisement of lodgers and other renters.

The politicisation of Council business continued apace in 1910 with petitions and deputations from the Trades and Labour Council and other labor sympathisers over the pay and hours for city laborers and drivers. Polarised in a series of votes at successive meetings in March through June, the Council, by close margins, chose to exclude delegations of interested parties and turned down the wages and hours recommendations of its own Works Committee. But clearly, governing the city had become more contested.

With the election in 1911 of a handful of labor councilors and a mayor with deep labor sympathies, a new political environment seemed in place. Mayor-elect, T.E. Taylor enumerated the issues he hoped to pursue: street improvements, higher wages for city employees, a better water supply, public markets and milk supply, and this without raising local rates.

No sooner had Taylor and his labor colleagues assumed their offices than they began to challenge both the procedure and substance of city council business. In a series of tie votes broken by the Mayor, Council granted permission to a variety of organisations seeking to hold public meetings in the central Cathedral Square, a public space previously denied for such purposes. The Mayor submitted a lengthy report on his proposal for major street reconstruction, including working-class neighborhoods, and proposed to hold mass meetings throughout the city to build support for his proposals. (Dust and muck were perpetual problems in poorer neighborhoods where macadam roads were unknown.) On other matters, such as city employees’ wages, the Mayor and the Labor councilors had more difficulty mustering a majority in the closely divided council.

Not three months into his administration, Taylor died suddenly. Wracked by a deep sense of personal loss, his labor colleagues tried to maintain political momentum. Despite the loss of Taylor, a Labour Representation Committee in 1913 managed to get five members elected to Council. From these positions then, they continued to challenge elite control of the city. As a sitting labor councilor, Hiram Hunter wrote just before the election, ‘it is no use to try and evade the fact that there are two parties in municipal as well as general politics. Which side are you on? There is no middle course. Either you are of the exploiting class, or you are being exploited’.

While the election of a ‘Labor mayor’ in 1911 was without precedent in New Zealand, the municipal gains in Christchurch and the politicisation of municipal affairs follow a pattern that can be discerned in other municipalities in Australia and New Zealand in the pre-war years. Key players were invariably impressive individuals like Taylor, or David McLaren, elected mayor in Wellington in 1912, who could appeal to some liberal voters, and trade union activists who helped forge and agitate on behalf of an explicit municipal program within the local labor parties of both countries. Although the precise timing and specific history varies from one municipality to another, similar patterns can be observed in Broken Hill, Brisbane, Redfern (Sydney), Footscray, Fitzroy, and Essendon (Melbourne), Australia. The boundaries between municipal lib-labism and outright Labor Party activity in city politics were not always sharply drawn, and local politics advanced at different times under different labels. Nonetheless, city affairs began to tilt under the influence of the political gravity labor brought to local politics. Sometimes the progress was more symbolic than real, or so incremental as to be barely discernible, but at other times a minority labor interest in council drew to its ranks sympathetic liberal councilors and could constitute an effective, if ephemeral, majority. Labour’s presence made a difference, if only by...
shining the bright light of public attention into municipal affairs that had been shrouded from public view by illusory consensus and arcane procedures. Not surprisingly, the first and often the most bitter battles were procedural.

**Brisbane: municipal swamp in the era of franchise restriction**

Not quite a year after the 1912 general strike in Brisbane, *The Daily Standard* expressed continuing frustration with Queensland’s restrictive municipal franchise law. ‘A clean city still seems like a mystic dream in the far future. For we are sadly deficient in the first requisite, a clean franchise’. With a plural voting system favoring the city’s largest ratepayers, Brisbane possessed in the eyes of labor activists a ‘nil’ city government in which ‘[m]onopoly now claims the Divine Right to oppress the people’. The editor noted that plural voting had disappeared in all ‘British communities’ outside the state of Queensland. But in Brisbane and its neighboring municipalities,

> the big army of mosquito-bitten and fly-inoculated citizens look dumbly on, and have no power to lift a little finger in opposition to a continuance of a brand of civic ‘rule’ which is a byword and a jest. They are helpless and cannot prevent the handing over of the government of our city to a small official bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, despite the handicap of a highly restrictive municipal franchise and a pervasive sense that the municipal cause was ‘hopeless until the franchise is granted’, the record suggests that elite control of Brisbane’s local government did not go uncontested during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In part this stemmed from the growing voice and clarified agenda of local activists in the Queensland ‘Labor-in-Politics’ conventions, who from one year to the next pushed forward a municipal program. But also, even under the franchise handicap, a solitary council member, Thomas Wilson, reelected from 1905-21 as alderman, challenged the governing consensus on a number of key municipal issues and on rare occasions marshaled a fragile majority of councilors in support of his positions.

Wilson came to Council with working-class roots and ‘radical’ inclinations. Hailing from Victoria, he learned shearing in the Riverina district, New South Wales and worked as a copper miner in the Cobar field before settling in Brisbane. Finding time ‘to study local government’, he ran successfully for alderman from Merthyr Ward in 1905 and served in City Council until 1921, including one term as council-elected Mayor in 1909. For most of the period before franchise reform in 1920, Wilson served as a lone Labour alderman.

From 1908 to 1920, labor’s interest, largely represented by Wilson, focused on several issues: contract versus municipal labor, municipal ownership of trams, standardisation and improvement of municipal wages, ward versus at-large representation, and expansion of the municipal franchise. Each of these issues became the focus of repeated and, at times, acrimonious debate. Most remained unresolved, though not without some incremental progress. Clearly, fundamental franchise reform and implementation of labor’s key demands would have to wait for the election of a labor majority in both houses of state government and the passage of local government reforms in 1920.

Despite rather indifferent support from the executive committee of the state parliamentary party, Queensland Labor-in-Politics conventions beginning at Rockhampton in 1907 and more decisively at Townsville in 1910 passed a substantial ‘Local Government Reform’ platform, which went significantly beyond the routine call for a broadened municipal franchise. Addressing such issues as a Single Tax-style rating on unimproved land values, abolition of contract labor on municipal works, the institution of trade union wages and the eight hour day for city workers, free public baths, libraries and museums, public ownership of trams and electric lighting, and city control of all parks and ‘commonages’, the local branches moved the Queensland Labor Party more aggressively in the direction of a new municipal socialist politics.

The work of the Brisbane City Council highlights the efforts of one labor representative to generate debate around key elements of labor’s municipal program and in so doing to challenge the conduct of local government business more generally. But because of the limited franchise, his persistent efforts were largely stymied. Despite Labor Premier T.J. Ryan’s initiatives after 1915, Local Authorities reform remained hamstrung until labor majorities in both houses broke the logjam.
With the passage of the Local Authorities Amendment Act of 1920, labor overcame the persistent opposition of local councils’ lobbying in the Legislative Assembly. With the municipal adult franchise achieved, local government in Brisbane and elsewhere in Queensland stood poised for a new era of local labor rule. The persistent and often beleaguered efforts of Thomas Wilson and his allies in the Labor Party had borne fruit.

**Milwaukee’s municipal socialists: contesting for power**

Despite conditions that many observers regarded as less auspicious for socialist success in the USA, labor and socialist activists in some municipalities forged municipal programs and conducted campaigns that paralleled those in New Zealand and Australia, as well as in Britain, Germany and Sweden. Facing different impediments to victory, American socialists and urban populists in the early twentieth century achieved some dramatic political victories in a host of municipalities. Nowhere was the record of success more stunning than in Milwaukee.

Methodically over two decades, the socialists in Milwaukee under Victor Berger’s leadership built the strength of the party in the municipal arena. Crucial to its success was the official endorsement of the AFL-affiliated Milwaukee Federated Trades Council in February, 1900. But, despite growing strength, the Social Democrats did not enjoy the fruits of office until 1904 when they nearly doubled their vote and elected nine aldermen to the city’s Common Council.

Although the new socialist councilmen represented a decided minority in a council of 45 members, they demonstrated remarkable discipline and a willingness to challenge the established agenda and procedures by which Council conducted its business, a story parallel to that of Christchurch and Brisbane. They put forward a remarkable array of initiatives in the face of Democratic Mayor-elect David Rose’s warnings about the use of ‘partisan tongue and partisan pen’ and the duty of elected officials to be responsive to ‘the whole people rather than to party’. At the urging of the Federated Trades Council, Frederic Heath moved that city council meetings henceforth be held in the evening rather than the afternoon in order to enable workers’ participation. The chair referred the motion to the Rules Committee, from which it failed to emerge. Reintroduced in early 1905 by another socialist, the proposal met the same fate.

Within their first six months on council, the minority of nine socialists submitted motions for equitable expenditures for street repairs in the wards, for a municipal ice plant and coal and wood yard, to create space and speaker stands in public parks for open air meetings, to solicit bids for a long-promised children’s ‘Isolation Hospital’, to establish eight hours as the standard for all city work whether directly employed or on contract, and to seek state legislation to tax light, street railway, and telephone companies at the high rate established for railways. They also pushed for municipalisation of the electric utility. On virtually all of these initiatives, the proposals disappeared into committee, were recommended for ‘indefinite postponement’, or were eventually voted down on committee recommendation. Where votes were taken, the nine Social Democrats always stood alone.

In 1906 the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee won five additional aldermanic seats, and by 1908, the party had gained a third of the citywide vote, displacing the Republicans as the second party. But under new state imposed at-large election rules their seats fell again to nine, even while winning more wards. The key to municipal victory now appeared to be the Polish working-class vote on the city’s South Side, which continued to support the Democratic candidates.

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The socialist victory in 1910 may have been unprecedented, but it came in soil that was well prepared. As Cleveland reformer Frederic Howe noted on visiting the city shortly after the election, ‘The public had grown accustomed to the name and the spectacle of Socialists in office’. In Victor Berger’s view, Milwaukee had become a ‘convinced Socialist city’, its politics ‘saturated with Socialist doctrine’.

Milwaukee’s Social Democrats put the local party on the national and international map by electing a mayor, 21 of 36 aldermen, and 11 of 16 county supervisors. If their program bespoke reform, it did so in the cadences of class-conscious immigrant workers. While working for urban home rule and immediate, tangible reforms, the socialists spoke in the producerist tradition of ‘the cooperative commonwealth as a guiding star’ of their reform program. Mayor-elect Emil Seidel belittled the wastefulness of capitalism and applauded the efficiencies of publicly-operated services. ‘See how easily we get along when the idea of profit is absent’. And the socialists, unlike many progressive municipal administrations, sought
the expansion of the public sector: municipal ownership of street cars and other city services, a city-owned terminal station, municipal baths, markets and cold storage plants, a public garbage disposal plant, a municipal ice plant, public works employment for the unemployed, free medical dispensaries and hospitals, an expanded system of parks and swimming pools, free textbooks, and the opening of schools as community social centers.\textsuperscript{35}

The Milwaukee socialists’ municipal reign proved short-lived in the face of Democratic and Republican fusion in 1912. But, by 1916 the party reinvented itself, as USA intervention in the European war loomed, and elected Mayor Daniel Hoan who had served as City Attorney in the first socialist administration. Despite their wartime travails, Social Democrats continued to play a major role in Milwaukee municipal politics for the next 40 years. They constructed the city’s public space and culture in ways that made it, in some respects, a ‘workers’ city’.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The events in Christchurch, Brisbane, and Milwaukee are instructive for a number of reasons. First, they suggest, as do the annals of municipal labor politics throughout the industrialised world in the early twentieth century, that despite its minority status, labor exerted a significant influence in city councils by tearing away the mask of non-partisanism and redefining how council business was conducted. Second, contestation of municipal elections grew more intense, spirited, and by increments successful over time. Third, labor’s municipal program, honed through debates at party conventions and shaped by grassroots political activism, provided an agenda for labor councilors (and occasionally mayors) to reshape council debate and action around a set of issues to which labor was deeply committed. Lacking governing majorities in most cases, labor councilors could rarely claim outright victory, but their efforts did bring some changes in municipal affairs as they astutely assembled support from sympathisers among liberals and independents.

The process of redefining the political space in cities was protracted and the impediments substantial. But in 1910, as a benchmark, Milwaukee’s Social Democrats swept to municipal power in impressive fashion, their victory cause for celebration among municipal Social Democrats worldwide.\textsuperscript{37} Within the next two years in Christchurch and Wellington, New Zealand workers would elect labor mayors, though not a controlling majority of their Councils. Labor Party activists in Brisbane would struggle on for nearly a decade in the face of severe franchise restriction, until a state Labor government in Queensland overcame the bitter opposition of the state’s municipal elites to push through legislation guaranteeing one person-one vote in local contests. The significance of that measure would be evident as labor won power in both Brisbane and South Brisbane within a few years.\textsuperscript{38} Briefly, the Milwaukeeans’ victory suggested ‘American exceptionalism’ of a different sort. Though driven from power two years after their triumph, they and their comrades in places like Christchurch, Brisbane, and scores of other cities had begun a process of reclaiming cities in the name of their workers and reconstructing urban political space on a fundamentally more democratic basis.\textsuperscript{39}

City politics, then, provided a dynamic arena in which labor activists tested their mettle and honed their message. Annual campaigns offered a medium for party-building and a training ground for party activists. And the issues at stake had a tangible and immediate character that touched workers’ lives directly. To raise those issues within the staid chambers of the ‘honourable’ and grandly robed Councilors and ‘His Worship The Mayor’ represented itself a victory of sorts and legitimation of a new politics that held the promise of more substantial victories in the future.

\textbf{Endnotes}


2. Christchurch, NZ, City Council Minutes, May 12, 1913 [report comes from an undated newspaper clipping pasted into the council minute book].
3. Minutes of the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, Christchurch, May 22, 1913 (MacMillan-Brown Archives, Canterbury University) carried the report of a rousing resolution of support for the ‘Social Democratic’ councillors in their fight for committee positions.


6. Richard J. Evans, “‘Red Wednesday’ in Hamburg: Social Democrats, police and Lumperproletariat in the suffrage disturbances of 17 January 1906’, Social History, v. 4:1, January 1979, 1-31, is a useful case study in the volatile politics of the street; also, see the mass protest of Malmö workers on the eve of municipal elections from which they were largely excluded in December 1890, Arbetet (Malmö), 5-9 December 1890.


11. Minutes, Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, 21 March, 1908; Christchurch City Council Minutes, 27 April 1908, 21 December 1908, 27 March, and 5 April 1909.

12. Christchurch City Council Minutes, 20 March, 3 April 1911; Minutes, Canterbury Trades and Labour Council, 29 April, 1911.

13. Christchurch City Council Minutes, 3 May 1911.

14. Ibid., 15 May, 26 June, 10 July 1911.

15. J.A. McCullough Diaries, vo. 4, 1 August 1911 (thanks to Melanie Nolan for the diaries’ transcription), Canterbury Museum, Christchurch; T.E. Taylor Papers, 1 v., newspaper cuttings, Canterbury Museum. See also Margaret Thorn, Stick Out, Keep Left, pp. 19-22, for an account of the popularity of Taylor in Christchurch.


17. The Daily Standard (Brisbane), 17 January 1913, p. 6.

18. Ibid.

19. See, for instance, Minutes of Labor-in-Politics Conventions, 1905, 1907, 1910, 1913, John Oxley Library, Brisbane.


25. Minutes, Labor-in-Politics Convention, Townsville, May 16, 1910. During this same period, the Central Political Executive (CPE) of the Queensland Parliamentary Labor Party, May 1909 through July 1911, had no discussion of the agitation for Local Government planks in the party platform, though it acknowledged local branch discontent over the lack of local representation on the CPE. See CPE Minutes, 1909-1911, John Oxley Library, Brisbane.

26. See, for example, the debate surrounding contract versus municipal labor in which Wilson managed a limited victory, Minutes, Brisbane City Council, 6 May, 13 July and 17 August 1908, pp. 58-9, 97, 113-14, or the debates on municipalization of tramways in which he largely failed: Minutes, Brisbane City Council, 13 September, 3 October 1910, pp. 95-6, 105; ‘Mayor’s Report for 1911’, 13-15; Minutes, Brisbane City Council, 29 April, 3, 27 May, 1912, 20, 26, 31-2; 25 August, 1913, 82-3; 16 June 1914, p. 60.

27. Minutes, Brisbane City Council, 8 November 1915; 25 September 1916, 85; 13 December 1920. See also Greenwood and Laverty, pp. 297-99.


31. Minutes, Milwaukee Common Council, May 31, July 11, 25, October 24, November 14, December 12; February 6, 20 1905, pp. 213, 392-3, 515, 936, 1039-40, 1136, 1142-3, 1411-12, 1427. The battle over municipalization of electricity, despite support in repeated referenda, ended successfully only with the election of a socialist administration in 1910. Minutes, Milwaukee Common Council, April 19, July 25, September 19, October 31, 8 1904, pp. 461, 759, 982; April 1910, pp. 5-6.


34. Wachman, History of the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee, 1897-1910, pp. 70-73.


37. See, for instance, the report in the German SPD periodical, Kommunale Praxis (Berlin), 13 Jahrgang, Nummer 38/39, 20 September 1913, pp. 1235-45.

38. R.J. Brewer and R. Dunn, South Brisbane: from its inception in 1888 to its absorption in Greater Brisbane on October 1st 1925 (Brisbane: H. Pole, 1925), 7-12; Greenwood and Laverty, Brisbane, 1859-1939, pp. 301-3.

39. See Warren Magnusson, The Search for Political Space, 164-5, 167 and David Harvey, Spaces of Hope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 177, 238-40 for a sense of alternative political possibilities. The construction of this new municipal labor and socialist politics is the subject of my book-length work in progress, Social Democracy in the City: Politics, Ideology and Reform in Comparative Perspective, 1890-1920.
The Waterside Workers Federation and the Aboriginal rights movement of the 1960s: a north Queensland case study

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The Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), (later the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders or FCAATSI) formed at a meeting in Adelaide in 1958. It was attended by representatives from nine state-based so-called Aboriginal advancement or rights bodies. There were 26 people at this meeting, either as delegates or observers. No-one was present representing a union, although some were members of unions.¹

In 1961 the third annual FCAA conference was held in Brisbane, and attended by about 150 people including Aboriginal people from all mainland states who spoke articulately and passionately about the oppressive undemocratic state laws which made their people’s lives a misery. Indigenous membership increased. At this meeting Joe McGinness, secretary of the Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League, was elected president of FCAA, a position he would hold for all but one year from that date until the demise of FCAATSI in 1978. McGinness was also a member of the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF).

