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## The Hunter Valley's Eight-Hour Movement and its Connection with the First Newcastle Trades and Labour Council, 1869–1886

### Abstract

The year 1869 can be considered the time from which there was a continuous “combined” union presence in the Hunter Valley. This can be said despite the examples of the various Lodges of Miners combining (to form a miners association in the period up to 1860); the short lived Eight Hour Committee of 1862; as well as a few other cases where craft unions temporarily got together for a common purpose. At the time the Coal Miners were the best organised union in the region. There were members of other unions throughout the Hunter Valley but these workers were mostly members of Sydney Branches and were concentrated in the building trades (plasterers, stonemasons, etc.). In 1869 the unions and individual unionists began to combine in their activities with the formation of an Eight Hour Committee in Maitland followed soon after in the same year by a similar committee in Newcastle. This first regional combination involving a number of unions in various eight hour committees was very craft based, and for a time, Sydney orientated and lacking in a regional identity. It took until 1883 before the Newcastle committee metamorphosed into an independent regional organisation and began holding its own eight hour demonstrations. This whole process was facilitated because the period was one of steady growth of population, industry, urban areas and transport infrastructure, in particular the railways.<sup>2</sup> Generally, it was a period of labour shortage which created an atmosphere within which unions could organise and make gains on behalf of their members. It was no accident then that unionists from the building trades and railways were in the forefront of this early combined union activity.

## The Hunter Valley's Eight-Hour Movement and its Connection with the First Newcastle Trades and Labour Council, 1869–1886<sup>1</sup>

*Rod Noble*

The year 1869 can be considered the time from which there was a continuous “combined” union presence in the Hunter Valley. This can be said despite the examples of the various Lodges of Miners combining (to form a miners association in the period up to 1860); the short lived Eight Hour Committee of 1862; as well as a few other cases where craft unions temporarily got together for a common purpose. At the time the Coal Miners were the best organised union in the region. There were members of other unions throughout the Hunter Valley but these workers were mostly members of Sydney Branches and were concentrated in the building trades (plasterers, stonemasons, etc.). In 1869 the unions and individual unionists began to combine in their activities with the formation of an Eight Hour Committee in Maitland followed soon after in the same year by a similar committee in Newcastle. This first regional combination involving a number of unions in various eight hour committees was very craft based, and for a time, Sydney orientated and lacking in a regional identity. It took until 1883 before the Newcastle committee metamorphosed into an independent regional organisation and began holding its own eight hour demonstrations. This whole process was facilitated because the period was one of steady growth of population, industry, urban areas and transport infrastructure, in particular the railways.<sup>2</sup> Generally, it was a period of labour shortage which created an atmosphere within which unions could organise and make gains on behalf of their members. It was no accident then that unionists from the building trades and railways were in the forefront of this early combined union activity.

By 1885 unions felt numerous enough and independent enough in the Hunter Valley to move to set up their own regional Trades and Labour Council. This organisation lasted less than two years but was significant in that it marked the beginning of a move towards empowering and legitimising trade union interests in the region on a much broader basis than before. A

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further development was the process leading up to the establishment in 1895 of a Newcastle Trades Hall in Hunter Street.

### **Background to the Formation of the Maitland and Newcastle Eight Hour Committees**

Prior to 1869 there were some organisations in Newcastle that were in favour of shorter hours. These were organisations like the “Saturday Half Holiday Movement” or “Early Closing Movement”. However, these were separate from the Eight Hour Movement and appeared to be led not by organised workers but by influential “do gooders” who thought it “proper” that workers in shops and stores should have shorter hours. There was, in Newcastle, as early as October 1862, an attempt to set up an Eight Hour Committee with a J. Creswick being elected Chairman and Charles Yates as Secretary. However, this committee was short-lived and lasted only a few months.

