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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Introduction

Between 1913-1957 the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) was the largest branch of the largest trade union in Australia. Throughout this period in Queensland the AWU accounted for approximately one third of all trade unionists in that state and at its peak claimed a membership in excess of 60 000. Consequently the AWU in Queensland was able to exert enormous influence over the labour movement in that state not only in industrial relations but also within the political sphere through its affiliation to the Australian Labor Party. From 1915-1957 the Labor Party in Queensland held office for all but the three years between 1929-1932. AWU officials and members dominated the Labor Cabinets of the period and of the eight Labor premiers five were members of the AWU, with two others closely aligned to the Union. Only the last Labor premier of the period, Vincent Clare Gair, owed no allegiance to the AWU. The AWU also used its numerical strength and political influence to dominate the other major decision-making bodies of Queensland's labour movement, most notably the Queensland Central Executive (QCE), that body's 'inner' Executive and the triennial Labor-in-Politics Convention. Yet no history of the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers' Union exists for this period.

This thesis will present an interpretation of that history. It is not, however, a history of the union in the traditional style of institutional labour history. Unlike those pioneering left-wing scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, now referred to within Australian historiography as the 'Old Left', this work will not concentrate as heavily upon detailed
accounts of the work of union officials, of annual conventions, the intricacies of policy formulation and documentation or the many industrial disputes which occurred. Nor will it analyse the numerous awards and consequent arbitration hearings that were part of the everyday operations of all trade unions in Australia. Nevertheless, the thesis will necessarily rely on the same sources to develop its argument.

Its purpose is to examine how such a union was able to gain and maintain the dominance that it was able to achieve – and how this dominance was lost. The thesis deals fundamentally with the concept of power – industrial, political and social. The concept of power manifests itself in many ways and can thus be defined in many ways. For the purpose of this thesis power (and in this case an essentially organisational manifestation of power) will be defined as the ability to exert influence, to espouse and then enact beliefs and policies not simply within a narrowly defined social, economic or political organisation or community but to a significant proportion of the society from whence the source of this influence emanates. This definition draws broadly from Weber’s conception of power wherein there is an ability to impose one’s “will” even in the face of “resistance”. In the case of this work “will” is not that of the individual but that of an organisation and most specifically the leadership of that organisation.

Concomitant with this ability to exert and enact upon this influence is the ability of the organisation to defend itself from within and without, to protect itself, its members and the beliefs it struggled to espouse and enact. Simply how did the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers’ Union dominate the Australian Labor Party in that State and

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the Queensland labour movement in general between 1913 and 1957? From this question arises another: What role did the AWU play in the continued success of the Labor Party in Queensland throughout most of this period and how was this achieved?

Again such questions arise within a theoretical paradigm which asks: How and why do trade unions exercise and maintain power? British industrial relations scholar Allan Flanders provides a compelling basis upon which an answer can be formulated:

An organisation must have effective means for ensuring that its members comply with its decisions. These means are its sanctions; the rewards it can offer and the penalties it can impose to uphold its internal discipline. On the strength of its sanctions, rather than on the appeal of its objections, the unity and power of an organisation depends.

Flanders' conception of sanctions – both rewards and penalties – has been drawn upon by a number of Australian scholars such as Ellem and Shields, Brigden, Markey and Merritt. Merritt applies the concept admirably to the AWU whilst Ellem and Shields, Brigden and Markey discuss the concept as it applies to confederated peak union bodies namely the Barrier Industrial Council at Broken Hill, the Melbourne Trades Hall Council and the Labour Council of New South Wales respectively. This thesis will argue, in part, that this notion of sanctions was integral to the success of the AWU and its leaders.

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Despite the authoritarian and at times undemocratic nature of the AWU structure in Queensland it was able to maintain its legitimacy or power by ensuring that members did benefit from the advances it made for those members in industrial relations via arbitration and politically through its close association with the Labor Party.

