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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Chapter 5

Defeat and Depression, 1929-1933

"...this great organisation has contributed in greater measure to the sum total of human happiness in this State than has any other single influence." C G Fallon, Presidential Address, Seventeenth Annual Delegates Meeting of the Australian Workers Union (Queensland Branch) 1930.

The crushing defeat of the Labor Party at the 1929 State election had a cathartic affect upon the labour movement in Queensland. Although a sobering rebuke by the electorate the defeat was not altogether unexpected. The McCormack Government had become isolated from the electorate and more significantly the movement that had sustained it. From the time of the 1927 Railway Strike, McCormack and his acolytes within the PLP had emerged as irresponsible and unaccountable to the wishes of the movement. Amongst those which had lost faith in the political leadership was the powerful AWU. Although never advocating a vote against Labor the AWU's criticism of
the Government and the conspicuously reduced support it provided during the election campaign provided an unambiguous indication of its displeasure. As Queensland descended into the depths of the Great Depression the AWU was confronted with three major issues. How could it reassert its domination over the PLP? How could it renew the faith of the labour movement in the established body for political representation – the Labor Party? And what could it do in relation to the potential threat to its dominance posed by militants and the social discord brought about as a result of the economic crisis?

The defeat of Labor had resulted in the loss of sixteen seats including those of three Ministers and the Speaker of the House. The Country Progressive National Party (CPNP) of Arthur ‘Boy’ Moore had emphasised the worsening economic conditions and promised ten thousand jobs for Queensland’s men as well as apprenticeships for the boys. The most prominent campaign slogan for the CPNP was ‘Give the “Boy” a Chance’. Despite the convincing defeat of the PLP the AWU could at least take some solace from the performance of its own candidates within the PLP. At the Annual Delegates Meeting in 1930, J. S. Hanlon, Editor of the *Worker* stated:

> In regard to the State elections it may be mentioned ... that not a single member of Parliament who was formerly an official of the AWU and in whose electorate

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the *Worker* circulated, lost his seat. There are so (sic) fewer than 19 members of
the State Parliament who are ex-officials of the AWU.²

Such a statement is made even more impressive when it is considered that the PLP now
had only twenty seven members in Parliament compared to forty three before the
election.

The Labor Party had suffered its most serious reversals in the south east and in the
metropolitan areas. Of the sixteen seats the PLP lost to the CPNP, ten of them were in the
south east and of these six were lost in the Brisbane metropolitan area including the seat
of Bulimba which returned Mrs I. Longman as the first female elected to the Legislative
Assembly in Queensland. Of the remaining six seats two were in the mining and pastoral
electorates of Cook and Chillagoe in the Far North but more significantly the remaining
four seats were all in the sugar and farming districts around Rockhampton and Eacham to
the south of Cairns. Furthermore, Rockhampton itself was captured by an Independent.
Clearly the alliance forged between the PLP and the small to medium sugar growers and
farmers in the years of Ryan and Theodore was beginning to wane with the economic
conditions.

Whilst the AWU obviously had members in these areas the Labor candidates were
often metropolitan businessmen or cane growers. As these areas were more densely
populated than those further from the regional centres such as Rockhampton, the local

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² *Australian Workers' Union, Queensland Branch, Official Report of Seventeenth Annual Delegates
Meeting, January, 1930.* (Hereafter all such meetings will be referred to as *Annual Delegates Meeting*).
branches relied less upon the organisational abilities of the AWU. In these seats the
Labor Party relied more heavily upon its ability to appeal beyond its trade union base to
the wider community for its success. Thus as economic conditions worsened the small
capitalist businessmen and farmers deserted the party that seemingly could not guarantee
the profits they and their financiers demanded and had enjoyed under Labor.

Predictably, McCormack accepted responsibility for the result and resigned as
Leader of the Labor Party. Almost as predictable was the election of William Forgan-
Smith as McCormack’s successor. Thus one AWU man replaced another. For the PLP
and the AWU the task ahead was to discover why the Party had performed so poorly and
to reunite the labour movement and win back the support of the electorate. The
cornerstone of their strategy would be an unequivocal demand for loyalty in uniting
against a common foe – the Moore Government.