At the height of its power – in 1970 – 350 people attended FCAATSI’s annual conference in Canberra. This included 125 people of Aboriginal or Islander heritage. Sixty-eight organisations were present, almost a third of which were unions.²

This paper seeks to understand the relationship between left wing unions, and specifically the WWF, Aboriginal and Islander Queensland activists and FCAATSI in the 1960s. A number of scholars, most notably Andrew Markus, Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, and Bob Boughton have surveyed this broad field.³ Other scholars, such as Bernie Brian, have looked at unionists’ growing realisation of the need to amend union constitutions which barred Aboriginal members.⁴ Whereas these historians have looked at changing union attitudes to Aboriginal workers I am focusing here on Aboriginal unionists in the WWF and specifically in Cairns. I am contending that a broad labour community existed in north Queensland which was inclusive of Aboriginal wharf workers and which was essential to the success of the 1960s Aboriginal rights movement. Joe McGinness was elected treasurer of the Cairns WWF branch in 1959. Gladys O’Shane, another Aboriginal activist who was married to Irishman Paddy (Tiger) O’Shane, represented the Cairns WWF women’s committee at the 1958 National Conference. As well, other Aboriginal and Islander wharfies were members of the Cairns branch of the WWF.

In 1958 after an incident of racial discrimination in the workplace which led to a worker losing his job, the WWF supported the establishment of a Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League (CATSIAL).⁵ Gladys O’Shane was elected president and Joe McGinness secretary and CATSIAL affiliated with FCAA. Three years later, as the fourth FCAA annual conference, which was held in Brisbane, Joe McGinness was elected president of FCAA, a position he would hold for all but one year from that time until its demise in 1978. McGinness and O’Shane were key Indigenous activists in mobilising the labour community in the early 1960s with regard to discrimination – in wage exclusions, laws and practices – routinely experienced by Indigenous Queenslanders.

The WWF provided an entrée into a broader labour community which offered to these Indigenous leaders a vision of a fair and inclusive Australia, education, a support network, strategies for social change, expertise and financial support. All of these were vital ingredients in the 1960s work for Aboriginal rights, much of which was co-ordinated through the FCAA, which in response to a motion from Queensland delegates became FCAATSI in 1964.

Australian historians have been slow to explore labour history through community.⁶ I hope to demonstrate, through this north Queensland case study, that analysis which takes account not just of ideology, but of the broader notion of community, helps us to understand the dynamics of the relationships which were central to some of FCAATSI’s successes in the 1960s. One incident, which became known as the Hopevale Flogging, will be used to further develop this argument.
Hopevale 1961

In April 1961 Joe McGinness heard of the flogging of a young man by the superintendent, Pastor Kernich, in charge of Hopevale Lutheran Mission, on Cape York Peninsula. Jacko had been born at the Hopevale mission but he had lived and worked outside it, on cattle stations and on the railways. These experiences had the effect of making him less compliant than those who had never escaped the authoritarian paternalism of the mission. Following the rules of the mission, Jacko had asked permission of the superintendent and Gertie Simon’s parents to court her, a girl of almost 17. He had been given a block of land to clear in order to build a residence and had started work on this. Jacko’s initial offence was to sit with Gertie at the weekly football match. The sexes were strictly segregated on the mission and this action, when reported by mission staff, earned a punishment for Jim Jacko and Gertie of two weeks’ work, including Saturday, without pay. The couple ran away in protest, camping some distance from the mission for a week. They returned on hearing that Jacko’s sisters were being restricted to their homes on the pretext that they may be supplying the couple with food. On their return, following his brother’s advice, Jacko apologised but the Superintendent refused to accept this. Pastor Kernich ordered Jacko’s brother to administer the punishment but he refused so Kernich picked up the cane himself. For Gertie, it was a whipping and a humiliating closely cropped hair cut.

Following the flogging, Jacko was taken to Cooktown where he was put in jail for a week. He was not charged with any crime. Then he was put on a boat for Cairns, met by local police and taken to the Department of Native Affairs hostel. It seems that the plan was to send him to Palm Island as punishment. While in Cairns he slipped away from the authorities, met Aboriginal wharfie, Peter Guivarra, in a Cairns pub and told him his story. Guivarra, a member of CATSIAL, told Joe McGinness of Jacko’s plight. Various WWF homes became hiding places for Jacko over the following weeks. As ‘harbouring an Aboriginal’ was an offence under the Queensland Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act the operation had to be handled skillfully in order for those involved to avoid a jail sentence. A barmaid in one of the pubs was asked by police if she had seen him. She asked if he’d committed a crime. No, the officer said, but the ‘Commies’ have got him!

Meanwhile Joe McGinness informed Stan Davey, General Secretary of FCAA, of the situation, while CATSIAL and the Cairns Trades and Labour Council organised meetings, distributed leaflets, sent a report to the London Anti-Slavery Society, and generally roused the public, all with the aim of establishing an open inquiry into Jacko’s case. They succeeded. The Queensland Minister for Health and Home Affairs, Dr Noble, announced that an open magisterial inquiry, the first such inquiry in Queensland, would be held at Hopevale Mission on 20 June.

Thus began an early FCAA campaign to expose the injustice of the Queensland Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act, the paternalistic authoritarianism of the Mission, and to show Aboriginal and Islander people in remote and isolated locations that the young Federal Council offered hope against these repressive controlling powers. Joe McGinness, Tom Uren, Labor MHR, Gladys O’Shane, President of CATSIAL, Pauline Pickford from the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights, representatives from the Cairns WWF and the Cairns Trades and Labour Council, and Fred Walters, a Torres Strait Islander of great renown and respect who made sure that Islanders knew of these events, traveled to Hopevale for the inquiry. Fred Paterson, former member for Bowen and the only Communist Party member ever to be elected to Queensland Parliament, was also present as counsel for Jim Jacko, although under the Queensland Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act he was prevented from meeting with his client before the court hearing. The composition of the group was representative of the community interests who would become most involved in the work of the Federal Council in the years to come. According to Pickford, the arrival of these 11 people caused consternation. She recalled how the Deputy Director of Native Affairs, Paddy Killoran, rushed to the pedal wireless to contact Brisbane. ‘We were not expected in such numbers, nor was Jim, in anyone’s wildest dream, thought to actually have a barrister to attend to his interests’.

The outcome

During the three day inquiry the contingent supporting Jacko saw that Deputy Director of Native Affairs, Pat Killoran who under the Queensland Act was Gertie Simon’s legal guardian, attended the hearing
but called no evidence to establish Gertie’s physical abuse. Unionists present learned that men on the mission earned 6 shillings a week, at a time when award wages for other Australian male workers for similar work was £7 a week (more than 20 times this amount). They became aware that mission staff had been sowing suspicion in the minds of mission residents, describing the Cairns Aboriginal activists as ‘Godless ones who were questioning the authority of the Church’. They listened as Kernich contradicted himself and finally admitted to caning Jacko while knowing that he did not have authority under the Act to do so. Justice J.O. Lee, the Magistrate hearing the case, concluded that Pastor Kernich’s caning of Jacko was in breach of Regulation 29 of the *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act*. Following the presentation of the report to parliament Dr Noble, the Minister for Native Affairs, who had publicly supported the actions of Pastor Kernich, issued a statement in which he regretted that his earlier public statement was ‘not entirely in accordance with fact’. Pastor Kernich was transferred from Hopevale. This was a significant victory at a time in Queensland’s history when the mission and Native Affairs authorities had unquestioned power.

**Significance**

The Hopevale Mission flogging was important to the federal movement at this time in three ways. Firstly, it generated publicity into the operation of the Queensland Act where parents were not the legal guardians of their own children; where pay and conditions of work on missions were unaffected by established award payments which applied to other workers, and where people could be forcibly moved thousands of kilometres away from their homes.

Secondly, this event was important because the findings from the inquiry showed that the Mission Superintendent and the Minister both publicly misrepresented events; that the Superintendent had acted unlawfully; and that Jacko had been flogged and jailed although he had not been charged with any offence. The principle of *habeus corpus* which protected other Australians from arrest without being charged did not protect Jacko. The case demonstrated the actual power of mission superintendents over those in their care, and ensured that it was never going to be as easy again to get away with high-handed punishments. Mission residents, ignorant as they mostly were regarding their rights, had little recourse in such authoritarian structures. They were not treated as citizens. And that fact was now widely publicised.

Thirdly, this case provided an early example of an alliance formed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of FCAA fostered in the labour community. This group included lawyer and former CPA member for Bowen Fred Paterson; secretary of the Council for Aboriginal Rights and member of the CPA, Pauline Pickford; ALP Federal member Tom Uren; president of FCAA and waterside worker Joe McGinness; president of CATSIAL and wife of a waterside worker, Gladys O’Shane; and BWIU representative Kevin Loughlin.

The following year ‘Tiger’ O’Shane played an active part in bringing a case against two Mareeba policemen who went on a drunken rampage in which they broke into homes and assaulted Aboriginal women. O’Shane reported that the Aboriginal community silently packed into the tiny Mareeba courthouse for the trial, and was elated when a verdict of guilty was announced. ‘We have had a really great victory’ O’Shane announced to Pickford. ‘I think this is the first time the State [of Queensland] has taken action against one of its servants on behalf of an aboriginal person’.

In the same year Pauline Pickford persuaded Gladys O’Shane to come to Melbourne on a public speaking tour to support Lake Tyers Aboriginal people in their fight to prevent the Victorian Government from selling Lake Tyers. And for Joe McGinness the case was the beginning of strong working relationships especially with Barry Christophers who worked on campaigns with McGinness over the next decade to remove discriminatory exclusions in the *Tuberculosis Act* and to expose the undemocratic racist Queensland Trust Fund.

**Conclusion**

To return briefly to my earlier contention, the support of the Cairns labour community was essential to these early successes and the growth in both skills and confidence which flowed from them.
McGinness, with many others, was a great admirer of Jim Healy, long time leader of the WWF and saw his vision of a fair wage and just conditions as inclusive of Aboriginal workers. Both McGinness and O’Shane argued for voting rights and decent access to housing, education and health for Aboriginal Australians and used these appeals for just inclusion in Australian society to also point out that land had been stolen and that populations had been decimated by slaughter and disease. The WWF, throughout the 1960s gave generously in support of the campaigns for Indigenous rights, even providing a wage for McGinness after he had left wharf work, to travel around to north Queensland communities assisting people with pension applications and such while at the same time encouraging them to organise in fighting for their rights. Access to expertise, such as that provided by Paterson in defending Jacko was another part of this community as was the cumulative experience of strategy which activists could draw upon in cases such as Hopevale where a missionary was found guilty, and Mareeba where a police officer was also found guilty.

My current project is to work out how these stories can be effectively told in an exhibition – both virtual and actual – which will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of FCAA in February, 2008. I am very open to suggestions.

Endnotes

2. Ibid.
7. Pauline Pickford, present at the inquiry, is responsible for the reports of these events. See P. Pickford, ‘The Hopevale Mission Flogging’, The Beacon, publication of the Unitarian Church, nd, but 1961, reprinted as a pamphlet, Council for Aboriginal Rights (CAR) papers, MS 12913, box 6/2, State Library of Victoria (SLV); ‘The Hopevale Incident’, Smoke Signals, October 1961; ‘The Magisterial Inquiry regarding illegal maltreatment practised on Mr Jim Jacko and Miss Gertie Simon, conducted at Hopevale Lutheran Mission July 1961 – Twenty years later 1981’, not attributed but most likely written by Pickford, CAR papers, MS 12913, box 6/2, SLV.
10. P. O’Shane to P. Pickford, 24 June 1962, CAR papers, MS 12913, box 3/3, SLV.

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Who was James Sinclair Taylor McGowen? In addressing this question, this paper reflects on the life of a man who played a leading role in the eight hour movement and in the early Labour Electoral Leagues, who was among the first Labor politicians elected to the NSW Parliament in 1891, and who became the first Labor Premier of New South Wales (NSW) in 1910. As a corollary, it also considers why so few Australians now recognise McGowen’s name. In order to explain this amnesia, the paper examines the way McGowen was portrayed by contemporary politicians and journalists, as well as historians. In order to assess the veracity of these representations, attention is then given to McGowen’s deeds and achievements and also to the views held by ordinary working class people who were his constituents in South Sydney.

How could a person who was the Leader of the Labor Party for 22 years and a Member of the NSW Parliament for 31 years have been so effectively obliterated from the labour movement’s collective memory? Was it because he was only Premier for three years, or because he supported conscription during World War I (for which he was expelled from the Party in 1916)? Is this the reason why he has been ignored in many histories of the Labor Party? Or was it, as some historians have concluded, that McGowen lacked intellect, brilliance and dynamism? Did he have ‘too much of the angel in him and too little of the devil to be a successful politician’?

Despite such negative views, there is ample evidence that McGowen was highly respected and liked by fellow Labor politicians. George Black, who entered Parliament alongside McGowen in 1891, wrote that a more ‘kindlier, cheerer and straighter man … could not be found – in or out of politics’. McGowen’s ‘amiability and high personal character, his unfailing truth and loyalty, were a tower of strength to the Labour movement’ and his ‘rugged honesty and personal integrity’ made him the natural choice as Party leader in 1894. Similarly, the day after McGowen’s Ministry was sworn in, on 21 October 1910, the Daily Telegraph informed readers that his ‘straightforwardness and honesty of purpose’ were unassailable. Because of ‘the goodwill and confidence of his fellow-Laborites’, continued the article, there could be no contest over McGowen’s accession to the Premiership. His constituents agreed with such positive estimates. When McGowen made his way through a packed public meeting held on 14 November to deliver his first policy speech as Premier, ‘there was a great outburst of cheering’. Throughout the hall ‘men and women waved hats and handkerchiefs and one man seized the opportunity to … call for “three cheers for Premier Jim”’. The newly elected Premier’s response ‘was clear and deliberate’ and he was ‘almost eloquent’ when promoting the reform of industrial laws, increased immigration and settlement of rural districts. The crowd was clearly sympathetic to his announcement that the Government proposed to give the living wage to all public servants, to introduce a bill to extend the 8-hour principle and to amend the previous Government’s hated Industrial Disputes Act, with its penal clauses.

Such public sympathy was also manifested following his death on 7 April 1922 at the age of 67. At McGowen’s funeral, then Labor Premier Jim Dooley expressed great sorrow about the loss of someone whose ‘integrity and honesty were such that you could never doubt, when he advised on a certain matter or advocated a certain course, that his heart was always in it’. This was not simply a view inspired by the gravity of the moment. Three years earlier, the Freeman’s Journal had remarked that McGowen’s ‘consistency, sanity and political honesty’ would ensure that he carried the name ‘Honest Jim’ with him ‘to the grave’.

Why then did Henry Parkes depict McGowen as a ‘dullard’? Why did the Melbourne Punch describe him as ‘A Puppet Premier’ who was ‘entirely controlled by his colleagues’? Was H.V. Evatt correct in referring to McGowen’s leadership as ‘pedestrian and colourless’? The paper addresses these questions by identifying how McGowen’s values and beliefs affected his political style and his relationships with other Labor politicians and also the industrial wing of the labour movement. It also examines the factors that influenced the views of his detractors. In this way, it considers the role of the individual in labour history and dominant assumptions about the sorts of qualities that make a successful politician.
Endnotes

5. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 4.
The making of a New Zealand communism?:
the rise and fall of the Workers' Communist League.

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This paper examines the history of the Workers Communist League, a small but influential group which, for a time in the 1980s, grappled rather promisingly with the challenge of merging more traditional communist politics with notions central to feminist and indigenous politics.

The post-1960 history of the New Zealand communist movement is a tale of fragmentation. The Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ) split, reflecting the increasingly acute ideological division between China and the Soviet Union. Uniquely for a Western country the Maoist tendency won the inner party struggle and it was the Soviet aligned minority that, with significant help from the CPA, established a new organisation, the Socialist Unity Party. However, the subsequent history of New Zealand Maoism mirrored the geological fault lines that so frequently influence New Zealand, serious ideological quakes occurred and political fissures appeared on a regular basis.

In 1980 a new group was launched under the name the Workers’ Communist League (WCL). The League’s origins lay in the wholesale expulsion of the Wellington District from the CPNZ in 1970. This dispute was in part over tactics in the trade union movement and the Auckland leaderships seemingly uncritical support of the so-called ‘youth revolution’. After the expulsion former party members in Wellington continued to work as a collective, playing a leading role in the campaign against war in Indo-China and the anti-apartheid struggle. From 1973 they formed the core of a group that published The Paper, an organ of protest politics. From this collective a loose knit Pre-Party Organisation was established and this was more formally constituted as the Wellington Marxist Leninist Organisation in January 1976. The WCL was the result of a merger of this Wellington group with the smaller Northern Communist Organisation, based in Auckland and Hamilton.

In some respects its program was a reasonably predictable series of statements derived from ‘Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought’. It included an emphasis on building a ‘genuine Marxist-Leninist party’; a resolute struggle against ‘revisionism and all forms of right and left opportunism’; and an attack on ‘super power hegemonism’, especially ‘Soviet social-imperialism’. The League declared itself to be primarily a secret organisation based on democratic centralism and combined legal and illegal activity. The WCL had close contacts with several international organisations, including the Canadian Communist League/Workers Communist Party (ML), the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain and the League of Revolutionary Struggle, USA. Its policies, strategy and tactics in part reflected these contacts.

So far, so conventional! Yet the League’s manifesto also contained an interesting and extended analysis of the history and current state of New Zealand politics and the local class struggle. Some were hopeful that from amidst the more conventional Maoism a more independent and distinctively New Zealand path to socialism would emerge. Bruce Jesson, one of the most perceptive commentators on the left in New Zealand, described the WCL as ‘the most promising of the sects’.

The League made rapid progress in some areas of ‘mass struggle’. Using the car assembly industry as a base of concentration it became influential in the Wellington union movement. In 1980 the League’s Chairman, Graeme Clarke, became secretary of the District Trades Council of the Federation of Labour. There was also some influence in the Clerical Workers Union and in public sector unions such as the PSA.

From the early 1970s Wellington Marxist-Leninists had achieved considerable influence in student politics in the capital city and at the national level within the New Zealand University Students Association. This continued into the 1980s.
From the base in union and student politics a number of other campaigns were conducted, most importantly on the issue of apartheid. In 1981 Wellington League members provided the core leadership (and strategy and tactics) of COST, the local coalition against the Springbok Tour. This leadership moulded the Wellington protest movement into arguably the most effective during the long and violent winter of protest. It brought the organisation to national prominence when Prime Minister Robert Muldoon used security service reports to ‘out’ a number of prominent League members in the anti-tour movement. The attempted ‘red scare’ had relatively little impact.