Where this thesis will differ from Flanders who in turn had developed some of his theories from the Webbs' seminal work *Industrial Democracy* is in the role of political action. Both Flanders and to a more forceful extent the Webbs saw the role of unions as most importantly in the field of industrial relations. Unions were to work collectively to improve the wages and working conditions of its membership. Political activity in the form of 'party-politics' as is now common throughout modern democracies was most definitely a secondary (although still important) role of the trade union. It will be the contention of this thesis that the AWU that emerged in Queensland following the amalgamations of 1912-13 and under the influence of the powerful northern bush union the Amalgamated Workers' Association (AWA) was from its inception both industrial and political. In equal parts. The tribulations of the labour movement in Queensland from the 1890s to the early years of Federation had convinced trade union leaders such as Theodore and McCormack of the AWA that the only way in which the goals of its members and (as they saw it) the goals of the labour movement in Queensland could be achieved was through co-ordinated industrial and political action via the Labor Party and ultimately the attainment of the mechanisms of the state through parliamentary means.

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Neither activity was subordinate to the other: on the contrary it was complimentary, indeed, *symbiotic*.

Significantly, this power was exercised by an organisation drawn from and claiming to represent the labour movement in Queensland. In a Gramscian sense, this thesis examines the AWU’s attempt to exert a labour-orientated ‘hegemony’ over not only the labour movement in Queensland but also the total apparatus of the State. It will consider these questions from the perspective of the Union and its leaders: how and why did this union and its leadership achieve what it did and what were its motivations? However, it will be argued that although the AWU leadership most definitely sought to extend its influence and fundamental principles throughout as many levels of Queensland society as possible it was never able to fully supplant the existing ‘capitalist cultural hegemony’ with an organic ‘proletarian cultural hegemony’. Moreover this thesis will contend that the leaders of the AWU and in the majority of cases the rank-and-file of the Union and the Labor Party it helped to sustain never sought to do so: the AWU and the Labor Party intended to reform not replace the existing capitalist-inspired society and the apparatus of the State.

In essence this thesis is an account of a relationship: that between the AWU and the movement it sought to represent. Like most relationships it was characterised by periods of harmony and discord. Throughout the period the AWU, its leadership and the Labor Party it dominated were continuously threatened by not only its obvious opponents representing the forces of Capital but also various industrial and political groups within

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the labour movement. At one extreme were militant Left wing organisations such as the Railway Workers', the Pastoral Workers Industrial Union and the Communist Party of Australia, whilst at the other extreme were sometimes the Labor politicians themselves or conservative groups like the Industrial Groups. By considering the economic, social and political development of Queensland society to the time of the amalgamation in 1913 we can discover how and why there were divisions within Queensland society and within the labour movement itself. Furthermore, this broader scope allows a consideration of how and why the AWU came to occupy the powerful position it did in 1913.

The AWU has been one of the most significant industrial and political forces within the Australian labour movement. Much has been written about it and from Childe’s seminal work *How Labour Governs*? to the present, Australian scholars (and predominantly those from the Left) have demonised the AWU as a conservative even reactionary force within the Australian labour movement, and not without cause. Others such as Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend* have characterised the AWU as the harbinger of the great Australian bush ethos based on ‘mateship’. From the 1970s onwards with the rise of ‘social history’ as inspired by Thompson and Hobsbawm, the AWU exemplified all that was wrong with the Australian labour movement. To a rising group of scholars identified as the ‘New Left’ and including McQueen, Macintyre, Evans, Dixon and Burgmann the AWU was conservative, bureaucratic, racist,

xenophobic, sexist, nationalistic and lacking in theoretical depth. Again, not without cause.