### **The Maitland Eight Hour Movement**

On Saturday 23rd October 1869 Mr T.Baker invited workers from the building trades and others to a meeting in Maitland to discuss the “Eight Hour System”. Baker was the former Treasurer of the Sydney Eight Hour System and General Short Hour League, which had been set up in Sydney on August 12th 1869. He had come to the Maitland district for employment. The Maitland meeting was attended by about sixty people from whom a committee of eighteen was elected with J.G.Thornton as Secretary. The committee decided to “agitate for the limitation of the working hours of artisans from ten hours per day to eight”. They notified employers of skilled labour that the new system should commence from the first week in the new year so that in tendering for contracts the alteration in hours of work could be taken into account by masters. The committee also resolved to extend the Eight Hour Movement to other towns in the North.

This movement represented the coming together in the Hunter Region of workers from different trades and jobs to strive for a common goal and make decisions which were to effect all. It laid the basis for a regional Trades and Labour Council.

### **The Newcastle Eight Hour Movement**

On Saturday the 20th of November, 1869, Mr Thornton, the Hon. Secretary of the Maitland Eight Hour Committee, convened a

meeting in Newcastle of members of the building trades for the purpose of furthering the eight hour movement.

Approximately eighty people attended the meeting, which included: bricklayers, plasterers, stonemasons, a few carpenters and one master builder. The two delegates from Maitland, Mr Thornton and George Galley reported to the meeting of decisions taken in Maitland. They mentioned that four replies had been received from twenty five circulars sent out to employers enquiring: "Sir, have you any objection to the eight hour system? Your reply will oblige." Two employers had indicated no objection, "eight hours a day being quite enough for any workman to labour in this colony." Another said he had no objection "provided the wages would accordingly be reduced". It was on this latter question that the Maitland Committee had resolved to have the eight hour system "adopted, at all risks, and let the matter of wages take its course." "Labour is our capital," they decided, "and the time had arrived to look after our interests".

It appears that the Newcastle meeting was dominated by the two Maitland delegates. George Galley was chairing the meeting and when at one point he asked for someone from Newcastle to say something no one answered. In a final attempt to move the Newcastle workers to action Galley praised the effort people had made to come to the meeting and placed the hope before them that: "Instead of having an Oddfellows Friendly Society procession on the 1st of January he hoped to see a monster eight hour procession..."

It was more than thirteen years before his wish was fulfilled but the vision had the desired effect and a resolution was carried, moved by Mr Nowland and seconded by Mr Flavell: "That a committee be appointed to carry out the eight hour system."

An election then took place for a committee of eighteen.<sup>3</sup> The office holders were Chairperson, Mr Nowland; Secretary, Mr Flavell; Treasurer, Mr Hay. The meeting thanked the Maitland delegates for their attendance and in a departing word of advice George Galley said: "If workmen were, in a body, to combine together, they could do as they liked with the masters".

Then, as if foreshadowing organised labours' involvement in parliamentary politics he stated: "We must induce all the candidates at the general election to pledge themselves for the eight hour question".

So ended the year 1869. It would be more than twenty years before organised labour had a substantial effect on parliamentary politics, however the stage had been set. By June 1870 a Mr D Wallwork (from the Northern Railways Workshop) was secretary of the Newcastle Eight Hour League and remained so for some

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time. In fact Wallwork's direct connection continued with this organisation at least until 1882. Early in this period the Newcastle Eight Hour League and its Sydney counterpart were in regular communication but after the formation of the Sydney Trades and Labour Council in 1871 the latter body took up the eight hour issue and from then on the Newcastle organisation maintained contact with the Sydney Trades and Labour Council.

Early in 1873 there was a delegation from Newcastle to the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (TLC) on the issue of the adoption of the eight hour system. Much agitation for the eight hour principle had been emanating from the Great Northern Railways Workshops in Newcastle and one of the spokesmen Mr Wallwork wrote to Sydney TLC a number of times between December 1872 through to March 1873 asking for cooperation between the two centres. The Sydney TLC decided that "any attempt to introduce the question to the notice of the government without the co-operation of the men in the Sydney yards would be premature and ill judged". Nevertheless, Sydney TLC pledged itself to try and produce the desired result. Soon after, in April 1873 a delegation from the Newcastle Railway workshops were in Sydney to wait upon the Government on the eight hour question. They addressed Sydney TLC and indicated that in order to obtain an eight hour day they were prepared to accept a 5% cut in wages. Lengthy debate ensued and no decisions were taken.