Given the events described above the League should have been riding the crest of a wave, however within two years of its foundation fundamental issues were being debated and serious divisions emerged. From 1982 to 1985 core issues of traditional Marxism-Leninism were questioned and in some cases jettisoned. The dogmatic insistence on class as the principal contradiction in capitalism was dropped and notions of race and gender became more central to the agitation and propaganda of the League. This reflected the broader context of international debates on such issues. It was also the result of an increasingly assertive indigenous voice within New Zealand protest politics, including a pointed attack on the League in the aftermath of the 1981 Springbok Tour. To some extent the internal debates also reflected the social composition of the League itself, especially with regard to gender.

Over time the WCL was characterised less and less by orthodox communism. In its 1984 policy statement, Socialism and Liberation, the League formally renounced the abandonment of the notion of ‘party monopoly over socialist society and the mass movement’. In 1985 the notion of party building was abandoned altogether. In January 1990, influenced by international events in 1989 (including the dramatic events in Tien An Men Square) but also the logic of their own development since 1982, the League formally abandoned the communist project and dissolved itself. A core of members reformed into a loose activist network called Left Currents.

The short but lively history of the Workers’ Communist League makes an interesting case study of the issues, opportunities and challenges in attempting to merge more traditional communist theory and practice with perspectives of feminist and indigenous movements. In this case the tensions and contradictions between the political traditions proved insurmountable.

Endnotes

‘We were sick of being treated like animals’: class, gender and activism in the Melbourne Tailoresses Strike, 1882-83

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The socialist feminist Barbara Taylor wrote in 1983 that ‘the history of all progressive movements is littered with such half-remembered hopes, dreams that have failed’. She was referring to the socialist endeavours of the nineteenth century, but the same could now be said of the once mighty women’s liberation. Most women in Australia today are in fact worse off under the Howard government than they were a decade ago. The lack of affordable childcare funding and universal maternity leave have increased the burden on working mothers who have little choice than to take poorly paid casual jobs, leaving them financially vulnerable and dependent on partners. Women’s average wages have now fallen to 66 per cent of men’s. Reproductive rights are also under attack with the re-opening of the so-called ‘abortion debate’ and panic about a falling birth-rate.

Yet as women workers’ rights are rolled back, there are few signs of resistance from within the union movement. This presents a challenge to historians who continue to call themselves labour historians. Although not the first time that labour history has entered a period of self-questioning, what distinguishes now from earlier methodological turmoil, is the extent of the political crisis in the left from which the discipline has traditionally drawn its theoretical inspiration.

Perhaps ultimately it will be political developments outside of the university which will regenerate academic practice. Although less optimistically, I share Verity Burgmann’s hope that ‘as workers across the world regroup and mobilise anew in exhilarating ways’, so will there be a renewed intellectual interest in class, the labour movement and Marxism. Such a political resurgence would hopefully inspire a new generation of women to demand their rights and in doing so, re-discover as did the feminists of the 1970s, the history of women’s political struggles.

My own interest in researching women’s political and industrial activism is informed by my experience as an activist. I became aware of how much the existing literature was influenced by debates between feminists begun over 30 years ago, controversies over the nature and cause of women’s oppression, over strategy and more recently over the value and limitations of the linguistic turn; controversies which remain unresolved. Focusing on historical instances of women’s activism my research, on which this paper is based, is an attempt to contribute to these debates and in so doing, develop a greater understanding of the relationship between the gendering of working class experience and political mobilisation.

This emphasis on the experience of class and gender marks a clear departure with recent post-materialist historical practice. My preference for writing about ‘experience’ over ‘representation’ and ‘identity’ over ‘discourse’ or ‘subjectivity’, allies me more closely to the political and methodological origins of Women’s History. My focus on the activities of ordinary working women is also consciously inspired by the earlier practice of the social historians of the 1960s, particularly E.P. Thompson. However this return to Thompson’s cultural turn does not mean ignoring important theoretical developments since. Most notably the recognition that the experience and articulation of class is always gendered has revolutionised the way in which labour history is written.

I believe that it is possible to take up this insight without subscribing to the extreme post-materialist view that ‘agency, consciousness and identity [are] constructed through discourse’. British historian Marc Weinberg has suggested that dialogic analysis based on the ‘Bakhtinian Circle’, offers historians a way of theorising the relationship between language, consciousness and action which builds on the cultural Marxism of Thompson. Dialogic analysis emphasises the function of language in mediating between experience and consciousness and sees the production of meaning as an ongoing social process of dialogue between collective actors. A dialogic perspective, writes Weinberg, allows historians ‘to read the language of nineteenth-century working people and understand how women and men fashioned a class consciousness from within the language of their capitalist oppressors’. It thus becomes possible to envisage how such political language ‘simultaneously facilitated class struggle and gender oppression’, while also paying attention to the ways in which gendered meanings were constantly contested by women activists.
The Past is Before Us

Part B: Non-Refereed Papers

This paper will attempt to draw out how the social meanings of masculinity and femininity placed constraints on working women’s lives and how their activism both exploited and contested these gendered meanings.

The rise of ‘gender’ has paralleled the decline of ‘class’ analysis in western academia. The rise of popular conservatism during the 1980s and the defusing of trade union militancy, forced some labour historians to rethink what they meant by class. Historical developments made the idea that working-class people must organically and inevitably organise to defend their interests embarrassingly naïve. Historians questioned the determining influence of social and economic factors in creating the conditions for working-class activism. Although some came to dispute whether class in fact existed at all outside of language, others attempted to deconstruct the relationship between class, class identity and collective political action.

Ira Katznelson takes issue with a concept of class consciousness, as that based on a ‘correct’ comprehension of worker’s common interests. ‘The essentialist assumption that classes “in themselves” will, indeed must, act “for themselves”’, he writes, continues ‘implicitly to underpin much of theoretical debate about class’.9 This logic reduces class-based political activity to a ‘formula’. Katznelson prefers to see class in capitalist societies is more usefully conceived of as having ‘four connected layers of history and theory: those of structure, ways of life, dispositions and collective action’.10 This re-formulation of class, he argues, brings together the ‘objective’ structure of economic relations and social organisation with the Thompsonian concept of class as a ‘loosely defined body of people’, ‘who have a disposition to behave as a class, [and] to define themselves in class ways’, without lapsing into determinism.11 Sharing a common culture and community does not automatically translate into self-conscious political activity. Instead the interplay between these ‘levels of class’ allow historians to better explain variations in the process of class formation, such as why groups of people do and do not take political action or develop collective organisations in different places and at different times.

To understand how some women workers led and participated in collective political activity, and why others did not, it is first necessary to ask how they came to see themselves a belonging to a group with shared interests, specifically as working-class, and what they understood this to mean. Moreover, since the experience of class is also gendered, it is also critical to be aware of how their articulation of this class identity, and the possibilities for its expression, were shaped by their experiences as women. This paper explores how economic pressures, lived experience and shared ideas came together in one such self-conscious collective action, the momentous Melbourne ‘Tailoresses Strike’ of 1882.

On Tuesday 5 December 1882, 300 or so tailoresses employed at Messrs. Beath, Schiess and Co. clothing factory in Flinders Lane put down their work and walked out. They had just been informed that their piece rates were to be cut even further. Probably this announcement did not come as much of a shock. According to Ellen Creswell, who was employed at the factory as a trouser hand, 13 years of experience in the clothing industry had shown her that employers constantly strove to lower prices. It was, she later told the subsequent Royal Commission into factory conditions, a ‘daily complaint’ among workers. Another woman working as a coat hand told the Age how six weeks before, the firm had tried to reduce the price for a coat from 4s 8d to 4s 2d, and had been forced to back down: ‘We refused to accept it. They then took off threepence. We submitted to this, but [when] they said that they would take off another threepence, then we struck’.12 The picture which emerges is of workers engaged in a relentless cat-and-mouse struggle with their employers to resist each serial assault on their ability to earn a living wage; a struggle in which their collective protest was the only weapon at their disposal.

This struggle also vexed many employers who also resented the downward pressure of the market on prices in order to compete with other firms. By the 1880s Victoria was the undisputed centre of manufacturing in the colonies. The high demand for affordable products together with the labour-intensive nature of the work, encouraged manufacturers to seek out the cheapest labour available to them, which, according to the gender order of the day, was female labour.13 The tendency towards mechanisation and piecework during the 1870s and 1880s, and the consequent definition of much tailoring work as ‘unskilled’, meant that women were concentrated in the clothing industry, both in factories and as outworkers.14 Over time, demand for lower production costs saw the tailoresses’ wages caught in a downwards spiral. Although later unhappy with the consequences, Beath, Schiess and Co. initially supported the tailoresses decision to form a union in the hope that it would impose a fixed scale of prices on all companies which would halt this race to the bottom. So far as his employers were
concerned, Beath, Schiess and Co’s manager Mr Blencowe told a meeting at Trades Hall, ‘they do not care if the prices were increased by 100 per cent if all the other firms joined in the movement’.15

Ellen Cresswell was a widow who had returned to the tailoring trade to support three children after the death of her husband. During that time she had experienced first hand the deprivation and suffering arising from low wages. While her children had lived at home they had sat up late every night with her finishing the minimum of pieces needed to keep them. Her youngest child had recently died, aged 15, and she was convinced that her death had been hastened by hard work and malnutrition. But Ellen did not passively accept her lot. Contrary to the prevailing stereotype of ‘sweated’ workers as helpless victims, she had a record of industrial militancy before the 1882 strike and had been singled out by employers because of it. Four years before she had led a strike at another firm over a pay reduction which had lasted three days before the boss backed down, only to be fired on returning to work. ‘Because I was the speaker’, she explained to the Commission, ‘[but] I never worked for 7½d, and I never will’.16

Another employee at Beath and Schiess told the Age a similar story: While she used to earn no more than 24s a week, working 14 hours a day, ‘the reduction proposed will bring [her] down to eighteen shillings’, ‘working from half-past eight in the morning to half past five in the afternoon with half an hour’s interval for lunch and three to four hours work in the evenings at home’.17 If it was next to impossible for older women with families to earn a living, it was no easier for single women. Asked by the Commissioner about the ‘young girls’ who had forsaken domestic service for the factory, Ellen presented a very different reality to alleged frivolity of the ‘factory girl’. She doubted whether any of them could live on their wages, replying that only few ‘just get what they earn for clothes’, most helped out their parents. Most worked ‘in the factories to support their aged parents and children who worked 14 hours a day’.18 This is backed up by the testimony given by women to the Age: One young woman told the journalist covering the story that she could not expect her parents to keep her and paid them 10s of her 15s a week board. Another angrily complained that she could not possibly support a sick mother and two little sisters on 16s.19

From the outset the strike represented commentators with an anomaly. The startling news that several hundred women were on strike contradicted the stereotype of women workers as uniformly helpless and intrinsically conservative. Yet the lack of major strikes by women prior to 1882 does not imply that female workers were simply compliant. Rather women were more likely to register their dissatisfaction through informal, short term acts of defiance such as walking out, insubordination, absenteeism, lateness and in some instances even sabotage.20 While factory jobs were still plentiful during the 1880s ‘boom’, simply leaving a job seems to have been one of the most common responses to frustration with working conditions or a wage cut. Ellen later told the Royal Commission that she had once been sacked after taking part in a strike but had found another job within ‘a quarter of an hour’.21 Another revealed how she had elected to leave factory only days before a strike broke out there, only to take part in a strike at the new establishment.22 Such examples suggests that the transition from informal, individual acts of resistance to more recognisable expressions of collective militancy such as strikes, were not a quantum leap, but rather a progression of an existing strategies for resistance.

Yet alongside the stereotype of docile female labour there was a widespread belief that women, who opted for factory work over more genteel employment such as domestic service, flouted the norms of femininity. During the strike the Argus was swamped with correspondence blaming the women for their own plight on account of having chosen factory work, simply, according to one letter, in order to ‘indulge in personal, and intrinsically conservative. Yet the lack of major strikes by women prior to 1882 does not imply that female workers were simply compliant. Rather women were more likely to register their dissatisfaction through informal, short term acts of defiance such as walking out, insubordination, absenteeism, lateness and in some instances even sabotage.20 While factory jobs were still plentiful during the 1880s ‘boom’, simply leaving a job seems to have been one of the most common responses to frustration with working conditions or a wage cut. Ellen later told the Royal Commission that she had once been sacked after taking part in a strike but had found another job within ‘a quarter of an hour’.21 Another revealed how she had elected to leave factory only days before a strike broke out there, only to take part in a strike at the new establishment.22 Such examples suggests that the transition from informal, individual acts of resistance to more recognisable expressions of collective militancy such as strikes, were not a quantum leap, but rather a progression of an existing strategies for resistance.

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However the unruliness of factory girls was not commonly supposed to extend to industrial militancy. Throughout the strike it was consistently claimed, by supporters and detractors alike, that the tailoresses were acting under the direction of Trades Hall. Godfrey Barthold, the proprietor of the Victorian Clothing Company, was adamant that the trouble had started when the ‘outside excitement came on [and] they could not resist it’, although he claimed that some were ‘ashamed of it afterwards’. They had he alleged been ‘very ill-advised’ by the ‘Trades Hall people’ who had persuaded them to strike if their prices were not met.\textsuperscript{29} The Age newspaper, which for the first and only time in its existence supported the strike hoping that it would lead to industry regulation, agreed that the ‘helpless girls’ should place themselves, in the words of one male trade union delegate, ‘entirely in the hands’ of Trades Hall Council (THC): ‘Men in similar circumstances can hold indignation meetings and publicly make their grievances known; women cannot. They can only depend on friends to champion their cause’.\textsuperscript{30} In this vein the paper cast itself as chief among these champions, going so far to claim that ‘their dependence rests entirely on the press to whom they appeal to ventilate their grievances’.\textsuperscript{31} So pervasive was the myth of female vulnerability that even one of the strike’s leaders, Ellen Creswell, later cast her fellow unionists as ‘helpless females’ who had been rescued by the ‘noble men’ of the THC— one of the ‘noblest works men could do’—when she publicly thanked them at the Inter-colonial Trades Congress the following year.\textsuperscript{32}

If Ellen’s deference to the Congress was a concession to the acceptable roles available to women in the union movement in 1884, the strike was remembered very differently by Helen Robertson 40 years later. According to her, the initial impetus to organise Melbourne’s tailoresses had come from a small group of women including Helen herself and her friends Mrs Moody, Mary Wise, and several others who took it upon themselves to organise their co-workers. Born in Scotland, Helen’s family emigrated to the Australian colonies when she was three, and she had lived and worked, even once married, in the inner city factories of Melbourne all her adult life. When she was interviewed by the *Clothing Trades Gazette* in 1922, Helen told how three or four women, sick of being ‘treated like animals’ by their employers, resolved to start a union. Whether any of them had previous experience of industrial activism, or were familiar with the traditions and ideology of the labour movement is not recorded, although it seems highly likely that they were. Helen recalled that they had been in contact with Trades Hall.\textsuperscript{33} However ‘opposition came from all quarters’, and she was labelled ‘an agitator’ and boycotted by employers after several of the other workers scabbed on them. Undeterred, these ‘staunch fighters’ had ‘stuck all along’, stoically ‘battling the might of the employers’. She described how she and Mrs Moody had been forced to act covertly, on one occasion plastering the factories with handbills for the first organising meeting under the cover of night.\textsuperscript{34} On another, Helen and her band of committed activists led a rally to Parliament House, wondering all the while how long it would be before their bosses would find out and they would be sacked. In the end however, the public meeting was a success. ‘That’, Helen recalled, ‘was really the starting point of our improvement’.\textsuperscript{35} As well as suggesting that the strike was not wholly spontaneous, her retrospective self-fashioning as a politically astute militant is also a measure of how the role of women in the union movement had expanded since.

Far from being helpless, the evidence suggests that the women in fact held out for a whole week before seeking the assistance of the THC.\textsuperscript{36} After one week, the newspaper reported that 200-300 women had voted to remain on strike with only 20 returning to work. The remaining strikers were apparently keenly aware of that their defeat would most likely set a precedent for other firms decreasing their prices.\textsuperscript{36} According to the Age, they had requested that their plight be put to the public, which they vocally ‘maintain[ed] they had a right to demand in a democratic colony like Victoria’. Whether the Age was responding to a direct appeal from the women or Trades Hall, or had independently decided to turn the strike into a *cause célébre*, it is impossible to know. Ten days into the strike, the Age, reported that ‘the great number of the women, having now shown a determination to get better terms, still refuse to go back’ for anything less than a 3d increase and another 100 women had gone on strike at Beath, Schiess and Co.’s second largest factory.\textsuperscript{37} As news of this second strike spread, another strike promptly broke out at factory number three.\textsuperscript{38} That evening between 500 and 600 tailoresses, many of them employees of other firms, crowded into one of the large meeting rooms at Trades Hall to discuss the formation of a union. Another 500 people, apparently working-class sympathisers attracted by the ‘unusual occurrence of a strike of females’ gathered outside.\textsuperscript{39} After speeches from the Trades Hall President, Benjamin Douglas and Murphy, Ellen Cresswell, who we have been recognised as one of the leaders of the strike by both the tailoresses and the THC, moved that they ‘form themselves into a union for their mutual protection
and improvement’. Her motion was seconded by a Miss Cass and promptly ‘carried unanimously, amid
great applause’. Women were then appointed to represent each branch of the trade on a strike committee
although the leadership of the THC assumed the executive of the new Tailoresses Union.

Nevertheless, Douglas reminded the women that ‘it now rested entirely with themselves’ to secure the
success of the strike. Murphy went further, assuring the tailoresses that they only had the full support
of organised labour if they ‘showed a desire to help themselves’. The activities of the women during
the strike can be reconstructed from a few clues gleaned from the existing sources. All the women on
strike were required to sign a strike attendance book for each day they claimed strike pay, implying that
they would receive this in return for performing routine union duties. Duncan McIvor, secretary of the
Tailor’s Union, suggested that the women on strike should go out to other factories to talk to the women
there ‘with a view to all the factories in the city and the suburbs striking at once’. To what extent this
happened it is difficult tell, although the second phase of the strike must have necessitated a high level
of co-operation and communication between union members at the 13 factories involved. Women also
appear to have been responsible for organising and maintaining regular pickets outside the factories,
a task which Murphy later recalled the women had done well. So effective were they, that H. Farrar,
Secretary of the Victorian Manufacturer’s Association wrote to the Argus complaining that the women
has used ‘violent language and threats’ to intimidate workers who had attempted to scab on the strike.
Conservative denunciations of the strikers drew liberally on the stereotype of the rowdy factory girl.