For the officials of the AWU the reasoning behind the defeat was simply one of
disloyalty and disruptors. Forgotten was the heavy-handed approach of McCormack and
the dismissive attitude he developed towards the official mechanisms of the labour
movement and to the movement to which he owed his power. The AWU could now use
the election result as the excuse it needed to launch an assault upon those militants within
the movement that questioned the legitimacy and the reformist policies of the Labor Party
and as an extension of that the AWU itself.

Even before the election the AWU was preparing for a ‘stoush’. From the mid-
twenties various disgruntled groups within the AWU in a number of states had formed
around the common issues of rank-and-file exclusion from the decision making process
of their officials and the perceived bureaucracy of the AWU. Most significant of these
groups was the Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group. A collection of militants, many with communist sympathies, the Group became a particular thorn in the sides of AWU officials.¹ Their concern was reflected at the 1929 Annual Delegates Meeting when a motion was moved to have a doorman to ensure that only those vouched for by an AWU official could attend the Meeting. In moving the motion, J. Campbell from the Far Northern District noted:

Just because a man happened to hold an AWU ticket it was not to be assumed that he was loyal to the organisation. A good deal of white-anting was going on, and it was the duty of delegates to protect the organisation so far as lay in their power.⁴

Clearly the AWU leadership were becoming suspicious of militant members of the AWU who challenged the authority of the Executive and who were advocating direct action tactics and a rejection of the arbitration system. To this end at the same meeting, the President George Martens in his last address as President⁵ referred to the recent Wharfies’ strike in New South Wales over the infamous ‘Dog Collar’ Act:

² Annual Delegates Meeting, 1929.
³ George Martens resigned as President of the Queensland Branch of the AWU at this Meeting due to his election as Member for the Federal seat of Herbert.
Its members listened to foolish advice, acted upon it and perished in the process. That will always happen when non-constitutional methods are adopted and the laws of the country defied.\textsuperscript{6}

It is quite evident that Martens’ message was more for the benefit of pastoral workers in the central west and sugar workers on the coast of Queensland than for members of the Waterside Workers’ Federation in New South Wales.

At the beginning of 1929 the AWU was by far the single largest trade union in Queensland with a membership of 51,833\textsuperscript{7} – over a third of unionists in the State! Thus of all the delegates to the triennial Labor-in-Politics Conventions they were the most numerous. The AWU was assured of at least five seats on the QCE. However, both the official AWU delegates and those AWU members that attended as local electorate delegates ensured that the union had the numbers on the floor of the Convention to secure the direct election from the floor of even more of their comrades to the QCE. Clearly even before the ravages of the Great Depression decimated the numbers of trade unionists within Queensland, the AWU was in a commanding position within the political and industrial organisations of the labour movement.

Of more immediate concern to the people of Queensland and Australia was the impending economic collapse and the responses of the Moore Government and the newly elected federal government of James Scullin and the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. Scullin was elected in early October in Labor’s greatest success at the Federal level. By

\textsuperscript{4} Annual Delegates Meeting, 1929.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
the end of that month the global economy was in a tail-spin following the Wall Street
collapse on ‘Black Tuesday’ 28 October. However, even before ‘Black Friday’, global
markets had been contracting with Australian commodity prices experiencing steady
debleses since 1927.

The most immediate effect of the economic collapse was unemployment. In June
1929, 10 717 unemployed had registered with the Labour Bureau in Queensland. By June
1932 that number had risen dramatically to 32 344. However, the threat of mass
unemployment was not immediately apparent to the Moore Government upon its
assumption of power in May 1929. The new Cabinet met on 21 May for the first time. As
their predecessors had done before, they quickly went about the business of repaying
their supporters with sympathetic legislation. On 22 May the Government suspended the
Rural Workers Award via an Order-in-Council. The award had provided for a 44-hour
week, time-and-a-half overtime rates, wages ranging up to £5 per week and granted
preference to members of the AWU. Although Moore claimed that such measures were
introduced to increase employment in the agricultural sector the move served not only to
reward those farmers engaged in mixed-farming that virtually banished the Labor Party
from the state’s south east but it also served as a none-too-subtle reminder to the Labor
Party and the AWU in particular, as to who was in charge. It is significant to note that at
the same meeting Moore abolished compulsory unionism for public servants, further
signaling an assault upon the organised labour movement in Queensland.