It should be recalled that this period was one of economic expansion. Capital inflow to Australia from 1871-1875 was up 21.2% on the previous period and much of this underpinned the building of the railways.<sup>4</sup> This boom made it a good time for workers to make demands. Miners also made moves for shorter hours and after a strike in early 1873 they obtained a reduction from 12 hours to 10.5 hours per day; by January 1874 this had been further reduced to 10 hours per day.<sup>5</sup>

By 1873 the Newcastle Branch of the eight hour committee had gone on from being called the Newcastle, Eight Hour Labour League to the Newcastle Labour League (NLL). It was on August 20th of that year that the Newcastle organisation affiliated with the Sydney TLC. The first two delegates appointed for Newcastle were Mr Dixon and Mr Hopkins. The NLL continued to be the voice of Newcastle combined unionism in the region for the next decade.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Newcastle Eight Hour Demonstration Committee**

The wish of the eight hour pioneers from Maitland and Newcastle for a procession in favour of eight hours labour had to wait until

1883 for fulfilment. From that year onwards the Eight Hour Demonstration Committee took over the role of the NLL.<sup>7</sup>

On August 28th 1883 a meeting was held to discuss the need for an Eight Hour Demonstration Committee in Newcastle. It was held under the auspices of the Newcastle Labour League.

The chairman at the meeting was Mr W.H.Manuel who was the Mayor of Hamilton and active in the Labour League.<sup>8</sup> There were three decisions made that night: to hold an eight hour day demonstration; to circulate workshops, trade societies and other interested bodies requesting two representatives from each to meet and elect a working committee; and George Eames was elected as Secretary.

Their second decision led to a series of two meetings. These were on the 14th and 17th September and endorsed the holding of a demonstration in the Crystal Palace Gardens, Waratah on Tuesday October 16th 1883 and then at the same time each year as the Sydney demonstration.

Various employers including the Hamilton Borough Council granted a half day holiday for the demonstration. However, the Miners Delegate Meeting of the October 4th 1883 voted against stopping work to attend the eight hour demonstration. One of the reasons, they argued, was that miners were paid by the ton not according to the number of hours worked. Most miners worked nine hours per day excluding lunch time and had fought for years with employers to get agreement on that, with previous shifts of fourteen hours per day not being uncommon. However, by the next eight hour demonstration in 1884 the miners were involved.

The meeting of August 28th 1883 had present (besides Eames and Manuel), Mr J. Curley (District Officer of the miners union) and Mr William Lyne.

William Lyne, a carpenter by trade, later became active on the Newcastle Hospital Board until his death in 1941. The William Lyne Hospital at Waratah was named after this early trade union organiser.

By October 1884 Lyne was Treasurer of the committee and David Melville one of two joint secretaries. Lyne and Melville are representative of two important factors in the later formation of Newcastle Trades and Labour Council (TLC). First is the link and experience with Friendly Societies, second is the significant involvement of the various trades groups in spite of the numerical dominance of the Miners Union in the District.<sup>9</sup>

David Melville was an active member of the Ancient Order of Druids Friendly Society and William Lyne was also very active in the Friendly Society Movement. In return for regular contributions

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these societies were generally to provide a weekly allowance in cases of sickness or accident, some form of medical insurance and funeral benefits. Many trade unionists received their training in friendly societies and a comparison of the rules and constitutions of friendly societies with those of early trade unions make the influence of the former on the latter very obvious.

Another important factor in the formation of Newcastle TLC is the involvement of craft based unions who because of their dominance in Sydney achieved an influence far and above that which their numbers suggested in the Newcastle eight hour committee and TLC.<sup>10</sup> There is, however, no doubt that when the Miners Union went cool on the first Eight Hour Demonstration in 1883 it threw the whole thing into jeopardy, and to imagine in 1885 a TLC in Newcastle without the involvement of the Miners Union would be hard indeed.