One Argus correspondent speculated on the grim fate of awaiting anyone who dared to suggest to any
of the ‘hundred young women outside the Trades Hall’ that they forsake their reckless independence for
the comfort of domestic service. While it was certainly in their opponents interests to depict the strikers as savages undeserving of sympathy, this should not preclude the possibility that they found necessary to act in ways they would
previously have considered unbecoming to a ‘lady’. Murphy’s subsequent praise also suggests that even
if their behaviour was distasteful to the average Argus reader, it was considered heroic by the unionists
at Trades Hall. Such behaviour, suggests Rae Frances, presented a radical challenge to conventional
femininity which emphasised domesticity and passivity, and was typical of the emerging ‘new woman’
of the trade union movement.

At any rate, the strike seemed to throw the existing gender order into chaos. Punch magazine featured a poem which reflected on these ‘curious times’ in which even ‘our
d. girls now emulate/ The ways of Dan and Mike/ And all engaged to sew-and-sew/ Have gone upon
the strike’. The next fortnight they published a risqué cartoon titled ‘The Trouser Famine’, depicting the
eminent businessmen of Collins Street in skirts with the caption ‘What it must come to if the
Tailoresses continue much longer on strike’. As well as being a testament to the tailoresses’ success
in closing down Melbourne’s factories, the absurdity of the image evokes a world in which the gender
order has been gone topsy-turvy. However this discovery of their talent for picketing did not, at least in
their own eyes, erode their claim to genteel femininity. On the contrary, the strike leaders used it their
advantage. When the union was invited to march in the annual Eight Hours procession, the executive
declined, saying that they ‘felt too diffident’ and during the ensuing Royal Commission, several were
alleged to have requested for ‘reasons of morality’, that the interviews not take place in a hotel.

The tailoresses initiative and resolve also confounded the suspicion of women workers characteristic
of the union movement. The seemingly universal support for the tailoresses from both male rank and
file unionists and officials was noted with wonderment at the time. The Age boasted that the strike
had become ‘the chief topic of conversation among the working classes’ and reported that ‘several of
the trades’ had already announced their commitment to assisting their ‘sisters in the field of labour’. Public gestures of solidarity from male rank and file trade unionists were a conspicuous feature during
the dispute, most crucially contributions to the strike fund which over the duration of the strike amassed
to thousands of pounds. Most welcome was the support of the Tailor’s Society. For much of the 1860s
and 1870s the society had upheld a rule banning tailors from working in any shop that employed
women and even into the 1880s, several leading members of the union continued their principled
opposition to female labour.

Although the leadership of the union were divided on the question, Duncan McIvor, the society’s ‘most
advanced thinker’, played a pro-active role in facilitating the formation of a tailoresses union, as did
John Wing, the Society President. While self-interest was clearly a motivating factor, this should not
detract from the significance of their support.
It is important to remember that not all the women played such a militant role during the strike, and their non-participation is as deserving of analysis. At a union meeting on 27 February, Murphy bemoaned the ‘scant attendance’ and claimed that Trades Hall had been ‘badly treated by the girls after all they had done to obtain the victory for them’. His disappointment was shared by Ellen Cresswell who said that she was ‘ashamed of the tailoresses when she saw the way they treated the committee of the Trades Hall who had laboured so hard in that great struggle’. The difficulties associated with mobilising and sustaining the membership through union activity once the excitement of the strike was ended would be an ongoing problem in the years to come. Although the strike was a success in forcing manufacturers to agree to a log, employers avoided paying log prices by sending work out. Unfortunately, while they held employers ultimately to blame, members of the union reserved a great deal of bitterness for the outworkers themselves. The union’s refusal to organise outworkers- who were typically women whose domestic responsibilities made it difficult to work outside the home- is especially exasperating given the historic refusal of men’s unions to organise women on an almost identical basis and was a major cause of the union’s eventual downfall.

This inability to defend the log prices undoubtedly undermined member’s confidence in the union and within a year of the strike it struggled to maintain the active membership necessary to sustain it as a viable organisation. The extant union letter books point to some of the problems associated with sustaining union activity among the rank and file membership. These letters offer an insight into the kind of duties which members were expected to perform such as representing factories on the union committee, collecting dues and recruiting new members. Several letters are to members who have for some reason neglected their designated roles, most commonly a failure to collect and pass on dues. Without knowing the exact reasons for this high turnover of members, it is difficult to draw any major conclusions as to how the gender of the unionists affected their ability to carry our union work. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to speculate that some of the perennial difficulties involved in organising women workers; such as the transitory nature of employment, the fear of dismissal or intimidation from managers and the ideological pressure on women not to involve themselves in political activity, were contributing factors.

Yet despite the union’s subsequent deterioration, the strike marked a turning point in the participation of women in the Victorian labour movement. The following year the THC commissioned a Female Operatives Hall adjacent to the Trades Hall building as a centre for women organisers. Although the hall was demolished in 1960, a plaque still testifies to the strike’s significance. The strike also developed a layer of committed activists such as Ellen Cresswell, Mrs Moody, Helen Robertson and several others who remained deeply involved in union work: representing the union at official events, sitting on the executive and associated committees. Ellen was appointed as one of the union delegates at the 1884 Inter-colonial Trades Congress, where she and Jane Graham publicly addressed the congress to rapturous applause. What she and Jane thought of the poem read at the official welcome which began ‘In your federated freedom/ In your manliness allied’ can only be guessed at. A photograph of the delegates was later presented to the union by none less than W.G. Spence himself. Ellen represented the union again at the Third Congress in Sydney the following year, where she gave a rousing speech declaring that all workers who ‘earn their living by the sweat of their brow’, ‘had a right to sell their labour at as high a price as they could get for it’.

While women workers continued to be a minority within the movement which continued to be configured in labour rhetoric as ‘a man’s movement’, the strike marks a shift towards a recognition that women were also workers whose solidarity needed to be ensured movement was to secure its goals. More importantly still, the strike represents one of the first documented instances anywhere in the world of women workers moving from merely seeing themselves as sharing a common experience of exploitation with their workmates, to collectively and self-consciously engaging in political action. Although much of this activity dissipated once the strike was over, the memory of the tailoresses militancy long served as an antidote to the stereotype of the industrially timid female ‘blackleg’, becoming a point of reference for subsequent generations of female union activists.

The theme of this conference, ‘the past is before us’, begs the question of what, if anything, historians can or should take from the study of past struggles if we accept, to paraphrase Marx, that the point is not merely to interpret the world but how to change it for the better. Although there are always difficulties in transposing ‘lessons’ from one historical moment to the present, there are nonetheless
tentative points that feminists and unionists today could take from the strike’s successes as much as its failures. It illustrates for example the need for cooperation between female and male workers and the corrosive effect of sexism on this solidarity. It is also a reminder to the union movement that it needs to get serious about organising the millions of women in low-paid casual work and outwork today if things are not to get worse still for working women. But arguably the most important lesson to be taken from the strike is that it shows what ordinary people can do when they organise collectively as workers. Although their additional marginalisation as women had the potential to stifle their resistance, the tailoresses were also conscious that they were acting as women and by turns exploited and contested the gender roles afforded them.

But returning to the Taylor quote at the start of this paper, if any one lesson can be learned from the study of the past, it is that such self-conscious working-class activity and the social upheavals which it produces, are not inevitable. If classes can be made, they can also be unmade. In this sense Katzenelson’s conception of class as a highly unstable multi-layered process offers a useful and innovative way of thinking about the pre-conditions for self-conscious, class based political activity. However while he criticises Thompson for assuming a natural leap from a shared culture to collective action, Katzenelson does not himself attempt any explanation of how or why this shift does, and just as often does not, occur. This is perhaps the problem which has preoccupied radical thinkers who do not accept the crude orthodoxy that ‘class struggle’- and in its wake, proletarian revolution and communism- is somehow predestined. It is the problem which vexed Antonio Gramsci as he reflected in his prison cell on the failure of the Italian worker’s movement and the rise of Mussolini.

This is precisely where the study of past struggles has the potential to become an invaluable tool for theorising future social change. Reflecting on the development of the Tailoresses Strike, it is possible to surmise that the strike might never have happened had it not been for the agency of a small, but cohered minority of women who had the initiative and the ability to organise their fellow tailoresses and the political forethought to enlist the support of the wider union movement and appeal to sympathetic press. Gramsci called these individuals ‘organic intellectuals’, politically advanced members of the subaltern class capable of drawing together experience and ideas into an ‘unity of theory and praxis’. Then again I am conscious that the very idea of class activity being ‘organic’ risks lapsing into determinism. Instead of ending this paper with a glib conclusion about what lessons historians should take from the past, I will finish by saying that if labour history is to contribute to the process of social change, then historians must seriously attempt to theorise the relationship between class experience, consciousness and activity.

Endnotes

22. Ibid., p. 61.
27. Ibid., p. 47.
29. Royal Commission into the Factories Act, 1882.
31. Ibid., 13 December 1882.
35. Ibid., p. 7.
36. *Age*, 12 December 1882.
37. Ibid., 15 December 1882.
38. Ibid., 16 December 1882.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
42. *Age*, 16 December, 1882.
43. Ibid.
44. *Argus*, February 27, 1883.
45. *Age*, 16 December 1882.
47. *Age*, 17 February 1883, p. 13.
51. Ibid., 1 March 1883, p. 84.
53. *Age* 18 December 1882, p. 3.
54. Ibid., p. 3.
55. *Argus*, 18 July 1874, p. 9.
56. *Argus*, 27 February 1883.
57. *Letterbook of the Victorian Tailoresses Union 1885-86*, Clothing and Allied Trades Union Papers, N84/2, NBAC ANU.
58. *Clothing and Allied Trades Union*, Minutes, October 4, 1909, Melbourne University Archives.
60. *Age*, 29 April 1884, p. 5.
The many gains that have flowed from Eureka

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‘Eureka continues to arouse more debate than any other event in Australian history’, said historian Geoffrey Blainey in the week of nationwide celebrations of the Stockade’s 150th Anniversary. Much of the debate arises from small understanding of the manifold gains that have flowed from Eureka. Here is an estimate of those gains.

Eureka not explained by a single cause

Across 150 years, attempts have been made to confine Eureka to a single and if possible local cause, thereby obscuring the significance of an event that reverberated around Victoria and beyond. Among such single causes have been: the licence tax, its enforcement by oppressive police, an inflexible British Governor, foreign agitators, Irish diggers, land-hunger, economic recession, the decline of individual mining, the rise of capitalist mining, deep shaft-sinkings at Ballarat, resistance to mining machinery, exclusion from the right-to-vote, and infringements of rights whether deemed ‘natural’ or ‘British’ in the sense of rights achieved by historic ‘precedents’ such as Magna Carta (1215), the English Revolution (1640-89), and the First Reform Act (1832).

Single-cause explanations are at once seen to be superficial when compared with the blunt view of the fallen Colonial Secretary J.L.F.V. Foster to an 1867 Select Committee: ‘The whole Government were placed in an antagonistic position at the time to the rest of the community… It was before responsible Government’. In other words, Victoria at the end of 1854 was mired in a general crisis of colonial-imperial relations: the fast-growing Victorian colony had outgrown the authoritarian system of government that distant Imperial Britain had imposed before the great goldrush began, a top-heavy system of powerful British Governor assisted by a Legislative Council unrepresentative of nine-tenths of the community.

Armed rebellion ended a long crisis

The gunshots of the morning of December 3rd 1854 broke through this general, diffuse, stalemate crisis. Armed ‘rebellion’? Yes, though the arming was with defensive intent, to resist oppression by Ballarat officialdom rather than to overthrow the Government of Victoria. (The term ‘rebellion’ has emerged as the one clearly favoured over ‘revolt’, ‘insurrection’, ‘uprising’ and others by nearly all 150th Anniversary commentators.)

The rebellion could not be restricted to a smashed stockade on an acre of a Ballarat goldfield, though that’s what the Governor had intended; instead, it spread immediately across a Victoria grown resentful of imposed Government – a popular movement that expressed itself through excited radical meetings in Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine and other centres. It did not spread, however, as armed rebellion, though that might have happened if the Governor had resorted to suppression of the meetings or to further provocations like the November 30th digger-hunt which had tilted the Ballarat diggers towards resort to arms after three years of fruitless ‘moral force’ protest. The Victoria-wide storm of rebellion impelled the Government to agree to important reforms – which we can now specify along with many other gains from Eureka.

1. Immediate gains for the Ballarat diggers

Eureka swiftly and comprehensively changed for the better the working environment of the Ballarat diggings. Initial shock news of the military assault with its killing of 30 diggers and the imposition on the 4th of martial law aroused a mood of anger across the Ballarat population, even among those averse to resort to arms: the diggers were seen to be more sinned against than sinning.
The mood was so universal as to be compelling; no surprise then that the Governor, four days after Eureka, hastily summoned a Royal Commission he’d nominated three weeks earlier (to report generally on all the goldfields) and, when it went to work in emergency mode in mid-December, this had the effect in Ballarat of putting all past repressive practices on hold, so there were no more digger-hunts and the hitherto arrogant administration (the Goldfields Commission) lapsed into dysfunction, marking time till something better should replace it.

Martial law was quickly lifted (on the 9th). As to the Government’s reward notices for apprehension of three Stockade leaders, the public pointedly ignored the notices, while its call for a loyal enrolment of ‘special constables’ attracted only a single application. Meanwhile, Ballarat’s residents were heartened as news kept coming through from the meetings across Victoria which supported the diggers’ cause and especially supported 13 Stockaders charged with high treason. A new Colonial Secretary, William Haines, appointed a week after Eureka, lost no time in making a mollifying speech (on the 13th) promising a vigorous reform policy, especially of reforms for the goldfields.

2. Gains for all the goldfields

Within six months of Eureka the Government, which for three-and-a-half goldrush years had stubbornly resisted petitions for basic reform of administration of the goldfields, caved in and ‘gave all the diggers wanted’\(^1\) – gave, indeed, a torrent of reforms unequalled in Australian history as stemming from a single event.

The June 1855 *Gold Fields Act* established local self-government for the diggers in the form of Local Miners Courts which replaced the inefficient and sometimes corrupt Goldfields Commission. The diggers would now elect nine trusted members to each local court and the courts were empowered to make local mining laws, determine how much ground a miner could claim, and settle disputes over claims. Importantly for working men, they were to be paid for the cases they heard. At a stroke the hated licence tax and its enforcing ‘digger-hunts’ were replaced by a small tax on exported gold – exactly what the diggers had advocated since the goldrush began in 1851! Moreover, an annual £1 ‘Miners Right’ secured a miner’s claim and conferred the right-to-vote, while a new electoral act granted the goldfields eight elective seats in the Legislative Council. All this (including the opening for sale of squatters’ land immediately around the goldfields) was considered by the diggers to be a huge improvement after four years of abrasive goldfields administration.

Mining historian Ralph Birrell says: ‘… the political pressure exerted by the miners and the merchants and shopkeepers who supported them had forced the Governor and Legislative Council to accept the control of the small alluvial digger of the processes and scale of the mines’\(^2\). The new system, says Geoffrey Blainey in *The Rush That Never Ended*, ‘was probably the high tide of Australian democracy… The miner in moleskins, for long hunted and herded, was lord of his own goldfields’\(^3\).

Eureka, in short, had impelled a reluctant Government to install within six months a drastically reformed, economical and effective mode of goldfields government. More widely, the vote given to holders of the Miner’s Right would open the way to early achievement (1857) of manhood suffrage for Victoria – which otherwise, says Ballarat’s leading modern historian, ‘might have come only after years of bitter struggle’\(^4\).

3. Gains for the liberal-democratic movement

The radical meetings which swept through Victoria in the days following the Stockade’s fall embraced the spirit of rebellious Ballarat but now as a ‘moral force’, a non-violent yet determined popular movement bent on winning a drastic reform of government. Essentially the meetings called for an end to the autocratic government of Victoria, an end to ‘the pre-goldrush Establishment’, the alliance of a British-appointed Governor with an intensely conservative Legislative Council made up of the Governor’s nominees, a squatter majority, and a number of Melbourne’s wealthiest businessmen, an alliance that had remained obdurately resistant throughout the goldrush years to ‘the democracy’, the mass of the Victorian public, most of whom were goldrush arrivals.

At the most important of all the meetings – in Melbourne three days after Eureka – one of the strongest speakers, Dr John Owens, is reported as declaring prophetically, ‘This was a great day for the colony,
the beginning of its history, this great meeting of the people to assert their rights and lay bare their injured feelings to the Government.5

Before Eureka, colonists of liberal or democratic tendency had supported sporadic protests on specific issues; for instance against convict transportation, against the squatters’ land monopoly, or against the goldfields licence-tax system. Eureka triggered an amazing change: it gathered a Victoria-wide popular movement which readily embraced those specific issues but swept on further to challenge the pre-goldrush Establishment. Nothing would now be acceptable short of a new government that represented the whole of the adult male population – reform which would mean an end to the Governor’s extensive personal power and an end to his unrepresentative Council.

In the months following Eureka the popular movement vigorously targeted the Governor for not freeing the 13 imprisoned Stockaders whose conviction could have seen them hanged. Several panels of middle class jurymen gave expression to the popular mood by pronouncing them ‘not guilty’, thus inflicting a humiliating public rebuke on the Governor.

The dramatic Eureka-prompted emergence of the popular movement must have been what the ALP leader Dr H.V. Evatt had in mind when he famously declared, in an article titled ‘Australian Democracy was born at Eureka’, that ‘The Eureka Stockade was of crucial importance in the making of Australian democracy’.6 After all, Victoria was then, and would remain for four decades, the trend-setter among the Australian colonies, having become, because of the goldrush, the most populous, most prosperous, most politically innovative colony of all.