\[\text{Lack, C., op. cit., pp.63-64.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
In the following months Moore could point to the decision to suspend the award as the reason for increased employment in the sector. No doubt the reduced wages and conditions in the industry encouraged employers to take on more workers. However, it is more likely that continued good rainfall, which had broken the two-year drought, did more to encourage employment than the CPNP’s industrial relations policies. Nevertheless, the rain could only help for so long. By November 1929, with world commodity prices plummeting, the official number of unemployed in Queensland rose dramatically to 17,782.10

The Annual Delegates Meeting AWU of the in February 1930 was significant not only for its attack on the Moore Government and the enemies of Labor as well as confirmation of the growing economic crisis but it was also the first at which the newly elected president, Clarrie Fallon, presided. Clarence George Fallon was born at Rookwood in Central Queensland around 1890. The son of a shearer and a domestic servant who both participated in the 1890 shearers’ strike, young Clarrie was well versed in the rhetoric and tradition of industrial trade unionism. A tall man for the times (5ft 10in), Fallon had a pale complexion, a shock of red hair and a piercing stare that could intimidate most men along with a ‘wonderful physique’. Fallon worked in the mining, transport and pastoral industries and joined the Trolley, Draymen and Carters’ Union in 1908 when he also became active in other rural unions. In 1917, he joined the AWU and by 1921 had become a temporary organiser for the Union at Bundaberg. By 1923 he was in charge of the AWU office at Rockhampton and in the following year he was transferred to Mackay where he became friends with William Forgan-Smith. Fallon was

the Northern District Secretary of the AWU by 1928 and his rapid rise through the AWU hierarchy was complete when in mid-1929 he narrowly won the Presidency.\textsuperscript{11}

The reports of the district secretaries revealed that employment opportunities for its members were diminishing with the Western and South Western District reports blaming not only commodity prices but continued drought conditions for unemployment. The Northern and Far Northern Districts could report some mining work and consistent employment in the sugar industry whilst in the Southern District there was so little construction work that it had become ‘purely a tucker job’\textsuperscript{12}. Furthermore, the district secretaries reported dissension amongst some members with South Western District Secretary, G.H. Devries reporting:

\ldots I am sorry to say that many unkindly remarks are hurled in the wrong direction, and the assistance which could be expected from members towards officials is not given.\textsuperscript{13}

Devries was referring to those militant members of the Union who had aligned themselves with the self-styled ‘Rank and File Movement’ which had emerged from the Bushworkers Propaganda Group, announcing its arrival with a Rank and File Conference in New South Wales in 1928.\textsuperscript{14} In his inaugural Presidential Address, Fallon too, chose to confront the issue of the Rank and File Movement in a manner that typified his leadership style, warning:

\textsuperscript{12} See district secretary reports from the \textit{Annual Delegates Meeting 1930}.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Idid}.
\textsuperscript{14} Hearn, M. and Knowles, H.. \textit{op. cit.}, 1995, pp. 143-144
...There is a very close analogy between this so-called Rank and File Movement and the now defunct Machine Shearers' Union of infamous memory. Members would be well advised at all times to regard with suspicion glib-tongued individuals claiming to represent any organisation the origin of which is clouded in mystery, who promise to provide a panacea for all industrial and social evils, provided that they, the members, will sign and or do something, the purport of which is usually not clearly understood.  