Ironically, despite the significance of the AWU and the many commentaries that have been written about the Union, only three histories of the Union have been published. In 1911, the Union’s founding President, William Guthrie Spence produced, his triumphal, *History of the AWU*. Celebratory in tone and content, the work was a rallying cry to the labour movement and a reminder of those qualities best exemplified by bush unionists – mateship, pragmatism, unity of voice and the maintenance of a ‘White Australia’. Significantly, Spence wrote it before the amalgamation of 1913 that encompassed the powerful North Queensland unions and would have such an enormous influence on Labor politics in Queensland. Instead, apart from due reverence to the legendary Shearer’s Strikes of 1891 and 1894 in Queensland, the work concentrated mostly on the growth of the mighty bush union from its humble beginnings in central Victoria and the role that the author played in these events.

It took over seventy years before another history of the union was attempted. In 1986, John Merritt produced his, *The Making of the AWU*. Covering the same era as Spence, Merritt produced an insightful and exhaustively researched account of the growth and operation of the union. The work also stood alone as an examination of work practices and industrial relations within the rural industries for the period within a strong


theoretical framework of class analysis. However, as with Spence, the work finishes where the central focus of this thesis begins - with the 1913 amalgamation - and although there is sufficient recognition of the political machinations of the AWU within the fledgling Labor Party, Merritt's work concentrates more specifically on the role of the union as an industrial organisation.

It was not until 1996 that Hearn and Knowles attempted a comprehensive history of the union with *The One Big Union. A History of the Australian Workers' Union 1886-1994*. The AWU commissioned the work to celebrate its centenary and it attempted to tell the story of the union, both at state and a national level. The work was ambitious in scope and scale and as such is easy to criticise from narrow or specific perspectives. However, the authors succeeded in producing a valuable contribution to a task that many others would have found daunting. Due to the enormity of the task the authors concentrated mainly on the national executive of the union and digressed into the affairs of specific branches only when relevant to the overall story. This yielded an excellent chapter on the growth of the Queensland branch during the 1930s and a consideration of the 1957 'split' in Queensland. Throughout, however, the authors focus on what they define as the 'ethos' of the AWU – mateship, loyalty and pragmatism – as the main means of describing the Union's growth and power.

Apart from Childe's exceptional critique of Labor up to the early 1920s, which dealt with Queensland as well as the other states and the Commonwealth, Queensland political historiography, let alone anything that could be described as Queensland labour

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historiography, was confined to public servants and politicians. Two parliamentary secretaries, C. A. Bemays and his successor Clem Lack produced three general political histories of Queensland, with Bemays' *Queensland, Our Seventh Political Decade* and *Queensland Politics during Sixty Years* followed by Lack's *Three Decades of Queensland Political History*. Whilst both authors made some insightful comments, the histories were presented more as a chronicle of the parliament – members, legislation and other significant events – rather than a well-developed analysis of the process. Another historian of the times was perennial Labor parliamentarian (1912-56) (and often Cabinet member) of the 1930s, Jim Larcombe. Erudite and charismatic Larcombe (himself an AWU sympathiser) produced three major works (often pamphlet-sized and serialised in the *Worker*) in the 1930s and 1940s, the most significant of these being 1934's *Notes on the Political History of the Labour Movement in Queensland*. Essentially propaganda for the Labor Party and the AWU, Larcombe's work, nevertheless, provides a valuable source of detail and context in the period up to the Great Depression.

By the 1940s and 50s scholars such as A. A. Morrison and E. M. Higgins, had begun contributing articles to academic journals that began to criticise the role of the labour movement and the Labor Party in Queensland politics. Their example gave encouragement not only to young Queensland academics who began to address these

issues in Honours, Masters and Doctoral theses but also to amateur historians and activists such as Joe Harris who in 1966, and with the assistance of the recently formed Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, published *First Steps: Queensland Workers' Moves Towards Political Expression 1857 – 1893*. In the meantime Geoffrey Bolton had published his *Thousand Miles Away*, that although superficially a regional history proved to be an excellent piece of labour and social history.