4. Gains for reformers of the first (1856) Parliament’s constitution

The popular movement aroused by Eureka stimulated leaders like Dr Owens to believe the era of conservative dominance was doomed. Addressing the meeting on the 6th, Owens had been applauded for saying that he would have been speaking even more strongly had there not been ‘so much concession already’ – just three days after Eureka! He was especially referring to Governor Hotham’s acceptance two days previously of the resignation of his senior executive officer, Colonial Secretary J.V.F.L. Foster, who in the public mind was even more to blame than the Governor for the goldfields crisis. Foster’s departure was widely interpreted as the de facto beginning of the principle of ‘responsible government’ which the awaited new Constitution would formally install; that is, the obligation of a government to resign if it loses the majority support of parliament. The contemporary historian Thomas McCombie expressed the popular perception: ‘Responsible Government commenced in reality with the resignation of Mr Foster’. And he quoted Hotham’s acceptance letter to Foster: ‘The hostility against the Government is very general, and I could not disguise from myself, that, were I to decline accepting the resignation, the Queen’s colony would be placed in jeopardy’.7

But how effective would the popular movement be in reforming the draft Constitution of self-government sent to Britain for royal approval eight months before Eureka? It had been calculatedly framed by conservatives to exclude ‘the democracy’ and entrench the power of the well-to-do, mainly pro-squatter forces, in the Legislative Council. Until Eureka, public criticism of the draft’s entrenching of privilege had been slight because the power of Governor and Council had seemed too great to challenge.

The newly confident popular movement now seized on the shortcomings of the draft Constitution. The first task of the Parliament elected under the new Constitution, said The Age of 20 December 1854, should be a remodelling of its many undemocratic clauses, in particular its virtual disfranchisement of the diggers by not only requiring an expensive (£8) annual licence but also requiring fixity of residence for 12 months despite the fact that diggers typically shifted often in the search for gold.

Unfortunately for the reformers, much time passed. The Act to Establish a Constitution in and for the Colony of Victoria did not get back from Britain till October of 1855. ‘War was immediately declared’, said the liberal reformer William Westgarth; even so, the first Parliament elected under the new Constitution did not meet till 21 November 1856. By then Eureka was almost two years in the past and the radical goldfields populations had been much placated by the 1855 Gold Fields Act, with its enlightened system of local self-government. Yet a good deal of democratic political agitation did continue on the goldfields supportive of the agitation in Melbourne and Geelong.
After about 1858 it becomes difficult for the historian to trace the effects of Eureka on the great reforms to government in the next two decades when the efforts of liberals and democrats made Victoria one of the most advanced parliamentary systems of the 19th century – realising broadly the reforms that had been advocated by the British Chartist movement and the Ballarat Reform League. Some significant reforms included: more equal electoral districts, secret ballot 1856, male right-to-vote 1857, abolition of property qualifications for MPs 1857, three-year parliaments 1858, payment of MPs 1869, and at least a degree of success in the 1860s in opening the squatter lands to small-scale, farmer settlement.

Historians now generally assert that Eureka had an accelerating effect on the reforms. To quote two: Geoffrey Serle speaks of Eureka as ‘the dramatic incident which ushered in the first period of great democratic victories in Australia’ and he affirms that ‘until 1857 the diggers’ movements and reform societies in the gold towns were the driving force of the democratic movement’; and Geoffrey Blainey says, ‘My own view is that the Ballarat miners accelerated the movement towards democracy. By 1857, Victoria had one of the most democratic systems of government the world had seen’.

Those frequent mass meetings – direct democracy in which all attending had equal speaking and voting power – were strikingly similar to the citizen meetings of ancient Athens which gave the word ‘democracy’ to the world, a people power determining government. But Victoria’s new Constitution installed at the end of 1856 a very different, an indirect, mode of governing, a representative parliament which, as we have seen, had been stacked by conservatives against democratic representation and who would fight with increasing wealth and power in the decades ahead to preserve their privileges (see below, How Eureka’s reform impulse was blunted).

5. Gains for the working class and trade unions

The great period of the Australian labour movement was 1850 to 1890 in the estimation of Brian Fitzpatrick, leading early historian of that movement, for he saw those four decades as a time of rapid expansion and relatively fluid society when the working class was able to establish a favourable division of the national product.

An historian’s difficulty in pinning down Eureka’s influence after about 1858 is compounded when considering working class activity because that class since early colonial days had usually deferred to articulate middle class radicals who had advantages of status, education, income and leisure. In the big meetings that swept Melbourne, Geelong and the goldfields in the weeks after Eureka, the working class attendees may safely be considered to have constituted a militant left-wing cheering the speeches being made by radicals like Dr Owens.

The years immediately following Eureka saw a strengthening of such support while middle and lower classes made common cause in a powerful attack on the squatters aimed at ‘unlocking the lands’ to small-scale farming. At the same time, trade unions of skilled workers (‘craft unions’) were being formed, with prominent concern for winning the 8-hour day (won first by Sydney stonemasons in 1856 but more deeply consolidated in Victoria on a broad front of the building unions).

Of 1858, Serle reports ‘… a new phenomenon – men claiming to speak for the working-class in politics’. But before this new force could weigh significantly in the political balance, a strong conservative reaction began to slow the tide of reforms achieved by the Eureka-promoted popular movement which had been founded on the unity of most elements of society against the autocratic Governor and the squatter majority on his Council. Increasingly a number of middle class politicians, feeling content with their strength in the new (1856) Parliament, joined with the squatters to oppose ‘the democracy’ who, they felt, had secured more than enough by achieving manhood suffrage and the ballot and who now needed to be pegged back, especially by asserting the power of the undemocratic Upper House to defend propertied interests.

The emerging spokesmen for the working class were unable to rally an effective political grouping or party to represent the workers as an independent entity. That had to await the emergence of the Labor Party in 1890; a phase of trade union growth had to be worked through, taking the form of a steady strengthening of craft unions for a couple of decades and then in the 1870s and more strongly in the 1880s the organising of ‘industrial unions’ of miners, shearmen and seamen. The outstanding union leader of the ‘industrial’ phase, W.G. Spence, continually promoted to workers the importance of the Eureka tradition, as did many pioneers of the early Labor Party.
Tracing the stimulus of Eureka on the working class and trade unions between 1854 and 1890 is difficult; but that the spirit of Eureka was widely and sometimes reverently remembered is beyond doubt.¹⁵

That spirit endured brightly in the long life of the youngest Stockader, Monty Miller, 15 years old when he was wounded but escaped arrest by the soldiers (many colonial lads were self-supporting at 15). He educated himself by reading widely. For decades he was an active organiser of the Carpenters Union and later also worked with founders of the Labor Party, though he stuck with unionism and campaigned for the breaking down of barriers between unions. A popular lecturer and fluent writer, he often signed his articles ‘Eureka’. In his seventies, during World War I, he was arrested, tried for anti-conscription and peace activities and ably conducted his own defence. When he died at 77 in 1920 he’d just completed an 80-page booklet, *Labor’s Road to Freedom*. A few years earlier, John Curtin (Prime Minister in World War II) had said he knew of no one who had done more for the labour movement than Miller. On his grave in Perth the epitaph says simply, ‘Monty Miller, Australian Worker’.¹⁶

6. Gains for the Australian radical tradition

Much was said about tradition at the 100th anniversary celebrations of Eureka in 1954. In the half century since, there has been much more, as just three glimpses are enough to reveal.

In 1963, historian Geoffrey Serle wrote, ‘Eureka’s importance in Australian history, apart from its importance in Victorian history and its immediate effects on some 40 per cent of those living in Australia at that time, is in its strength as a tradition – much of which has been summed up by H.V. Evatt in a moment of rhetorical expansion: ‘Australian democracy was born at Eureka’. The statement can only be defended as pointing to the dramatic incident which ushered in the first period of great democratic victories in Australia’.¹⁷

Twenty years later, historian John Molony added: ‘Eureka blended all the factors that go to make a legend… a legend of mateship, egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, improvisation… [Some diggers became shearers] and took on a new kind of mateship called trade unionism. At Barcaldine in 1891 the shearers flew the Southern Cross as a symbol of their unity with the men of Eureka… in the struggles of the 1890s which gave birth to the Labor Party, the two legends of the pastoral and the golden past met and blended’.¹⁸

Another 20 years on, Australia-wide celebrations marked the 150th Anniversary of the Stockade. ‘The Southern Cross flag under which some 30 diggers and six soldiers fought and died…was raised above parliaments and town halls across the nation’, reported John Huxley.¹⁹ Many themes recurred in the media: a fight for freedom, popular demand for democracy, defence of human rights, defence of trade union rights, struggle against government oppression, aspiration for a republic, recognition of multiculturalism (18 nationalities involved), and more. Chiefly applause. There was of course debate about ‘the exact meaning of Eureka’, a little disparagement of it, and reminders not only of ‘what Eureka started’ but also of ‘what we still haven’t finished’. Eureka is now prominent among the few events in Australia’s history that have steadily grown in significance from local occurrence to increasing national celebration. As Ballarat historian Anne Beggs Sunter puts it, ‘Eureka is the Magic Pudding of Australian history: everyone wants a piece of it yet it always grows back temptingly and, as the 150th Anniversary has shown, it’s now plumper and more appetising than ever’.

How Eureka’s reform impulse was blunted

So many gains flowed from the Eureka rebellion that a slowing was sure to set in. The plethora of reforms in the three years following Eureka brought satisfaction enough to many who, in every society, find political activism an irksome diversion from making a living and enjoying the leisure time left over. Victoria encouraged them by providing three decades of relative prosperity after the economic downturn that had marked 1854-55. As a *Bulletin* writer put it in the 1880s:

The men were strong whom Lalor led
Their sons may not be weaker
But smoother paths in life they tread
And half forget Eureka”
Conservative political forces too were encouraged by rising prosperity. They had been compelled to give way on many issues by the popular upsurge of digger and urban radical feeling, but from 1858 they began to counter-attack with increasing confidence, using many stratagems but especially their power in the Legislative Council, the upper house of the new Parliament which had opened uncertainly in November 1856. From this privileged vantage point they were able – as the ‘House of review’ – to block or delay reform bills sent up by the much more representative Legislative Assembly. They were largely successful, for example, in beating back most of the determined attempts to open the squatters’ vast pastoral stations to ‘selectors’ (farmers).

At the same time, the right-to-vote achieved in 1857 was creating the impression among many voters that this was democracy achieved. No, warned radical democrats, the vote is only a beginning. But the message was little heeded, not least because the performance of the new MPs was often so inept or so self-serving as to disenchant voters with both politics and what they thought to be democracy.

Still, the democratic ideal persisted in some minds. The question What is democracy? was revived strongly in the late 1880s and early 1890s when depression set in and with it unemployment, social distress, class warfare, and state power used against dissent (largely trade union dissent). The democratic hopes stirred by Eureka were remembered, as was the strength of the direct democracy practised by the Ballarat diggers at their ‘monster meetings’… What had gone wrong with the very different representative democracy of the new Parliament? Was it indeed democracy? So many questions were aired: What were those ‘rights’ the Stockaders vowed to defend? How secure are they? Can Parliament be made more responsible to the people? Do parties wield power responsibly? Does wealth exert too much power over MPs and parties?… The questions have a modern ring.

Endnotes

5. The Age, 7 December 1854.
7. T. McCombie, The history of the colony of Victoria from its settlement to the death of Sir Charles Hotham, Sands and Kenny, Melbourne, 1858, pp. 282-85. For more on Foster’s resignation see my article in the Special Eureka Supplement of Historical Studies of Australian and New Zealand, December 1954.
10. Ibid., p. 380.
11. The Age, 3 December 2004. Blainey also draws attention to the importance of the ‘mass meetings’ of Ballarat preceding the Eureka appeal to arms.
12. The class composition on the diggings has long been disputed. Who were ‘the diggers’? Attempts have been made to type them; for example, as ‘small businessmen’ or ‘middle class’ or ‘workers’. In their backgrounds they were a mixed lot and most of them must have come from the middle and working classes though with at least the means to sustain the long voyage to Australia and the longer period away from income-earning. There was no fixity of class about them – after all, they were transients and driven by fear of a failure that would send them back to subservience to someone with capital enough to employ them. At Ballarat, the depth of the best gold lode prompted a trend away from individual fossicking to ‘partnering’ by up to a dozen men to share the heavy work of perhaps six months of digging and timbering a shaft down to 180 feet. This trend became strong in the second half of the 1850s, with the partners even becoming ‘working-shareholders’ in legal companies. Nevertheless it is certain that in 1854 the diggers were mostly individuals or partners and that a trickle back to wage-work was increasing along with the trend to working-shareholder companies.
15. See, for example, many references in the collections, journals, newspapers, creative literature, etc. detailed in ‘Bibliography of Eureka’ in the Special Eureka Supplement of Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand, December 1954, by R.D. Walshe.
20. Russel Ward handed me these lines when we met while researching in Sydney’s Mitchell Library in 1953; I believe I’ve remembered them accurately, but have lost the reference.
Different worlds, different lives: labour history approaches to histories of the military

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In the introduction to his examination of the 1st Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during World War I, Dale Blair he felt obliged to note that his book, Dinkum Diggers, ‘does not cast itself as a military history’. Similarly, Eric J. Leed, in the preface to his book, No Man’s Land, felt it necessary to establish that his work ‘is not a military history’. Blair argued that ‘military history is a genre governed by its own conventions and, understandably, its focus is more often on uncovering the reasons for victory or defeat’. Joan Beaumont added that ‘Traditional military history has also been strongly empirical, theoretically unadventurous, and – literally for millennia – a masculine domain’. Instead of following in the footsteps of this genre, historians such as Blair and Leed present us with social and cultural history approaches to histories of the military, or more specifically, of people in the military. This paper argues that these approaches are both vital to an understanding of the traditional ‘military history genre’, and to a further understanding of civil society as a whole. It uses my current doctoral research, examining the impact of service in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I on working class attitudes to work and leisure, as a basis for outlining the importance of applying cultural theories to the military, and how wars, and individual military experiences, need to be understood as part of a greater social and/or life experience, with similar approaches being applied to ‘histories of the military’ as are applied to ‘histories of civil society’ and ‘histories of labour’.

Eric Leed argued that World War I provides an ideal foundation for discovering the thoughts and attitudes of society during this period as it ‘mobilized all the cultural resources of meaning available to Europeans in the first decades of the twentieth century. It allows us to see what those resources were, not as an abstract system of thought but as something which rendered experience coherent and meaningful’. In particular, the war provoked participants to write about issues that they would generally not consider putting down on paper. The archives of the State Library of New South Wales and the Australian War Memorial together hold thousands of letters and diaries written by people who were affected by war, a very large portion of these being working class people. They wrote about their own fears, their feelings, their thoughts of home; at times thinly veiling their true emotions, but at others with a sense of honesty and emotion that would generally be difficult to find in such numbers in peacetime writing. The war brought another world into the lives of these people. For soldiers, this new world was simply unimaginable, a see-to-be-believed landscape and environment. My doctoral work argues that accustomed to living in a generally understood ‘society’, this war, and the new ‘society’ it brought to soldiers, transformed their thoughts, behaviour, and their cultural representations of these deeply.

Military histories of World War I present the war as this ‘different world’, with different rules, different people, and different belief and behavioural systems where at times the killing or injuring of other human beings was approved. However, this ‘world’ conflicts greatly with the path of participant’s lives. The AIF was a volunteer force. Most men would never see active military service again. The experience of war, for most men, was thus their only experience of war. They left their homes, their loved ones, and their places of employment to experience this ‘different world’, only to have to return home again and readjust at the end of the war. Eric Leed argued that ‘Few, if any, veterans considered their war experience even comparable to their lives before or after the war. Many spoke of having inhabited two distinct worlds, of having seemed two distinct persons’. The great difficulty for historians is in understanding the part that this ‘different world’ played in the lives of these men as a whole. It stands out as distinct, completely different from all other memories, and for this reason historians have traditionally taken a distinct, completely different approach. A holiday to a foreign country is ‘different’, but the individual still largely retains their moral values and beliefs. Service in a war changes these moral values and beliefs, and men, quite simply, were not at all prepared for the difference of war. Nor too have many historians been prepared to apply the same social and cultural history approaches to the military in attempting to understand this.
Alistair Thomson’s *Anzac Memories* provides numerous examples of the effect of these differences on the lives of Australian men who enlisted. With a particular focus upon three World War I veterans – Percy Bird, Bill Langham, and Fred Farrall – Thomson demonstrates how difficult these lives became after the war as they had to deal not only with their own memory of experiences, but with wider cultural understandings, forms of commemoration, and imposed identities. In their post-war lives these three men struggled to live with the image as presented by the Anzac legend and the digger myth. They each had different social backgrounds, they each enlisted for different reasons, they each subsequently had different reactions to war and a different experience of war, and in the post-war world, they each continued to fight their own battles with themselves in attempting to understand what part the years 1914 to 1918 played in their greater lives. As easy as it may be to separate ‘war’ from ‘society’, and to write separate histories for each, when historians put these together and attempt to understand the lives of World War I soldiers, such different histories, with different approaches, only present difficulties. Men may have been heroes in the war, military histories may have praised their valiant deeds, but in society they were civilians just like everybody else. Instead of carrying a rifle and wearing a military uniform, they were asked to carry tools and wear overalls. At least, such was the situation for many working class men.

These working-class men have also largely been under-represented in general histories of World War I. Military histories have tended to view the First AIF as a homogenous whole, seemingly sharing identical outlooks on life, with similar attitudes and characteristics, class backgrounds and religions. C.E.W. Bean’s fostering of the Anzac legend remembers the AIF as egalitarian and classless. Dale Blair’s *Dinkum Diggers* convincingly argues otherwise. Military histories are focused upon the camaraderie of men in combat, and how this brought them through battles. Social and cultural history approaches consider instead the un-heroic nature of these relationships, the ‘society’ of war, how they were represented in letters and diaries, and essentially, how men lived ‘life’ in this environment of war.

Reading into the Anzac legend one would believe that as soon as these men enlisted, put on a uniform, and became soldiers, their pre-war differences were forgotten or ignored. By no means though were these social differences insignificant; catholic and protestant, working class and middle class, regional and metropolitan. John McQuilton noted Michael McKernan’s argument that ‘the war in rural Australia was a different war’. People in Australian society lived in very different social environments. Labour historians examine the working class as in a relationship with, or against, the middle class. It must be realised that they were under very different pressures to enlist. It is also understandable that these different motivations may also have led to different expectations of, and subsequently different reactions to, combat and war. The social and cultural history approaches to histories of the military seek to identify differences amongst the AIF. It seeks to question how the experiences of men in the AIF were different, instead of grouping all experiences under the banner headings of ‘Anzac’ or ‘digger’.