Fallon did not wish to begin his reign with any sense of disunity and preferred for the energies of the AWU Executive and that of the labour movement to focus upon its political and industrial enemies. And there was no shortage of targets with Campbell of the Far Northern District moving a motion in order to 'combat the political activities of the Country Womens' Association' (CWA). Speaking to the motion Campbell stated:

Those who controlled the CWA were largely drawn from the leisured classes. Many of its leaders were prominently identified with the Nationalist organisation and were implacably hostile to Labor...Labor had not paid sufficient attention to the organisation of women in the past'.

The motion was supported by the Branch Secretary, Jim Riordan, who believed that 'working class women should capture the CWA'. Whilst the motion may seem trivial it is indicative of the deep resentment at losing office that existed within the labour movement.

15 Annual Delegates Meeting, 1930.
16 Ibid.
at the time and also the extent to which the AWU was prepared to go to in order to secure political power for the PLP. The motion may also indicate the prevalent belief within the AWU that it represented the interests of country people in Queensland and as such it should exert an influence in all relevant bodies including those representing women.

The mood in favour of unity was expressed most fervently by William Forgan-Smith when he addressed the Meeting stating:

The forces of reaction were firmly entrenched, and the stage has been reached when industrial unionism will be called upon to guard its interests with jealous care.\(^\text{17}\)

This theme was, once again, reinforced by Fallon in more ominous terms when he stated:

Unionists would be well advised to keep in mind that every one of those who in any way assisted to defeat the Labor Party must be held responsible for social and economic evils resulting from any actions by the present Government.\(^\text{18}\)

From the very beginning both Forgan-Smith and Fallon encapsulated their beliefs as to how the Labor Party would again secure political power in Queensland – unity! Terms such as unity, loyalty and the peculiarly Australian manifestation of this concept- 'mateship' - would be used often in the proceeding years as the PLP/AWU clique attempted to recover the ground which it had lost in 1929. The term 'unity' however for men like Forgan-Smith and Fallon was a term which was synonymous with obedience and compliance to the wishes of these two men and the PLP/AWU clique they represented.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
The unity demanded by the leaders of the labour movement in Queensland, however, was severely tested by both the worsening economic conditions and the Moore Government’s zealous implementation of CPNP policy and ideology. Adopting the economic orthodoxy of the time, Moore believed the only way to revive the economy was to employ strict economies in fiscal expenditure through the reduction of public expenditure and the balancing of the State’s budget. Furthermore, Moore could only see that the best way to stimulate the economy was to assist private enterprises’ claiming as late as 1932 that, ‘All a Government should do is to give encouragement to private industry’.  

Moore quickly went about reducing the costs not only of the Government but also of private employers. In September the new Attorney-General, Neil Macroarty, responded defiantly to a question in the House from ‘Mossy’ Hynes about the Government’s intentions to ‘ringbark’ the Arbitration legislation claiming that, “We will ‘ringbark’ the Arbitration Court at an early opportunity”. And they did. The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act introduced in the House by the Minister for Labour and Industry, H.E. Sizer, was near enough to a complete repudiation of its predecessor as enacted and amended by successive Labor governments since the administration of T.J. Ryan. The new Act abolished the Board of Trade and Arbitration, replacing it with an Industrial Court adjudicated upon by one Supreme Court judge; abolished the 44-hour week; abolished the statutory 8-hour day and the basic wage and placed these issues under the jurisdiction of the Industrial Court; granted preference to unionists only upon

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20 QPD, Vol. CLIII September 3 1929
mutual agreement; gave the Court full control over wages, hours and conditions; reduced public holidays; abolished picketing by trade unionists; prohibited union officials from policing awards and forbade public servants to affiliate to political organisations through their union.21

Such legislation was a clear assault upon the principles of the PLP and the labour movement in Queensland. However, there was worse to come for Queensland workers. In March 1930 the Government and other employers' organisations applied to the Court for a reduction in the basic wage. The Court refused but undertook to review the situation in July. Thus in July a new application was made for the Court to reduce the basic wage from £4.5.0 to £4.0.0. The Court reduced the wage to £4.0.0. (the wage for women which was approximately half of that for males was similarly reduced). This was not enough for the Moore Government which then decided to apply for a ten per cent reduction in wages for all public servants. The Court only granted six per cent whereupon the Government via an Order-in-Council removed the States public servants from the jurisdiction of the Court and subsequently initiated the full ten per cent cut. Thus in one stroke the Moore Government had removed almost fifteen per cent of the States trade unionists, including the ARU from the ambit of the Industrial Court. With the trade unions suffering a large reduction in membership due to economic circumstances and the Labor Party on the Opposition benches there was little the labour movement could do. In November, the Court reduced the basic wage again to £3.17.0 per week.

