A history of the relationship between the Queensland branch of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) and the labour movement in Queensland from 1913-1957

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A History of the Relationship between the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) and the Labour Movement in Queensland from 1913-1957

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the University of Wollongong

By Craig Clothier

Program of History and Politics
2004
(Revised 2005)
DISCLAIMER

I hereby certify that the following work has not been previously submitted to any other University. Except for references acknowledged in footnotes, the work is entirely my own.
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Abbreviations

ACCC – Anti-Conscription Campaign Committee
ACTU – Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFULE – Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen
ALF – Australian Labour Federation
ALP – Australian Labor Party
AMA – Amalgamated Miners’ Association
AMIEU – Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union
ARU – Australian Railways Union
ASE – Amalgamated Society of Engineers
ASPA – Australian Sugar Producers’ Association
ASU – Amalgamated Shearers’ Union of Australasia
AWA – Amalgamated Workers’ Association
AWU – Australian Workers’ Union
BIC – Brisbane Industrial Council
CCC – Civil Construction Corps
CDC – Central District Council
CPA – Communist Party of Australia
CPE – Central Political Executive
CPNP – Country Progressive National Party
CSR – Colonial Sugar Refining Company
ETU – Electrical Trades Union
FIA – Federated Ironworkers’ Association
FCU – Federated Clerks’ Union
FEDFA – Federated Engine Drivers and Firemens’ Association
ITUC – Inter-Colonial Trade Union Congress
IWW – International Workers of the World
MMM – Militant Minority Movement
MOA – Marine Officers’ Association
OBU – One Big Union
OBUPL – One Big Union Propaganda League
PEA – Pastoral Employers Association
PLP – Parliamentary Labor Party
PPU – Primary Producers’ Union
PWIU – Pastoral Workers’ Industrial Union
QCE – Queensland Central Executive
QCGC – Queensland Cane Growers’ Council
QLU – Queensland Labourers’ Union
QRU – Queensland Railways Union
QSU – Queensland Shearers’ Union
SOAD – Sheep Owners Association of the Darling Downs
TLC – Trades and Labour Council
TWU – Transport Workers’ Union
UAP – United Australia Party
UGA – United Graziers' Association
UPA – United Pastoralists' Association
USL – Universal Service League
UWM – Unemployed Workers' Movement
WIUA – Workers’ Industrial Union of Australia
WPO – Workers' Political Organisation
WPRA – Workingmans' Parliamentary Representatives Association
WWF – Waterside Workers Federation
In 1913 one of the most significant events in the history of Australian industrial relations and Labor politics occurred – the amalgamation of several rural unions with the pre-existing Australian Workers' Union (AWU) to form a truly national AWU. Perhaps the most dominant branch of the newly amalgamated AWU was the Queensland Branch. Encompassing not only shearsers and other workers within the pastoral industry the Queensland AWU represented numerous workers (mostly rural and semi or unskilled) in mining, construction, the sugar industry, transport and the hospitality and other service industries. At a stroke the Queensland AWU became far and away the most numerically strong industrial organisation in that state. That industrial strength soon manifested itself into political power through the close relationship that developed between the AWU and the Labor Party.

This thesis will examine the rise of the Queensland Branch of the AWU and in particular its relationship with the Labor Party and the workers it sought to represent. Of particular interest will be the means by which the AWU attained, maintained and ultimately lost its dominance over the Queensland labour movement, the Labor party and more broadly the Queensland electorate.

It will be the contention of this thesis that AWU was able to maintain its level of influence and power over such a sustained period due to the geographic, industrial, social and political peculiarities of Queensland that allowed for the rise of a rurally based,
reformist yet economically and socially conservative organisation such as the AWU to emerge. Coupled with this was the AWU's ability to manipulate the mechanisms of the industrial and political labour movement in Queensland to ensure a steady flow of AWU nominees to the Labor Party and then Parliament. This in turn allowed for the passing of legislation beneficial to the interests of the AWU and its supporters. A mixture of strict control, numerical superiority and genuine industrial and economic progress for its members and sympathizers ensured that however ruthless its methods the AWU would continue to receive the necessary support.

Only in the face of a changing economic and industrial climate and the potential threat to its power from within the labour movement did the AWU depart from its traditional policies and embrace militancy in order to preserve its power. Such actions were anathema to its supporters within the AWU and the Labor Party and the electorate as a whole. In an effort to maintain its power in the face of a largely imagined threat the leadership of the AWU willingly risked the security of the Labor government in Queensland to assert its power. The result was disastrous for both the AWU and the Labor Party in Queensland.