Whilst the homogenous image of the AIF suits the ‘combat based’ style of military history, it does not assist in understanding experiences of war as part of a ‘life experience’. In Bill Gammage’s *The Broken Years* the 64 per cent of the AIF who were tradesmen or labourers were represented by only 46.4 per cent of Gammage’s diary and letter writers. On the other hand, the 12.1 per cent of the AIF who had professional or clerical observations made up 36 per cent of Gammage’s diary and letter writers. Dale Blair similarly noted the inaccurate representation of his diary and letter writers in *Dinkum Diggers* with ‘other ranks’ making up only 26 per cent of chroniclers, compared to 31.2 per cent who were Officers and 41.6 per cent who were NCOs. Blair argued that it is important to understand the social background of these chroniclers, as rather than being an egalitarian army, as has been supported by historians since World War I, the attitudes between officers and their men reflected similar class divisions that had existed in Australian society. The focus of my doctoral research upon the working class attempts to make up for this under-representation and provides some insight into the different experiences of war based upon social and cultural background.

A further social difference that has largely been overlooked by historians of World War I is that of residency. John McQuilton argued in his study of north eastern Victoria during the war that ‘most of the literature [concerning Australia during the war] relies heavily on metropolitan sources, and implicit in much of this is an assumption that the war in rural Australia reflected the war in metropolitan Australia’. Whilst metropolitan sources characterised the representation of the home front, the converse was the case of men in the AIF. The typical Australian soldier, according to the Anzac legend, had the
characteristics and qualities of the Australian bushman. This was almost primarily due to C.E.W. Bean’s praise of the socialising effects of the Australian outback. In his *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* he lauded the Australian soldiers for their natural instincts. Bean argued: ‘The Australian was half a soldier before the war; indeed throughout the war, in the hottest fights on Gallipoli and in the bitterest trials of France or Palestine, the Australian soldier differed very little from the Australian who at home rides the station boundaries every week-day and sits of a Sunday round the stockyard fence’.  

The bush, the outback, or regional Australian, Bean argued, typified the Australian soldier.

It may also be argued that this image of the Australian soldier as an Anzac united the men in a common identity. In *Anzac to Amiens* Bean also argued that ‘The absence of social distinction encouraged the initiative which was the outstanding quality of Australian troops’. This ‘absence of social distinction’ had largely characterised the writing of Australian World War I history until Bill Gammage’s 1974 *The Broken Years* re-wrote Australia’s history of the war from the soldier’s perspective. Gammage suggested in *The Broken Years* the possibility of different experiences of war based upon an individuals’ social background through his identification of different occupational and religious groups in the AIF. Similarly J.N.I. Dawes and L.L. Robson’s *Citizen To Soldier* examined the different social background of soldiers, with consideration given to pre-war occupation, age, and residency. However, neither book reached any conclusions as to how this background affected the experience of war for different groups.

Whilst Bean was the first to argue that Australian soldiers had the advantage of a bush background, other forms of socialisation have largely been ignored, and in recent years even Bean’s representations have been discredited by historians. In particular Alistair Thomson argued that ‘Lack of experience or empathy for working-class life and pleasures caused Bean to project his own values upon the diggers’. Indeed, it has only been in the past 20 years, 70 to 90 years since the end of the war, that historians have again began to make the link between social background as an important factor in determining the attitudes and behaviour of soldiers.

‘Playing Soldiers’, for example, argued that individual expectations of war based upon pre-war social life had a significant impact on a soldier’s experiences of war. But to date, historians have largely been hesitant in applying broader social and cultural theories to examinations of soldiers in the military. The two remain quite distinctly separated.

Labour historians have written of the workforce in Australian civil society; but the military, as a force of workers, remains largely untouched. Bruce Scate’s review article ‘The Price of War: Labour Historians Confront Military History’ argued that labour historians are aware of the impact of World War I on Australian society and have led the new ‘war and society’ genre of military history. However, this awareness has yet to transplant into detailed systematic evaluations of the labour force in the military. The identification of the Australian soldier as a worker has only been made in passing notes and comments. Whilst labour history provides attention to workers in civil society, military history takes over in analyses of soldiers in the military. The two remain quite distinctly separated.

Dale Blair has also argued that because the tendency is for military historians to ‘examine Australian soldiers mainly in the general context of the achievements of the Australian Imperial Force, there has been little examination of the attitudes and behaviour within the smaller unit formations’. At the same time, this ‘achievement based’ style of research has largely overlooked the ‘non-combat’ time of soldiers, thus holding back research on how the attitudes and behaviours of soldiers differed based upon their pre-war socialisation. J.G. Fuller argued in *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies* that ‘Historical analyses of the British and Dominion soldiers’ experience of the Great War have concentrated attention overwhelmingly on the world of the trenches. Little attention has been paid to the roughly three-fifths of the infantryman’s service overseas spent in the rear of these lines’. Soldiers did not simply ‘switch on’ during battle, and ‘switch off’ afterwards. Military histories, as Fuller argues, need to consider time spent in combat, and time spent not in combat; time spent in the trenches, and time spent out of the trenches. Or as in the case of my research, time spent ‘at work’, and time spent ‘at leisure’. Histories of the military need not necessarily be histories of combat, of bombardments, or of great battles. Histories of the military can reveal so much more about ‘war’ and ‘society’ through understanding individual and group experiences, how their attitudes changed, and how they adjusted to suit the circumstances of war. Military histories can adopt social and cultural history approaches to understand how soldiers, as people of different social and cultural backgrounds, related to each other, how they worked together, how they spent their leisure time, and how they lived life in the environment of war.
These dual worlds – ‘war’ and ‘civil society’ – need to be understood as a continuous timeline in people’s lives. Memories from one world carried disharmoniously into the next. As Leed argued, ‘The psychic problems caused by the experience of war often lay in a profound sense of personal discontinuity…Those who continued to be troubled psychically by their war experience were troubled by the sense of having lived two lives and of being unable to resolve the contradictions between them’. Men attempted to continue their ‘civil’ lives in war, but found they were leaving their old selves behind. The need to adjust to a different lifestyle also demanded that men adjust to a different attitude, and a different sense of morality. Civil society demanded respect for other people; it enforced laws that protected the property of people. The war demanded disrespect for the enemy; it enforced laws that destroyed the property of people. Normal people, volunteers, working men, had difficulty reforming their moral values to adjust to war, and had an even greater difficulty reforming them again to re-adjust to peace.

Historians have treated civilians and soldiers during war as a dichotomy of two different types of people. The male soldier was brave, strong and masculine; the male ‘shirker’ was cowardly, weak, and feminine. Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake argue in their introduction to *Gender and War* that ‘For men wars could be deeply disturbing events, occasions on which they were challenged to prove their manhood to the world or be stigmatised as shirkers, traitors or cowards. In wars men could attain heroism, but they might also be plunged into a crisis of masculinity as they in some way or other failed to measure up to impossible standards’. Soldiers, in spite of their rifle, rank, and uniform, were still human beings. They still had social interaction, and they still carried attitudes and behaviour from their pre-war lives. As men, they were still very much influenced by images of masculinity. Carmel Shute argues that ‘In the attainment of “manhood” at Gallipoli, the Anzacs were also proclaimed to have achieved Australia’s nationhood with which that manhood had been symbolically equated since the 1890s’. Soldiering was seen as the greatest thing a man could do for his country; Martin Crotty stressed that ‘fighting for one’s country is the peak of personal achievement and the epitome of manliness’. Upon returning home this suddenly ended for the men of the AIF. For the duration of their service they had been contrasted in the press against the weak, cowardly, civilian shirkers of home. Now, in the course of disembarkation and repatriation, they were once again these ‘civilians’ that they had been compared against for years.

Whilst many military histories conclude with the end of the war, and many social histories focus on the home front, few link these pre-war, war, and post-war experiences together. Stephen Garton argues in ‘Return home: War, masculinity and repatriation’ that the images of masculinity and ‘national heroes’ developed by soldiers during the service time, was contrasted by an ‘otherness’. Garton maintains that ‘The point of contrast, of otherness, that helped define this masculine world was home, the place of women, domesticity, constrained masculinity and “the shirker – the non man”’. Soldiers spent their service time in this ‘different world’, and then were simply expected to revert back to pre-war attitudes and behaviours. Garton argues that this return resulted in either a sense of alienation from home, society, friends and family, or a sense of joy, simply to be away from the hell of war. Referring to the memoirs of an Australian soldier, Alan Tiveychocs, Garten asserts that ‘Like so many accounts by returned soldiers, private and public, it positioned home as a death of the self, a world of dreary routine and convention, of domestic responsibilities, of the burden of being a breadwinner, of a grey and dismal slide from the peak of experience to finitude’. Military histories praise the ‘peak of experience’ of these men. Social histories examine the ‘finitude’ of repatriation. But few attempt to understand how the attitudes and behaviours of these men carried over into different situations, how they were transformed, and how they influenced later belief and behavioural systems.

One common thread that binds these worlds together is the fact that people were always required to work. In Australian society during the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s, working class people either worked, or they went hungry. Enlistment in the AIF during World War I has been identified as another way in which men could provide for their families. Graham Seal takes this recognition even further, arguing that ‘The digger is not…a professional soldier. He is a temporary bearer of arms and uneasy wearer of uniforms. He is “an ordinary bloke” doing a job of work for a reasonable day’s pay. That this work was in the interests of the Empire to which Australia belonged was a commonplace of the time’. Even the name given to the Australian soldier – ‘digger’ – was directly related to the nature of their ‘work’. Bill Gammage similarly identified the soldier’s identification of service with work when he
argued that new recruits felt that they should be able to ‘leave camp after work’. But to date, labour historians have been hesitant in crossing the line to examine the ‘world of war’ from a social and cultural perspective. A vast gap appears in labour history from 1914 to 1918 when over 400,000 men left home to ‘work’ in the military. Military service, as work, has simply not been examined in depth from a labour history standpoint.

This ‘work’ is so much more than simply a means of gaining an income. As Charlie Fox has argued, ‘We derive our identity from our work. It defines our sense of ourselves’. People judge others by what work they do, and by how much they are paid. People class certain jobs as respectable, and others as not so respectable. Similarly income from work is seen as a way of identifying social standing; people who do housework (unpaid) or have a low income job are generally seen as having a low social status, whilst high income work is seen as more socially respectable, as though income or money were determinants of a person’s worth in society. As soldiers, these men were identified with a rank; this was an official notification of their ‘status’ and place within the army. For the duration of their service they were subject to life as the military commanded, they could not simply quit and walk off the job, nor could they move freely to another area in search of different work. Their day-to-day lives, what they ate, where they slept, whom they lived with, and what they did, were all under the authority of higher powers. Thus, understanding the role of ‘work’ in soldier’s lives is as integral to comprehending their experience of war as is understanding the role of ‘combat’. Understanding World War I from social and cultural perspectives is thus also essential in understanding an important period of Australia’s history.

Many Australian men, and in particular working class men, may have enlisted for this ‘work’, or specifically, for the pay received from the work. These men would have approached the war differently to those enlisting for King and Country, or for an adventure. With an attitude towards service as ‘work’, they may have been less tolerant of poor working conditions, less willing to simply ‘obey’ the commands of an officer, and perhaps more likely to form a ‘class’ amongst other men of similar rank and situation to reflect that of civil society. As ‘workers’ they may also have been more likely to resist the authority of the management, their ‘officers’, as demonstrated in such examples as the 1st Battalion’s ‘strike’, or ‘mutiny’, in 1918, and the so called ‘Battle of Sydney’, the Casula and Liverpool camps protests and ‘strikes’ of 1916. Understanding this approach to service as work may assist historians in understanding how these men, through their own actions and attitudes, actively shaped their working environment.

Graham Seal argues that amid all the rhetoric of service and duty, the Australian soldier was being paid to do a job, and he had ‘a fierce lust to accomplish the job he had been set’. This is another important distinction from the soldier who enlisted for ‘King and Country’; for the attitude towards service as a job, rather than as service, may have attached a greater sense of individuality and personal empowerment. To be in the service of another man suggests subservience, submission, and loss of freedom. To be doing a job under the orders of another man suggests only a temporary subservience, an agreement of sorts in exchange for payment, where both parties supposedly profit.

The tendency of historians to treat men in the armed forces as ‘soldiers’, rather than as these ‘men doing a job’ has significantly influenced the nature of historical studies, the approach they take, and the questions that are asked. These have largely been clouded by attempts to portray the soldier as a soldier with all its preconceptions, and not as a human being in a military uniform. By adopting labour history approaches to these men, and their experiences, historians can see through this clouding of uniform, rank, and number, discover the attitudes and behaviours which made these men ‘men’, or rather ‘human beings’, and not just soldiers, and in the process uncover new areas of investigation. To do as Fuller has done, and remove combat as the sole focus in examinations of soldiers at war, is one of the objectives of this approach. For as Fuller argues, ‘From all points of view, it is clear that the soldiers’ experience cannot be understood without a knowledge of time behind the lines as well as time in the trenches’. Indeed it may be argued that the soldiers’ experience cannot be understood without knowledge of their life before the war, as well as during.

This ‘time behind the lines’, and in particular ‘leisure time’, is another area that has largely been overlooked, or at least, underemphasised, by military histories. With a focus upon ‘how the war was won’, it is understandable that what happened behind the lines may be of little importance.
However, in understanding ‘how the war affected people’, and indeed ‘how the war affected Australian society’, it is important to understand this ‘non-combat’, and indeed ‘non-work’ time. Brian Stoddart argues that ‘Most accounts of Australian leisure reflect the view that it occupies a “privileged space into which we can escape from real life”’. 51 Within the confines of the military, and in the environment of war, these men somehow managed to escape from the ‘unreal life’ of war, to find some ‘real’ connection with the pre-war lives through leisure.

Karl Marx argued in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts that ‘the labourer regards the maintenance of his individual existence as the aim of his activity; his actual labours serve only as a means to this end. He thus activates his life to acquire the means of life’. 52 People essentially work to live. But with the military history focus largely being upon ‘combat’, this choice of this ‘life’ has remained obscure. Soldiers were ordered to work, but they decided what leisure activities they would undertake. Understanding how these working class men chose to spend their leisure time is thus also of vital importance in understanding their experience of war as a whole. It reveals how the nature of work, the hours spent at work, or the danger involved, could affect the nature of this leisure time.

Joan Beaumont argues that ‘What Australian military history needs is an integration of the various approaches to war. Where, for example, are the studies of Australia in the two world wars that are comparable to Trevor Wilson’s The Myriad Faces of War in its integration of the home and the battle fronts?’ 53 Peter Cochrane’s Australian’s At War is perhaps one optimistic answer to Beaumont’s query with its combination of social, cultural, and military history. 54 Approaches to histories of the military such as this provide us with a deeper understanding of the Australian soldier’s experience in World War I and the impact of this service time on their lives as a whole. Beyond this, applying social theories and labour history approaches unites military, social, cultural, and labour history and provides constancy between the worlds of war and peace. They followed on from each other in terms of time, they should also do so in the writing of history, and in the approaches taken. Soldiers, and indeed Australian society, had a pre-war and a post-war life that World War I interrupted. More than just an interruption though, World War I acted as a watershed not only in these men’s lives, but also in the history of Australian society. If we are to truly understand its significance, we need to place the years 1914-18 between those of 1913 and 1919, and not treat them so differently.

Endnotes

5. Leed, No Man’s Land, p. x.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
8. Thomson provides a brief examination of the post-war working lives of these three men in ibid., pp. 205-16.
9. As noted by J. McQuilton, ‘Enlistment for the First World War in rural Australia: the case of north-eastern Victoria, 1914-1918’, Journal of the Australian War Memorial, 33, 2000, http://www.awm.gov.au/journal/j33/mcquilton.htm, paragraph [13]. McQuilton notes that whilst 37 per cent of soldiers were labourers, they were represented by only 22 per cent of L.L. Robson’s sources, and only 30 per cent of Bill Gammage’s sources.
10. See, for example, Blair, Dinkum Diggers, p. 3.
15. See, for example, ibid., pp. 31-50.
19. Ibid., pp. 37-68.

23. Gammage, *The Broken Years*, see for example p.310 for his comparison of the social background of men in the A.I.F.


25. See, for example, Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, pp. 46-72, esp. p. 52.


39. See, for example, Dawes and Robson, *Citizen To Soldier*, p.14.


43. Richard White examines this is some detail in White, ‘Motives for joining up’.

44. As argued by Blair, *Dinkum Diggers*, p. 38.


Since the election of the Howard government in 1996, industry policy has been used by the government as a tool for attempting to initiate industrial relations reform in the automotive sector. This marked a major departure from the positions of previous governments, who despite undertaking significant structural reform of the automotive sector, rarely sought to intervene in its industrial relations systems. However, in seeking to use automotive industry policy as a way of reforming industrial relations, the Coalition has largely been unsuccessful. This paper will look at one particular attempt by the federal government to initiate workplace reform through automotive industry policy, that centring on the Productivity Commission’s 2002 Review of Automotive Assistance. Its objectives are twofold: firstly, to attempt to explain why the government sought to use automotive industry policy as a way of reforming industrial relations in the sector; and secondly, to attempt to comprehend the reasons for the government’s relative failure. Theories of the state can generate some understanding for these developments. However, they cannot be understood without reference to the automotive sector’s development and the historical patterns of state-capital-labour relations in the sector. This paper will be structured in the following manner: firstly, the ways in which the federal government in 2002 sought to influence automotive industrial relations through industry policy and the outcomes of this attempt will be discussed. Secondly, as the themes of industry policy and industrial relations are central to this paper, an overview will be given of the role of the state in the development of the automotive sector and how this shaped patterns of industrial relations. Thirdly, an historical overview of automotive industry policy will be provided as context for the government’s approach in 2002. Particular attention will be given to the policies of the Hawke and Keating governments. This will help to inform the fourth and final section of this paper, which will focus on the reasons for the failure by the federal government to undertake workplace reform through automotive industry in 2002.