### **The Formation of a Committee to Establish a Trades Hall**

In September, 1884 Mr Goodsir of the Shop Assistants Association moved at an Eight Hour Committee meeting that surplus money from the demonstration should go toward the erection of a Trades Hall in Newcastle. His idea was defeated at the time, but later when he became chairman of the Eight Hour Committee the matter was again raised. By February 1885 a subcommittee had been set up specifically for the erection of a Trades Hall in Newcastle, and the local member of parliament Mr James Fletcher was making representations on its behalf regarding money from the government for a hall.

Earlier in the year there had been support for the idea of a Trades Hall from the Newcastle Herald which noted:<sup>11</sup> “scarcely a trade is not represented in the Newcastle District. Why should not a large and commodious hall for purposes purely connected with trade union matters – be erected.”

The observation was a little premature because though local branches of the Miners, Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Colliery Mechanics, Carpenters and Joiners, Shipwrights and Boilermakers were in existence in January 1885, it was later in the year before the Seamen, Wharf Labourers, Moulders, Bootmakers, Coal Trimmers, Stonemasons and others formed local branches of their unions.

This burst of union development gave great impetus to both the need for a Trades Hall and the formation of a Trades and Labour Council. *The Newcastle Morning Herald (Herald)* at the time perhaps captured the rising spirit of Labour when it stated:<sup>12</sup>



“If ever a reformation in the present social fabric is to come at all, it will come by a great and well directed upheaval of the working classes. The upper and middle classes, or a few of them, mean well, and try to do a little to equalise matters, but it is at best only patchwork ... There is no heart in it. What is wanted is not compromise, but alteration. Why should not the masses unite, with equal determination to perform the task of making themselves free?”

If this wasn't enough to frighten the average capitalist the *Herald* then proceeded to urge the erection of the devil's den: “How can this be done without a place to meet in?”

If this was the reason behind the need for a Trades Hall, Newcastle had to wait until 1895 to get it. Meetings in hotels had to suffice until then.

### **The Formation of the First Trades and Labour Council**

On the 10th of November 1885 at a meeting of the Eight Hour Committee in Newcastle it was resolved:

That the secretary be instructed to issue circulars, inviting the various trades societies to send two delegates each, to consider the advisability of forming a Trades and Labour Council for the Northern district, at a meeting to be held at Tattersalls Hotel, on the first Tuesday in December.

In the course of debate the President of the Eight Hour Committee Mr. M. O'Brien referred to the capability of the trades of the district in transacting their own business, and others mentioned that recent events in connection with trade disputes had shown that a Trades and Labour Council for the Northern district was a pressing necessity.<sup>13</sup>

On the surface, this action by the Eight Hour Committee was a simple straightforward one. In reality it represented the end result of sixteen years of tremendous change in the Hunter regional economy that had led to the development of new industry and new groups of workers with a regional identity.

The conditions for the flourishing of Trade Unionism in Newcastle were all present in 1885. There had been very little conflict involving the major union, the Miners, and speakers at the Miners Demonstration in March 1885 had been moved to say that it was good to see everyone so happy and prosperous. Newcastle had grown into an important centre of trade and industry. Various trades now had enough members in Newcastle to make a separate branch of their union a viability, and it was only a natural step for unionists in Newcastle to consider their

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own Trades and Labour Council.

Talk of a Trades Hall building where unions could meet was one thing. A council of unions was another. One trigger that set the train in motion may have been the long drawn out dispute in late 1885 between the newly formed Wharf Labourers and their employers. This dispute was over employers' attempts to cut wages and eventually involved the Coal Trimmers Union. The Coal Trimmers were asked to support the Wharf Labourers and while communicating via telegram with the Maritime Council of Unions in Sydney the Coal Trimmers also sought support of the Miners to bring the dispute to a head. The Miners Union was of course not affiliated to the Maritime Council but rather the Sydney Trades and Labour Council. It must have become patently clear to many unionists in Newcastle that a local Trades and Labour Council was necessary to cut through the red tape and confusion.