Contemporary Queensland labour historiography was dominated by one figure – Denis Murphy. Murphy was an academic and activist, and by the time of his death in 1984 at age 51 he had become the state President of the Labor Party and was poised to assume the leadership of the Queensland Labor Party. But he was foremost a gifted academic historian. His 1975 biography of Labor's first real premier in Queensland, *T.J. Ryan: A Political Biography*, was a classic example of an excellent critique of the Party and its ill-fated leader who died prematurely in 1919. But perhaps Murphy's greatest legacy was a collection of works that brought together a group of like-minded academics such as Margaret Cribb, Douglas Blackmur, R. B. Joyce, Kett Kennedy, Joy Guyatt, J. B. Costar and Colin Hughes. In 1970 Murphy *et al* published, *Prelude to Power: The Rise of the Labour Party in Queensland 1885-1915*. A decade later the same

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19 Murphy, D.J., *TJ Ryan: A Political Biography*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1975. In 1899, a coalminer, Andy Dawson led the Labor Party into office in Queensland following the collapse of the Conservative coalition. Dawson was Premier for six days in the 'first Labor government in the world' before their opponents re-organised themselves and Labor returned to the Opposition benches.
editorial collaboration provided the second installment with *Labor to Power. The Labor Party and Governments in Queensland 1915-57*. The series was completed in 1981 with the biographical *The Premiers of Queensland* (an updated version of the 1978 release, *Queensland Political Portraits*).²⁰

These proved an invaluable legacy. Written in the midst of a Conservative political epoch which had only been equaled in length by the Labor governments that are the focus of this work the texts provide both analysis, hope and instruction to a generation of Labor faithful whom had been confined to the political wilderness. The works emphasized unity, co-operation, the structures of the Party and the successes it achieved both politically and industrially before its eventual demise into factionalism, bitterness and defeat. They stressed the Labor Party’s pragmatism and successful appeal beyond narrowly-defined class boundaries and examined the role of the AWU and its leaders either as the source of strength and power or as conservative reactionaries that ruthlessly suppressed all progressive shifts within the labour movement. Whilst the AWU demanded much consideration throughout the series only a single chapter here and there attempted to consider the AWU specifically as this work will do.

Where Murphy attempted a broad examination of the Queensland labour movement in its entirety and the mechanisms through which both the political and industrial labour movement in Queensland was organised this work will, in effect, do a

similar thing although its focus will be more narrow with its attention on one single
industrial organisation. Furthermore and significantly this work will examine the
motivations – as power for powers’ sake is too naïve – of the leadership of this one
industrial organisation and how it sought to relate to and influence the labour movement
in general. Thus whereas Murphy et al presented a broad consideration of a movement –
that necessarily considered the AWU - this work will in essence take the view from the
inside out. Why did the leaders of the AWU do what they did, how did they do it, how
could they do it and what impact did this have upon the broader labour movement and the
Queensland electorate in general?

Murphy and his collaborators provided both inspiration and a source of criticism
and reappraisal to the current generation of Queensland labour historians such as Ross
Fitzgerald, Ray Evans and Kay Saunders. Fitzgerald not only considered the role of
Labor and the AWU in his two volume general history of Queensland but also in a
number of other specific texts such as Labor to 1980 (with Henry Thornton); and two
biographies – Red Ted, and The People’s Champion – the former about former
Queensland premier, treasurer and AWU stalwart Ted Theodore and the latter about Fred
Patterson, the only Communist Party candidate ever elected to a state legislature in
Australia.21

21 Fitzgerald, R., From the Dreaming to 1915. A History of Queensland, University of Queensland Press,
St. Lucia, 1982; Fitzgerald, R., From 1915 to the Early 1980s. A History of Queensland, University of
Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1984; Fitzgerald, R. and Thornton, H., Labor in Queensland. From the 1880s
Theodore, Queensland University Press, St. Lucia, 1994; Fitzgerald, R., The people’s Champion, Fred
Patterson: Australia’s only Communist Party Member of Parliament, University of Queensland Press, St.
Lucia, 1997.
Authors such as Evans and Saunders\textsuperscript{22} have studied the labour movement in Queensland through a consideration of race relations in Queensland. Dawn May’s *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry*\textsuperscript{23}, considered the employment relations of Aboriginal stock workers in Queensland. Evans, was able to expand this analysis of bigotry and fear of the ‘other’ most admirably in *Loyalty and Disloyalty* and *The Red Flag Riots*\textsuperscript{24}, which both considered notions of religious, racial and political intolerance during and immediately after World War I.