The Productivity Commission’s 2002 Review of Automotive Assistance: linking workplace reform to industry assistance

Since 1996, the Coalition government has adopted a starkly different approach to automotive industry policy than its predecessors. As part of its efforts to achieve widespread industrial relations reform, focused on reducing the role of ‘third parties’ and promoting labour market decentralisation, automotive industry policy has become more focused on workplace issues. Despite governing during a period of economic prosperity, the Howard government has largely been unsuccessful in its attempts to restructure the automotive industry. The two themes of workplace reform and the absence of tripartite consultation mark a point of difference between the Coalition’s approach to automotive industry policy and those of Labor governments between 1983 and 1996. The Productivity Commission (the Commission) has overseen two inquiries into government assistance to the automotive industry since 1996. The Commission has been used to target industrial relations reform in specific sectors, because according to Howard, “our labour market institutions have proven incapable of making the necessary adjustments in response to the pressures of structural change”.1 The federal government sought to pursue industrial relations reform through the Commission’s 1997 Automotive Industry inquiry.2 However, more significant issues arose out of this inquiry relating to levels of tariff protection, which saw major differences of opinion within the federal cabinet and the Industry Commission, and also hostile opposition from the Coalition Victorian and South Australian state governments, automotive manufacturers and trade unions towards the federal government. This had the effect of essentially deprioritising industrial relations as a desired area of reform. However, in the Productivity Commission’s 2002 Review of Automotive Assistance, industrial relations was one of, if not the prominent areas targeted for reform.

On 17 June 2002, the federal Minister for Industry, Ian Macfarlane, announced that the Howard government was contemplating making assistance to the automotive industry contingent upon workplace reform.
Macfarlane said, ‘it appears the government will have to seriously consider linking future industry assistance to industrial relations reform – if for no other reason – to ensure we still have Australian car manufacturers in 10 years time’. His remarks followed a Productivity Commission report released earlier that month that identified industrial relations arrangements as an impediment to the productivity of the automotive industry. The Productivity Commission’s interim report arising out of the inquiry floated various industrial relations areas for reform, including the structure of unions in the sector. The Commission said, ‘either an enterprise union system or a single union covering all workers in the industry could provide much greater coincidence of interests than the current largely occupation-based union structure’. Among other recommendations in the position paper, the Commission raised the possibility of using ‘external pressure’ to facilitate industrial relations change, saying that government assistance to the industry could be ‘made contingent on the achievement of specified workplace outcomes’.

The federal government seized upon this suggestion as a way of improving workplace arrangements. In the subsequent months, however, the government was spectacularly unsuccessful in implementing changes to automotive industrial relations due not only to opposition from trade unions, but also from the automotive manufacturers. The four major automotive producers issued a stern rebuke, saying that the government was at risk of politicising the inquiry. The Australian Industry Group made representations to the federal government on behalf of the automotive industry, reportedly telling the Minister for Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott, to ‘tone it down’ over suggestions of tying workplace reform to government assistance, because ‘industrial relations and tariffs were two separate issues’. This view had been supported by Holden and Mitsubishi in their supplementary submissions to the Commission inquiry as well the South Australian government, which argued, ‘it would also be an inappropriate use of industry assistance to achieve policy outcomes for which it is not designed’. The Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union were also hostile to the proposals, with National Secretary Doug Cameron warning the government that ‘there will be a massive industrial confrontation if you try to disarm workers’.

While raising various industrial relations matters as being in need of improvement in its final report, the Commission ultimately backed away from its original position that government assistance be made contingent on workplace reform. Nonetheless, in the following months, the federal government continued to push the issue. Macfarlane said in September regarding industrial relations reform being tied to assistance that ‘I’m not ruling it out’. Despite their reservations about such an initiative, the automotive manufacturers eventually agreed to be more ‘hardline’ in their relations with unions. According to a report in The Australian:

In meetings with John Howard and senior ministers … the bosses of Ford, Holden, Toyota and Mitsubishi said they would not stand idly by if unions ran illegal industrial campaigns. They told ministers there were court actions outstanding from earlier disputes that would be re-activated in the event of militant action.

This assurance was good enough for the government, which after threatening to do otherwise, did not end up linking government assistance to workplace reform. It was able to successfully pressure the four assemblers to agree to establish a $1 million ‘fighting fund’ to take on unions that initiated illegal industrial action in court. However, despite this concession from employers, the government was not able to achieve structural workplace reform in the automotive sector through industry policy. Before discussing the reasons for this failure, this paper will attempt to analyse why the government sought to use industry policy as a tool for attempting to initiate workplace reform in the first place by examining how the role of the state in the development of the automotive sector has shaped its systems of industrial relations.

**The development of the Australian automotive sector in shaping its industrial relations systems**

The increased emphasis of automotive industry policy on workplace reform cannot be understood without reference to the longstanding relationship between automotive industry protection and industrial relations. The interconnection between protection and centralised wage regulation, two components of what has been termed ‘New Protection’ or the ‘Australian Settlement’, formed the core of the cross-class compromise that existed between labour and capital for much of the twentieth century.
The sheltering of local automotive manufacturing from external pressures traditionally led to high wages and generous working conditions for employees in the sector in comparison with those in other industries. The sector was also characterised by high levels of unionisation, with trade unions in the sector being organised according to occupations and trades, resulting in a proliferation in the number of unions covering automotive industry workers. While tariff protection of the automotive sector has been significantly weakened in previous decades, its legacy is still evident insofar as industrial relations are concerned.

Wages for automotive workers are still high in comparison with those in other sectors of manufacturing, and the sector is characterised by high levels of union membership. Furthermore, with the exception of increasing flexibility around staffing arrangements, there has been little significant change in automotive assembly industrial relations over the past decade.\(^\text{15}\) This can partly be attributed to the residue of protection and the continuing strength of the trade unionism in the sector. The lack of flexibility and strong culture of collectivism in the automotive sector has resulted in it being targeted by the Howard government as a sector in need of workplace reform. However, before the reasons behind government’s failed attempt to structurally reform automotive industrial relations can be understood, the evolution of automotive industry policy needs to be examined.

**The interconnection of automotive protection and industrial relations**

The state has been instrumental in shaping the direction of the Australian automotive sector since its inception. As Jenny Stewart explains, ‘perhaps more than any other form of manufacturing in Australia, the passenger motor vehicle industry was the creation of governments… From the Chifley government onwards, the possession of a motor industry was held to be essential to the nation’s industrial future’.\(^\text{16}\) Specific government policies promoting the growth of manufacturing have had direct and indirect impacts upon the automotive sector. Conlon and Perkins assert that:

In many respects Australian passenger motor vehicle manufacture may be viewed as a case study in protectionism, or even a laboratory for discerning the effects of differing barriers to trade. Over nearly a century the production of vehicle components and, eventually, cars has been the subject of a greater variety of interventionist policies than the manufacture of virtually any other product in Australia.\(^\text{17}\)

An integral part of the sector’s history, therefore, is the role of the state, which through various forms of protection and industry policy was the driving force for the expansion of the industry from the mid-1920s. Hart and Richardson argue that protection of the automotive sector had been used by the state to increase the local content of motor vehicles, thus promoting the growth of other manufacturing sectors.\(^\text{18}\) Protection also reflected the status accorded to the automotive sector as being at the ‘leading edge’ of Australian manufacturing. Tariffs and other forms of government assistance were used to protect and facilitate the development of the automotive industry for much of the twentieth century. However, government intervention was never extended to the administrative affairs of automotive manufacturers, as the companies were left to their own devises in terms of their managerial strategies. Therefore, government policy in the automotive industry can be characterised as ‘macro-level protectionism’ but also ‘micro-level laissez-faire’.\(^\text{19}\)

Between the 1920s and World War II, high tariff levels were justified by the need to build new industries and to maintain those already operating.\(^\text{20}\) The low production of goods and services during the war, the desires of the federal government to expand the population and the necessity to create jobs as a result, led to the development of the automotive and other manufacturing industries, which was fostered through foreign investment protected by tariff walls.\(^\text{21}\) This arrangement was bolstered during the 1960s through the introduction local content ‘plans’, which aimed to encourage the automotive manufacturers to produce a narrow range of models with a high proportion of local content. Instead, an abundance of models were produced in low volumes, largely in the small-car market, leaving a gap in the market for overseas manufacturers to capitalise.\(^\text{22}\) Capling and Galligan claim that the local content plans ‘were an abject failure’ because they resulted in market fragmentation and significant inefficiencies for local producers.\(^\text{23}\) As Ewer et al emphasise, the structural inefficiencies of the industry had not come simply as the result of market forces but also from direct government policy.\(^\text{24}\)
The Past is Before Us

Problems with Australian manufacturing in Australia had largely been disguised by the prosperity of the post-war boom. Pressures relating to competition, adjustment and accumulation grew as the 1960s progressed and these problems became increasingly amplified with the start of the new decade. In 1973, unemployment was in steady decline, the economy was buoyant, industry was operating at almost full capacity and the international currency reserves were strong, as was the national balance payments position. However, this all soon changed with the oil crisis and the collapse of the Bretton-Woods international monetary regime, promptly bringing the long boom to an end. These factors precipitated an increase in inflation and unemployment and a decline in economic growth, leading governments throughout the developed world to become ‘progressively less comfortable with financial commitments to policy development entered into in more expansive times’.

These events exposed the structural weaknesses of the automotive sectors that had been disguised by protection. From the mid-1970s onwards, the pressures on automotive manufacturing began to exacerbate: international competition increased; the corporations that dominated emerging industries stood to gain little from industry protection; and industry lobby groups in these sectors were becoming more powerful and vocal in their opposition to government patronage of manufacturing. Furthermore, the manufacturing sector was becoming less reliable, due to sharply reduced profitability, outdated technology in many sectors and geographical fragmentation, meaning that its political sway was diminishing.

The onset of these factors had significant implications for the local automotive sector, which was now forced to compete with overseas manufacturers, especially from the newly industrialising Asian economies, who were able to produce increasingly sophisticated vehicles made with cheaper labour and cheaper overall costs. The Australian sector had to reconfigure itself simply to keep up, but was met by opposition from industry and organised labour. Also, the fact that the domestic automotive sector was not an Australian sector as such, but rather, a set of foreign-owned corporations operating in Australia further placed the onus on the federal government to take the responsibility to readjust the sector in a way that would allow it to survive and compete into the future.

With the exception of the 25 per cent across-the-board tariff cut of 1973, federal governments in the 1970s and early 1980s were reluctant to reduce the automotive sector’s reliance on protection out of fear of the potential political consequences. However, with the election of the Labor Party under Bob Hawke in 1983, Kelly argues that federal governments have initiated ‘a process of creative destruction’ on the elements of New Protection. Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments sought to restructure the automotive sector through cooperation with both employers and unions and were successful in bringing about gradual change. The analytical theme of embedded autonomy, devised by Evans, can be employed to explain the reasons for the success of the Labor governments. The notion of embedded autonomy centres on the argument that states with strong ties to particular social groups (such as employers and unions) — but not so strong so as to be captive of the interests of such groups — are more likely to gain the support needed to achieve their policy objectives.

The Passenger Motor Vehicle Plan (PMV Plan), implemented by the then federal Minister for Industry, John Button, operated between 1985 and 1992. The PMV Plan was one of a number of sectoral plans designed to wean manufacturing off protection and make it more efficient and competitive. According to Freedman and Stonecash, the main objectives of the PMV Plan were to ‘rationalise production, encourage efficiency in operation, by having fewer models produced with larger production runs for each, and to encourage modernisation of the sector’. This was done through the encouragement of major structural change in response to a decline in the performance of the industry and the closure of a number of production plants. Capling and Galligan assert that the PMV Plan was ‘based on a carrot-and-stick approach to restructuring’, with the carrots including ‘positive assistance’ measures such as industry modernisation, skill and training development, export facilitation schemes, research and development grants and programs to compensate employees who lost their jobs. The sticks, on the other hand, included a 20 per cent reduction in tariffs between 1985 and 1992 and the abolition of import quotas.

The PMV Plan was largely successful in restructuring the automotive sector to make it more competitive. One of the key reasons for this was the process of ‘bargained consensus’, whereby key sectoral stakeholders, including employers and unions, were involved in devising and implementing the PMV Plan. This was accomplished through the establishment of the Automotive Industry Authority
(AIA), which was composed of members from across the automotive sector, including representatives from the automotive manufacturers, component suppliers and unions, as well as from government departments. While its role was largely advisory, the AIA was given the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the PMV plan. According to Capling and Galligan, the AIA provided:

A unique and unprecedented forum in which conflicting interests could work together in a non-adversarial situation to undertake a frank assessment of their industry’s prospects. In many cases, unions and employers realised that it was in their mutual interest to abandon previously held positions and explore ways to achieve the survival and prosperity of their industries. This marked the genesis of an attitudinal change among unions and manufacturers alike, the prerequisite for the development of a viable manufacturing sector.

This process of ‘bargained consensus’ that was central to the PMV Plan helped the Hawke and Keating governments gain the sufficient ‘embedded autonomy’ with automotive manufacturers and unions that was needed to gain the support of for its agenda of industry restructuring. The only occasion that Labor governments sought to use automotive industry policy as a way of initiating industrial relations reform in the sector was through the Industry Commission’s 1990 Automotive Industry review. The government was indirectly able to initiate some changes to automotive industrial relations through this review, but these reforms were very minor in their scope.

As Brett explains, the dismantling of one of components of the Australian Settlement that the automotive sector was historically so reliant upon meant that the other components could also expect to be weakened. This can explain the attempts by governments since the mid-1980s to restructure the labour market and decentralise wage determination mechanisms. Insofar as industry policy is concerned, the Howard government has sought use this area of policy to intervene in areas of micro-management such as workplace relations. This can partly be seen as the result of the Coalition’s hostile attitude towards trade unionism and what it perceives to be excessive external regulation of the workplace. According to one automotive industry official, ‘where we’ve seen microeconomic reform take place and where we’ve seen the need to generate greater productivity, [industrial relations] is just another area that we need to look at’. In this sense, as automotive industry policy has evolved in its focus, the targeting of workplace issues can seen as the latest area perceived by governments as being in need of reform. However, while the relationship between industry policy and industrial relations is a longstanding one, the nature of this relationship was a contributing factor in the federal government’s inability to use automotive industry policy to undertake structural industrial relations change.

Automotive industry policy: a novel but ultimately futile avenue for workplace reform

There are various explanations for why the Howard government was unsuccessful in making government assistance to the automotive sector contingent upon workplace reform. Although it was the Productivity Commission that initially proposed linking industrial relations to assistance, it distanced itself from this – and the government’s – position in its final report. This effectively undermined the federal government’s attempts to use automotive industry policy to initiate structural workplace change. However, perhaps a more compelling argument relates to the micro-level laissez-faire tradition of government’s in regulating the industry.

As discussed above, an ‘activist’ state was crucial to the development of automotive manufacturing in the middle of the twentieth century. However, such interventionism was relegated to the macro-level, as the state largely left automotive companies to manage their own administrative affairs. This arrangement of macro-level protection and micro-level laissez faire shielded manufacturers from issues relating to competitiveness or efficiency. This prevented effectively concealed any structural problems in the sector and almost led to its demise in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As discussed above, between 1985 and 1992, Labor governments embarked upon programs of major restructuring aimed at making the automotive sector more efficient and competitive by weaning the sector off its reliance on protection. However, despite the reversal by the Hawke and Keating governments of their traditional approach of macro-level protection, the micro-level laissez faire arrangements effectively remained intact.

Nonetheless, the Howard government has sought to reverse this ‘micro-level laissez-faire’ approach to automotive industry policy. In response to the federal government’s announcement that it would seek to tie industry assistance to workplace reform, both unions and employers voiced their disapproval.
One industry executive claims that the government’s failure to realise its objectives was because ‘the industry basically weren’t going to have a bar of it… It has not been traditional to tie funding arrangements … to conditions’. This failure of the Howard government to gain support for its policies from key sectoral stakeholders, such as employers and unions, in part reflects its failure to secure sufficient ‘embedded autonomy’. Labor governments between 1983 and 1996 were able to overturn the macro-level protectionist heritage of the automotive sector by involving unions, employers and other important automotive sector actors in the process of restructuring. The Howard government, however, was not able to follow either the approach or success of the Hawke and Keating governments in reversing another historical tradition of automotive industry policy, micro-level _laissez-faire_, to initiate structural industry relations reform in the sector.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to explain why the Howard government sought to use automotive industry policy through the Productivity Commission’s 2002 *Review of Automotive Assistance* as a way of reforming industrial relations in the sector. The use of protection as a way of developing the automotive sector led to the emergence of systems of industrial relations characterised by generous wages and conditions and high levels of union membership. These legacies remain evident in automotive sector industrial relations, which can help to explain why the Howard government, with a record of hostility towards strong unions, has sought to implement workplace reform in the sector. The Howard government in 2002 was unable to use industry assistance as a tool for forcing change in automotive industrial relations. This paper has also attempted to gain an understanding of the factors behind this failure. Automotive industry policy was traditionally characterised by macro-level protectionism accompanied by micro-level _laissez-faire_. Despite the failures of this protectionist legacy becoming evident from the early 1970s, it was not until the election of the Hawke Labor government in 1983 that the tradition of macro-level protectionism was reversed. By involving key sectoral groups such as automotive manufacturers and unions, Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 were able to devise and implement a successful program for automotive restructuring. By contrast, the Howard government’s failure to gain sufficient ‘embedded autonomy’ from unions and employers meant that it was unsuccessful in overturning the micro-level _laissez-faire_ tradition of automotive industry policy by using government assistance as a tool for initiating structural change in the sector’s industrial relations systems.

**Endnotes**


34. Capling and Galligan, *Beyond the Protective State*, p. 133.


41. Interview with automotive industry official, Sydney, 16 August 2004.


43. Interview with automotive industry official, Sydney, 16 August 2004.
‘Angry disputings’ – violence, strikes and demarcation: relations between paid and unpaid firefighters in Sydney prior to 1884

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Traditional studies in labour history have concentrated on paid workers, their relationship with employers and the ways in which this relationship is shaped or governed. This paper seeks to move away from this focus and provisionally ventures into two areas beyond the mainstream of labour history: first, demarcation amongst non-unionised (paid and unpaid) labour and second, the nature of volunteer labour itself. This is in the context of the provision of nineteenth century fire services in Sydney and at that time a non-unionised industry – the first firefighters’ trade union, the Fire Brigade Employees’ Union of NSW (FBEU) did not form until 1910.

The events and tensions surrounding the organisation of fire suppression in Sydney and other NSW towns in this period raise interesting questions: What motivates volunteerism? Is volunteerism inherently good? How does the existence of volunteers in an industry affect the status and fortunes of paid workers? What are the strategies that various groups of (paid and unpaid) workers adopt in advancing their claims over the demarcation of work? This paper attempts to at least partially answer these questions as well as providing an overview of the relations between different types of firefighters, complete with the excesses of hyperbole, violence and one-upmanship that characterised the relationship.