At the November, 10th 1885 meeting of the Eight Hour Committee Mr O'Brien from the Shipwrights Union, and President of the Committee, was moved to say that "the trades of the district were quite capable of transacting their own business" and in the course of debate a general opinion emerged that recent events in connection with disputes had shown that a Trades and Labour Council for the Northern District was a pressing necessity.

It was at this Committee meeting that a resolution moved by T. Dixon (Dickson) and seconded by C. McGlinchey was carried.<sup>14</sup> The resolution called for a meeting (to form a Trades and Labour Council) to be organised on the 1st of December 1885.

At this meeting, Martin O'Brien, president of the Eight Hour Committee, welcomed the twenty three delegates plus observers and conducted an election for chairman. William Davies, ex chairman of the Miners Union, was elected. There being few disagreements as to the purpose of the meeting, a resolution was quickly carried to form a Trades and Labour Council in the district. Daniel Rees, president of the Miners Union, moved the resolution and Mr Graham (president of the Seamen's Union), Mr Goundry (Miners), Mr McGlinchey (Seamen), and Mr Lloyd (Miners) all spoke in seconding. The decision was unanimous. The job of drawing up a code of rules for the new organisation fell to seven delegates: four miners, one seaman, one stonemason and one ironmoulder. The ironmoulder was David Scott, later to become the local member of parliament for Newcastle. Mr Buxton (Miners) was elected secretary (pro tem).

At a second meeting, on the 11th of December 1885 the rules were adopted and elections held. Nine different unions were represented at the first two meetings: Boilermakers, Coal Trimmers, Wharf Labourers, Stonemasons, Ironworkers, Seamen,

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Engineers, Miners (11 different lodges) and Shipwrights. Some unions could not send delegates to the first meeting because they were not able to meet in time to choose delegates or else the meeting clashed with their own. The election for official positions resulted in nine office bearers (six of whom were miners).<sup>15</sup> They essentially remained the same for the life of the organisation. They were:

President	William Davies	(Glebe Miners Lodge)
Vice President*	M.Rutherford	(Stonemasons Society)
Treasurer	Daniel Rees	(Co-operative Miners Lodge)
Secretary	E. Buxton	(Glebe Miners Lodge)
Financial Secretary	J. Thomson	(Borehole Miners Lodge)
Trustees	H. Ely	(Wharf Labourers Union)
	C. Gardiner	(Boilermakers Society)
Auditors	G. Lloyd	(Burwood Miners Lodge)
	G. Jones	(Borehole Miners Lodge)

\* R. Goundry (Lambton Miners) replaced M Rutherford as vice president in 1886.

During 1886 meetings of the Newcastle Trades and Labour Council were held monthly at the Tattersalls Hotel. Almost immediately the year began trouble beset the organisation. A number of difficult disputes were thrust upon it to an extent that the Council's voluntary officers were overtaxed.<sup>16</sup> Added to this was a continuing tendency for unions and employers to look to Sydney for solutions to problems.

At the first Council meeting of 1886, the question of the current strike by the Miners at Lambton was raised and it was suggested that more aid to strikers collected by levy in Newcastle should go to Newcastle TLC for distribution rather than to Sydney TLC. This question of control over finance was only one example of a rivalry between Sydney and Newcastle. The Hunter branch of the Miners Union was affiliated to Newcastle TLC but also to Sydney TLC and had delegates to the latter. This fact put them in a contradictory position in relationship to control over finances and jurisdiction.

In February 1886 the Sydney TLC sent a deputation to negotiate with the coalowners to endeavour to solve the Lambton Strike and in the following April the Sydney Council put a great deal of pressure on the Newcastle Coal Trimmers Association to affiliate directly to Sydney and so become subject to its jurisdiction and receive its protection in regard to the dispute with the Dalgety Company.

This sort of bickering made the task of building a strong Labour Council at Newcastle very difficult. By mid-1886 only

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five miners' lodges and three other unions were regularly attending meetings. The Wharf Labourers Union had ceased to exist early in 1886 and the Coal Trimmers Union collapsed at the end of 1886 after its unsuccessful struggle to gain equal work for unionists, and because of financial difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

These factors coupled with the Miners' continuing direct connection with Sydney TLC led to the collapse of the Newcastle TLC.