Added to these were a growing number of journal articles, chapters and monographs by authors such as Bowden, Kellet, Webster, Penrose, Tsokhas, Menghetti and Cochrane who have produced works which consider the labour movement in Queensland manifested in many ways; as studies of local areas, studies of particular unions, a particular strike, a political event or as industry-based studies\textsuperscript{25}. All by necessity

have considered the labour movement in Queensland and where relevant the role of the AWU and the Labor Party within it.

Whilst all these authors have dealt extensively with the role of the Queensland branch of the AWU none have dealt with it directly as a continuous and powerful entity in its own right over time. This is what this thesis will do. Following E.P. Thompson it will consider the relationship between a community of working people, its leaders and its enemies as a fluid and evolving entity ‘embodied in real people and in a real context’\textsuperscript{26}. Most significant for this thesis is the relationship between an identifiable ‘working class’ and those who claimed to lead it.

The term \textit{class} is an elusive concept. For the purpose of this thesis I have again turned to Thompson who defined class as happening when a group of people ‘as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs’\textsuperscript{27}. In Queensland in the period of this thesis there was a clearly identifiable group of working men and women and their families who broadly shared the same goals and fears. Whilst there were those outside this group who became involved in Labor politics and obviously gave electoral support to the Labor Party for this period, it was this predominantly rural working community which gave direction and initiative to the AWU and the Labor Party.


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p. 9
Readers may also notice the relative absence of women from this thesis. For this the author is unapologetic. Women certainly had a role to play in the Queensland labour movement, most obviously through the journalist Mary Gilmore and those brave women involved in the Anti-Conscription campaigns and various industrial campaigns, but this thesis deals with the AWU, the Labor Party and other industrial and political organisations and its leaders. In Queensland in this period these organisations were exclusively male. Whilst there were female members of the AWU and the Labor Party they were not union delegates or Labor Party candidates, nor did they occupy any position of power in the local labour movement. Whilst a study of the role of women within the labour movement and in the AWU in particular would undoubtedly be valuable it is beyond the scope of this thesis and as such they appear largely as they did in the society of the time – in the background supporting the men.

The first two chapters are necessarily long, and will consider in turn the development of Queensland economically, socially, industrially and politically. The first chapter will discuss the emergence of the fledgling colony’s economy and its reliance on primary industries, especially pastoralism, as its staple. This reliance on primary industries grew and continued well into the twentieth century and significantly influenced the social, industrial and political development of Queensland. The chapter will also consider the development of a class-structured society and the political structure that evolved to represent that society, as well as the importance of Queensland’s economy and geography in the development of both its economy and demography. Thus, how did the development of certain industries affect the nature of those who settled in Queensland
and where they settled? From this will be considered the impact this development had on the social, political and industrial nature of Queensland.

The second chapter will focus on the development of the labour movement that emerged to represent the workers of Queensland, first in the industrial sphere, but eventually as an organised political movement. Of particular interest will be the development of that movement from 1890-1913 and specifically the role of rural workers and the unions that emerged to represent them such as the Queensland Shearers' Union, the General Labourers' Union, the Amalgamated Workers Union, the Amalgamated Workers Association and the Australian Workers' Union. How were these workers organised, who were they, what did they do, how did they relate to other unions both rural and urban and why did most of them eventually amalgamate with the AWU? Furthermore, how and why did these organisations within the labour movement combine to seek political representation through the foundation of the Labor Party?