In the 1850s in Sydney, two very different types of firefighter emerged: the partially paid (part time) firefighters employed by the Insurance Companies Fire Brigade (ICFB) and volunteer firefighters organised into volunteer fire companies. The ICFB was formed in 1850 out of self interest by colonial and British insurance companies to reduce insurance losses and was subject to rigid control by a Superintendent. It was influenced by British methods of organisation. The volunteer fire companies on the other hand were formed (the first in 1854) by interested citizens interested in protecting their local assets from fire. These brigades were modelled on US style brigades, were formed at public meetings and were democratic organisations that elected their leadership and voted on all major decisions.

These divergent groups of firefighters and their respective organisations soon became rivals. It started over arguments over their relative efficiencies and issues of independence from insurance company financial support and therefore control. The volunteers differentiated themselves from the paid firefighters by emphasising their volunteerist nature. Thus the employment status of the volunteer, as an unpaid worker was promoted as a civic virtue exercised by ‘independent tradesmen’ in their professions, to certainly be traded on in any dispute between paid and unpaid labour in the industry. They contrasted their status, with that of the ICFB superintendent who was deemed ‘merely a paid servant’ of the insurance companies. The former group protected life and the community; the latter were deemed to act in the interests of property alone. Disputes also flared about the techniques employed by both paid and unpaid labour: reflecting tensions (that would be ongoing) between the volunteer ethos of ‘playing water’ on fires and the ICFB’s aim of minimising water damage and thereby maximising the ability to salvage property. For the volunteer fire companies, success was measured by the extinguishment of fire, for the ICFB (particularly the salvage brigade) it was about minimising property damage.

The rivalry between paid and unpaid labour (and within the ranks of the unpaid workforce as well) led to various coalitions between volunteer brigades and the ICFB that would vary over time. The ICFB cultivated alliances with certain brigades in order to regulate response on the fire ground. In return they provided subsidies and equipment.

In 1870, these tensions impacted on the fireground. At a fire in Bridge Street in January, a physical confrontation occurred between paid and unpaid labour. One account described how the ICFB Superintendent (Bown) had threatened to throw a bucket at a volunteer leader’s head, that that same volunteer had burning embers thrown at him and that ICFB firemen rushed at him to wrest control of the hose.
Bown on the other hand accused the volunteers of zealotry – which caused excessive water damage and placed ICFB men at risk. In January 1872 these tensions intensified with a series of altercations on the fireground, primarily over the possession of fire plugs (hydrants). This competition over plugs stemmed from the status of applying first water on the fire and from the financial rewards that brigades received for being the first in attendance. The behaviour of the Brigades led to acrimonious public debates and encouraged discussion on the reorganisation of fire protection in Sydney, culminating in the introduction of the Fire Brigades Bill in November 1872. This Bill failed to be ratified in large part due to virulent opposition from many volunteer brigades. Similar legislative attempts prior to the 1884 Fire Brigades Act met a similar fate.

Urban growth, large-scale urban conflagrations and to a lesser extent, dissent within volunteer ranks led to the development of new volunteer fire brigades in the mid-1870s. A number of the existing volunteer brigades were instrumental in their formation. Bown, the ICFB Superintendent on the other hand was calling for an organised and larger professional fire brigade. Some of the newly formed brigades were formed by workers attached to particular work places that would protect their workplaces and their adjacent local communities (ie. Mort’s Dock and Engineering Works brigade (Balmain) and later Hudson Brothers brigade (Redfern)). At the same time, efforts were again made to pass a new Fire Brigades Bill, with a Superintendent appointed by the insurance companies. Such an approach was anathema to the volunteers, who saw it as a threat to their self management, with one volunteer leader stating that he ‘would rather burn all the plant belonging to his company than work under an officer appointed as the bill proposed’.

In 1879, after initial attempts at building unity across all brigades (including the ICFB) a major schism developed between them, which led to the formation of two rival associations of firemen. By August 1880, the United Volunteer Fire Brigades of the City of Sydney and Suburbs (UVFB) had formed and appointed their own Superintendent-General, E. Oram. Instigated by No.3 Co., it comprised of No.1, No.2, No.3, Woolalaha, Glebe, Hudson’s (Redfern) and Mount Lachlan Brigades. Around the same time, the Metropolitan Associated Fire Brigades (MAFB) formed and consisted of the ICFB, City, Nth Sydney, St Leonards, Paddington, Newtown, Waterlo & Alexandria, Surry Hills, Hook and Ladder and Fire Escape Brigades. The MAFB organised Sydney into districts with a number of volunteer firemen being made District Superintendents, with Bown as the Head Superintendent. In November 1880 the schism widened, after a violent incident between members of both groups. In an effort to be first to a fire at Randwick, No. 1. Volunteer Fire Company tried to block the City Brigade’s path whilst jostling for first position. When the latter brigade passed, a member of No.1 Co. held down the brake of City’s engine, leading to a brawl between the companies. This incident (and a similar one involving a dispute over suction hoses and dams with No.3 Co.) led to near universal criticism of ‘faction fights’ and ‘overheated competition’ between Brigades.

The rivalry soon took on a spatial dimension. In November 1880 the Surry Hills Fire Co. formed and was enrolling members. On the evening of 7 December, a further meeting of the Brigade was held, where it received broad support and new members. However on the very same night, the UVFB organised a meeting for the purpose of forming a volunteer fire brigade to operate out of Surry Hills. The UVFB and the MAFB thus started to deliberately organise competing brigades in the same areas: the contest over spaces of control and therefore the demarcation of work intensified. The interaction at Surry Hills was not just about control on the fireground and the broader competition between the UVFB and the MAFB. It was also about financial dominance: the rival brigades garnered subscriptions from the Surry Hills community. Competition also had a temporal aspect: in December 1880, the press was critical of brigades not ringing the bell so as to inform other brigades of fires until they were well on the way to the fire. This practice presumably was a method of maximising status on the fireground (as well as payments under the Sydney Building Act).

In early 1881 another Bill was introduced. The UVFB lobbied heavily to for it to be amended to include volunteer representation on the new Board, which was supported by the very pro-volunteer Premier Parkes. By this time the UVFB publicly portrayed itself as the representative of volunteers throughout the State and for the first time, attempted to place an economic value on their labour, being 1s 6d for each hour each member spent at a fire. The latter half of the year saw increased disputation and assaults both within the UVFB and between it and MAFB Brigades. A series of court cases made the press involving
inter-brigade assaults, with one incident being characterised by the throwing of bricks and iron. Squabbling continued over attempts to monopolise the fireground and over the clash of techniques used by the various brigades. Events involving fire brigades, such as annual picnics and engine ‘christenings’ also became increasingly factionalised events. The UVFB organised an Intercolonial Fire Brigades Demonstration (and Grand Torchlight Procession) with brigades from across Sydney, NSW and Victoria invited to attend. It attracted a large number of local and interstate firemen who, as with all demonstrations, were involved in various events that tested their endurance and firemanship. Parkes and other known supporters of the volunteers attended and celebrated the volunteer nature of firefighting. The MAFB Brigades (which now included Wagga Wagga, West Maitland and Windsor) expressly boycotted it.

A series of incidents at fires in 1882 fuelled both division and calls for legislative action. The Goon Ping fire in May 1882 in particular emphasised the need for change. Fireground operations were marred by a ‘general melee’ that involved assaults and bad language. It received significant press coverage and led yet again to a general call for centralised control of all brigades on the fireground. It also put into contrast the varying techniques of the ICFB vs. the UVFB volunteers: whilst the former used water judiciously so as to minimise water damage to property, the excitement of ‘quenching’ the fire for the latter group often led to spectacular losses. In the case of the Goon Ping fire, the original fire damage was £10, but the water damage ran into hundreds of pounds. Within weeks, the utility of volunteers was again in question: over 250 Sydney volunteers participated in the Intercolonial Fire Brigades Demonstration in Melbourne thereby raising questions as to their motives (protection or pageantry) and their very necessity. The *Sydney Morning Herald* identified volunteerism as the heart of the problem:

> The distinction between paid and unpaid labour is obvious to all: The fact that 250 firemen can leave Sydney at one time of their own accord to attend a demonstration in a neighbouring colony, is in itself sufficient evidence of the ineffectiveness of our fire brigade system. It noted that the Insurance Brigades did not have such liberty.6

The volunteers countered by claiming a right to ‘more sympathy and consideration’ than ‘mere public servants’.7

Subsequent fires in 1882 did little to quell the situation. A fire at Borthwicks (Oil and Colour Merchant) at Redfern in August led to further assaults and the wilful cutting of an ICFB hose on the fireground. The Secretary of No.4 Co. was convicted for the latter offence (which was overturned on appeal). The *Sydney Morning Herald* went further and called for the abolition of the volunteer system:

> Rather than have this clashing between the two classes perpetuated, it would be better to have the Volunteer Brigades abolished and a body of paid men appointed and made amenable to discipline.8

Within weeks another round of claims and counterclaims of violence (one involving a crowbar) between paid and unpaid labour emerged after the Cook Bros (Ultimo) fire, with access to the water supply again being the cause of the fracas. Whilst there were no reports of conflict, the total destruction by fire in September of Sydney’s most beautiful and extensive building, the Garden Palace, only heightened concerns over the administration of firefighting operations. A subsequent fire, which led to the death of a Mrs Wright in George Street, escalated the tensions, with the UVFB and MAFB brigades fighting over placement of ladders at the fire and as a consequence who was liable for her death. This latter event boiled over into a very public and acrimonious division between the UVFB and MAFB brigades. Yet another doomed Bill was again introduced into the parliament.

The fall of the Parkes Government lead to the Bill being redrafted and submitted to the parliament by the Stuart Government in early 1883. The new Bill proposed the establishment of a Board managed by representatives of the Government, insurance companies and local government. It promised the formation of a permanent paid fire brigade managed by the Board and allowed for the registration of volunteer fire brigades, which would give the latter access to subsidies and required their compliance with Board regulations. The Bill was seen as a snub to the volunteer fireman and a loss of ‘voice in the management of his Company’.9 Throughout February and subsequent months, the UVFB and its supporters lobbied hard for representation on the Board itself. The *Daily Telegraph* thought the situation so chaotic, that they proposed the importation of a complete company of firefighters from the United States.10 Stuart’s Bill predictably failed to be passed prior to the end of the parliamentary term and was withdrawn in late April 1883.
A fire shortly thereafter at Coles Stationery Shop, enervated the debate over the utility of volunteer labour in firefighting operations. Whilst somewhat disputed, volunteer firemen on scene were accused of causing extensive and unnecessary water damage, despite requests by the proprietor not to do so. Their actions were attributed to overzealousness and sharply criticised by the press. Further public attacks, including accusations of looting at fires led to a threat by UVFB volunteer brigades to disband. The MAFB brigades openly rejected such a course. At the same time, the insurance companies also threatened to disband the ICFB by the end of the year because of the lack of a Fire Brigades Bill and the ongoing existence of an uncontrolled volunteer sector. Both unpaid labour and the employers of paid labour threatened to withdraw from firefighting operations in the absence of a more ordered system. The cry for a Fire Brigades Act was near universal. Soon after, the Sydney Corporation changed the way payments were made under the Sydney Building Act to reward the first on scene, rather than the first to put water on the fire, with the hope of reducing tensions on the fireground.

More radical change occurred in October 1883 when Premier Stuart introduced yet another Bill. It replicated the previous Bill, except that it also provided for volunteer fire brigade representation on the Fire Brigades Board. The rationale provided by Stuart for such representation was that volunteers ‘were giving their time, which was their capital, in the extinguishing of fires, and that on this account they had just as much right to be represented at the board as capital in other forms’. Other parliamentarians unsuccessfully argued that the permanent paid firefighters should also sit on the Board, representing a very early form of industrial democracy. Amid debates over who would be the new Superintendent (the MAFB and insurance companies proposed Bown whilst the UVFB and its supporters advocated for the appointment of leading UVFB official, W.S. Kelly) the Bill was passed and an officer from the London Fire Brigade William Bear was appointed. The selection of the volunteers’ representative on the Board was also controversial. The meeting convened to develop an election process was, according to the MAFB, illegal due to the irregular and riotous behaviour of the UVFB delegates. Notwithstanding representations by the MAFB, a vote proceeded at a subsequent meeting with the UVFB’s representative (Torning) being narrowly elected in contentious circumstances.

Even before the commencement of the Board’s operations, it faced its first ‘strike’ – that of its unpaid labour force in the volunteer brigades. In early June 1884, the UVFB instructed its affiliated brigades not to respond anywhere until the newly formed Board had agreed to appoint a UVFB nominee to superintend fires in the absence of the Acting Superintendent (Bown) and/or his Assistant Superintendent (Dawson). They were incensed that they would be subject to control on the fireground by other permanent (ie. paid) men. The Volunteer Fire Brigades Association (VFBA) (ex MAFB) and its affiliates totally disassociated itself from the UVFB’s actions and announced that they would turn out as normal. A number of the UVFB affiliates broke ranks, including Pyrmont / Ultimo VFB and No.4 Co. (South Sydney), with the latter defecting to the VFBA. On 20 June, the UVFB’s Superintendent Kelly instructed all UVFB suburban stations to turn out in their respective areas, seemingly signalling the end of the strike. The Fire Brigades Board was gazetted on 25 June 1884 and commenced operation of its permanent paid force, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade on 1 July 1884. Aside from Bear, 15 appointees were ex ICFB, whilst 3 were from No.1 Volunteer Fire Co and 1 from the London Fire Brigade. Further appointments were made in August from the ranks of the Royal Navy and the St Leonards, Waterloo, Balmain and Pyrmont volunteer brigades.

The passing of the Fire Brigades Act and the appointment of Superintendent Bear kick-started the demise of unpaid urban firefighters in Sydney. Bear immediately sought regulations to stringently govern all firefighters. A number of volunteer brigades soon dissolved and Bear continued to express reservations over the usefulness of volunteer labour in firefighting. Meanwhile, the Board’s first Chairman Bown expressed similar concerns on behalf of the Board.

In 1901, the Board abolished all volunteer brigades and unpaid labour in Sydney. It instigated a system, whereby partially paid firemen received either a retainer and payment for each fire call or just payment for each fire call. These firefighters curiously continued to be labelled volunteers. In 1910, the newly created Board of Fire Commissioners was given state-wide jurisdiction and thus ensured a ‘monopoly’ of control by a single organisation managed by career firefighters in all but small villages and rural areas. It is ironic that the rapid post-WWII growth of the urban / bushland interface, has again led to considerable conflict and ill-feeling between paid and unpaid firefighters in urban areas. The extent to
which this has occurred is evidenced by the NSW Government enacting the *Fire Services Joint Standing Committee Act 1998*, which aimed to regulate the interrelationship between paid and unpaid labour and their respective agents. (ie. the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW Rural Fire Service Association, the NSW Fire Brigades and the NSW Fire Brigade Employees’ Union).

Volunteerism in late nineteenth century Sydney fire services was driven in two ways. Volunteer fire brigades were created out of necessity so as to protect citizens and their properties from the ravages of fire. However, their ongoing development and attraction for many participants lay in the status that was attached to such endeavours and the outlet for competitive behaviours that were afforded by the (lack of) organisation of fire services. This competition manifested itself in the form of racing to the fireground to be first on scene, via large public demonstrations, processions and elaborate social events that often involved excessive pageantry. The debates in the Press over the competition (indeed zealotry) of the times threw into sharp relief the fundamental differences between paid and unpaid labour. Besides the obvious difference that volunteers are not remunerated, volunteers are also free of the restraints of control that encumber paid labour. Unbridled competition between brigades and the desire to be given the honour of ‘first water’ (whatever the cost) made coordination and control on the fireground imperative. Yet, whilst needed, such command and control could not be demanded from volunteers. The paid firefighters on the other hand, were subject to the obvious strictures of paid labour, and were increasingly encumbered by the ‘scientific principles’ being introduced into an developing paramilitary style brigade.

In the conflict between paid and unpaid labour, volunteers traded on the selfless nature of their work, contrasting themselves with the ‘mere servants’ of the insurance companies. They saw themselves as a united band of citizens protecting their communities. Paid firefighters on the other hand, relied on their image as professional and disciplined, ever-ready to systematically protect life and property throughout Sydney. The employment relationships strictures of discipline and control proved to be very useful in promoting paid labour after the conflicts on the fireground and the near universal criticism of existing systems of fire protection. Put simply, the volunteers supplied labour without financial cost to the community, but without the inherent reliability and discipline of paid labour.

**Endnotes**

1. *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 8 January 1872.
2. This is an extended abstract of a paper to be delivered at the Ninth National Labour History Conference to be held at the University of Sydney between 30 June and 2 July 2005. It is not to be reproduced either in part or whole without the permission of the author.
3. *SMH*, 16 February 1867.
8. *SMH* 17 August 1882.
11. *DT*, 26 June 1883; *SMH* 12 October 1883.
## Index of Authors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Name</th>
<th>Part Number</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K. Kevyne Baar</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikola Balnave</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Barton</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Bennett</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Bolland</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Booth</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley Bowden</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy Brigden</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verity Burgmann</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien Cahill</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowan Cahill</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Cain</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Cockfield</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenore Colheart</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Corcoran</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew Cottle</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana Covell</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana Covell</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne Cutercher</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine Darnell</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine de Matos</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Deery</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Deverall</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Dyrenfurth</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Elder</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradon Ellem</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Francis</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Frank</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winfried R. Garscha</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith Gildart</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Gould</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>319, 321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Gregson</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Hagan</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robyn Hanstock</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Harris</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Heam</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindy Henderson</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob James</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie Jerrard</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Jones</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Jordan</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Jordan</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Kealey</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Kealey</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kellett</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Kelly</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa Kerr</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Keys</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Knowles</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Laffan</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances Laneyrie</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Lang</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Leger</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Love</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Lyons</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart Macintyre</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Markery</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>391, 401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristie Martin</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia Martinez</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Milner</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rod Noble</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbie Oliver</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Ouelett</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Parenteau</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy Paterson</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Patmore</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genevieve Picot</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannie Rea</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Ritchie</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff Robinson</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Ross</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Ryan</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy Sarina</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Scott</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Shields</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie Smith</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda Strachan</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelton Stromquist</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Taffe</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Taka</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry Taylor</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle Thornton</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Walshe</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Webb</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Wells</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan Wise</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Wolfinger</td>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris F. Wright</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Wright</td>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>