Mr W. Davies the first president of the Newcastle TLC, when speaking at the Miners Demonstration on the 5th March 1887 was reported thus:<sup>18</sup>

He was sorry to tell them that the Trades and Labor Council had died the previous night.

It was 1904 before another (more successful) attempt was made to again establish a Newcastle TLC. In the intervening period the Eight Hour Committee acted as a de facto inter-union domain for issues involving regional industrial issues.

### Endnotes

- 1 This article is based on a limited edition publication written by the author in 1984/85 and draws on original source material such as the minutes of the Sydney Eight Hour League and the Sydney Trades and Labor Council as well as depending to some extent on secondary reports of local proceedings. These reports were mainly in the *Miners Advocate* or the *Newcastle Morning Herald*.
- 2 McGhee, R., "The Long Boom", in Griffin, J. (ed.) *Essays in Economic History of Australia*, Jacaranda Press. 1970. p. 178.
- 3 The eighteen were Messrs Price, Watt, Murray, Hinton, Bignell, Williams, Brett, Crockett, Hutchinson, John Dillon, W.Amos, H.Chandler, W.Gibbs, W.Hand, Robert Taylor, H.Young, Joseph Hand, H.Wells plus three office holders.
- 4 Sinclair, W.A. *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1976, p. 96.
- 5 Fitzpatrick, Brian, *The British Empire in Australia 1834-1939*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969, p. 205.
- 6 On 24th August 1872 a meeting was held to establish the Eight Hour Movement In the Lambton district. The three people elected to responsibility by that meeting were: William Wilson (carpenters and joiners), James Marshall (labourers and top men), Williarn Holmes (wheelers).
- 7 On the 3rd June 1884 the Sydney TLC received a letter to say that the Newcastle Labour League had become defunct. Mr. O'Sullivan was the last NLL delegate to Sydney TLC.
- 8 Others who had been active in the Newcastle Labour League in 1882/3 were:
  - a) Mr. D. Wallwork from 1870 onwards. Wallwork was also active

in the Australasian Secular Association and anti-chinese activities.

- b) Mr. Curley the secretary of the miners union.
- c) Mr. Blackburn, Mr. G. Eames.
- d) Three borehole miners. G. McKean, W. Britton and James Duke.

In 1882 Mr. McKean was an alderman for the borough of Hamilton and Britton was the returning officer for the borough of Hamilton. It was G. McKean who had connections with unionism in Newcastle going back to the 1850's. In 1857 the first union organisation in Newcastle, the Borehole Miners Lodge was formed with James Fletcher as chairman, Mr. W. Hogg as secretary and G. McKean as treasurer.

- 9 The eight hour demonstration committee of 1884 had William Bewes (a boilermaker) and David Melville (Amalgamated Society of Engineers) as joint secretaries, and William Lyne (a carpenter) as treasurer. T. Dixon (Dickson) of the Miners was chairman.
- 10 The Newcastle branches of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Boilermakers Society were both formed in 1877 and the Carpenters union in 1883. The Boilermakers Society had only 30 members in 1879/80 compared with thousands belonging to the miners union. The Stonemasons Society had 35 members in 1885. Hunter River Coalminers Association had more than 3000 members in 1885.
- 11 *Newcastle Morning Herald* 20.1.1885.
- 12 *Newcastle Morning Herald* 20.1.1885.
- 13 *Newcastle Morning Herald* 11.11.1885.
- 14 C. McGlinchey was the Newcastle secretary of the Seamens Union.
- 15 It is interesting to note that the Hunter River Miners maintained their affiliation and their delegates to the Sydney Trades and Labour Council right through this early part of Newcastle Trades and Labour Councils existence (1885-1887).
- 16 The disputes included one between the Coal Trimmers Union and the Dalgety company.
- 17 These unions revived again in 1888.
- 18 Mr Davies died in 1889. Ref. 7.8.89 (*NMFA*)