The third chapter will examine the political and industrial machinations of the labour movement in Queensland from the period of the great amalgamation of rural unions in 1913 that gave rise to the modern AWU until the immediate post-World War I years to 1920. It will consider the enormous growth both in numbers and importance of the newly established Queensland Branch of the AWU and how it was able to exert its influence throughout the labour movement and eventually into the Government of Queensland. Significantly too, the chapter will consider the growing opposition to the AWU's power both within the labour movement and outside it.

The fourth chapter considers the tumultuous 1920s. With the labour movement's in general confronting ideological challenges from within - most noticeably from the
Australian Communist Party – the AWU embarked on a campaign to identify and eliminate its opponents amidst growing allegations of bureaucratization, corruption and disregard for its rank-and-file. The AWU and Labor Party not only had to confront dissent from within the labour movement but also from its political opponents who had become alarmed at the policy initiatives of the Labor Party in government. The resulting struggle for power saw the AWU increase its hold on the Labor Party but at the cost of political power in Queensland as the world slid into depression.

Chapter Five traces the labour movement’s struggle with ideology and the economic depression during the early 1930s. For the AWU the decade represents the zenith of its power and influence in Queensland. From the depths of the Great Depression, electoral defeat for the Labor Party, the corruption scandal of the Mungana Affair and the challenge of militant pastoral union and the struggles in the cane fields the AWU would rise to become unchallenged as the most potent industrial and political organisation in Queensland.

Chapter Six describes the period from the mid-1930s to the beginning of the Second World War. The AWU and the Labor Party, under the leadership of the autocratic Clarrie ‘the Red Terror’ Fallon as secretary of the AWU and William Forgan-Smith as premier, emerged to reign over the most ruthless political machine in the country. The Chapter analyses the zenith of the AWU-ALP (Australian Labor Party) dominance of Queensland society when under the uncompromising leadership of Fallon and Forgan-Smith the labour movement came as close as it ever did to establishing a ‘Labor hegemony’ over Queensland politics and society.
Chapter Seven traces the AWU’s attempts to deal with the industrial and political issues which arose as Queensland became the base from which the Allies in the Pacific conducted the war against the Japanese. It also investigates the Union’s ongoing battle against its enemies within the labour movement. Having so successfully marginalized its political opponents at the ballot box the AWU renewed its attack on its militant opponents within the movement. The most significant aspect of this attack was the sectarianism that emerged and manifested itself through the establishment of the Industrial Groups.

Chapter Eight considers the abrupt demise of the AWU and the Labor Party in Queensland, the surrender of government to the conservatives, and the leadership of Queensland’s labour movement to the militant unions. Having placed its faith in the Industrial Groups as a pliable bulwark against communism and militancy in an increasingly diverse economy, the AWU and the Labor Party found themselves having to confront an emboldened faction making its own claims for leadership. Fiercely determined to defend its dominant position with the labour movement the AWU opted for an unnatural alliance with the militants that culminated in a disastrous split casting the Labor Party into the political wilderness for the next four decades.

This thesis will contend that the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers’ Union was able to establish itself as one of the most effective and powerful industrial organisations in Australian history. Exploiting the peculiar economic, social, industrial, political and geographic features of Queensland, the AWU used its numerical and organisational superiority to manipulate the decision-making bodies of the labour movement. This in turn converted into political dominance in parliament and at the ballot.
box. The AWU was able to maintain this dominance – and that of the Labor Party – through a tumultuous relationship with the labour movement it sought to represent. This relationship was marked not only by the ruthless suppression of all those that sought to oppose the AWU leadership clique but significantly through genuine industrial, social and economic reforms which benefited not only Queensland's labour movement but the rest of the Queensland society. Nevertheless, this same single-mindedness to attain and maintain domination would sow the seeds of the disastrous schism that would eventually sacrifice nearly all that the AWU had fought to achieve and fracture the relationship it had nurtured and manipulated for over half a century between the leadership of the AWU, its rank-and-file, the labour movement and the electorate of Queensland.