For the AWU there was yet another blow. Having already removed the public servants from the ambit of the Industrial Court the Moore Government struck directly at

21 Lack, C., op.cit., 1962, p. 93
the heart of the AWU when it removed all workers employed in the pastoral industry (except shearers) and all those employed in the metaliferous mining industry (except those at Mt. Isa) from the Court’s jurisdiction. These workers along with those in the sugar industry provided the backbone of the AWU in Queensland. Despite Government arguments as to the essential nature of these industries and thus the need to ensure their continued operation through reduced operational costs, the move can be seen as a deliberate attempt to isolate the AWU in the industrial relations environment of Queensland. Amazingly, however, the AWU Executive refused to endorse strike activity in response to these punitive actions emphasising faith in arbitration and constitutional measures, with Hynes urging that ‘the defined policy of the AWU is arbitration’. Furthermore, the Executive realised the endorsement of illegal strike activity would provide the Moore Government with a very real opportunity to have the AWU de-registered. Such official timidity in the face of a hostile government could only serve to lend credibility to the activities of militants within the labour movement in the eyes of disgruntled and even impoverished trade unionists.

Although shearers were still covered by the Court they could expect little sympathy from an industrial judiciary that no longer included one of their own. In November 1930 the pastoral award was reduced by ten per cent. As most other workers covered by this award had already been removed from it, the cut only affected shearers. The shearers tradition of militancy soon revealed itself and sheds throughout the western districts were soon wiring the AWU executives for advice regarding imminent strike action. Again the Executive counselled against direct action with Jim Riordan warning

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the shearers that under the new industrial legislation any strike action would eventuate in
the immediate cancellation of the award and the de-registration of the AWU.\textsuperscript{23}

The Executive was in an awkward position. It realised that in these times of
economic hardship that any attempt at direct industrial action could only lead to greater
hardship for the membership. Desperate workers, not only from Queensland but New
South Wales and South Australia would willingly fill the void left by striking shearers or
any other unionist who chose to support such activity. Furthermore, the AWU Executive
knew that they would have little influence over the Government who were firmly on the
side of the pastoralists. Despite its hostility to the Moore Government the Executive
decided that the best option was to abide by the decisions of the Industrial Court and wait
for conditions to improve rather than risk de-registration and unemployment for its
members and possibly themselves.

Nevertheless, the shearers were restless and susceptible to the claims of militant
agitators. From these agitators arose the most significant threat to the AWU at this time –
the Pastoral Workers’ Industrial Union (PWIU). Emerging from the Rank and File
Movement and with connections to the Communist Party-instigated Militant Minority
Movement (MMM) the PWIU became a source of suspicion and loathing by not only the
AWU leadership but also conservative governments and graziers organisations. After
forming a loose coalition following the 1928 Rank and File Conference mentioned above,
the PWIU came into existence officially after an inaugurating conference in December

\textsuperscript{23}Worker, 21 January 1931.
1930. The final impetus was given to the formation of the PWIU when Federal Arbitration Court Chief Judge Dethridge, pronounced his notorious Dethridge Award of July 1930 which slashed shearing rates. In the subsequent ill-fated strike of New South Wales shearers the AWU refused to support the strikers and disgruntled militants took the opportunity to form a new union.

Amongst the leadership of the PWIU was renegade Labor senator and expelled AWU official Arthur Rae, ex-Wobbly, a foundation member of the CPA Norm Jeffery and CPA functionary Tom Brislan. The objectives of the PWIU were clearly stated in the CPA journal the Workers' Weekly:

(a) To organise the workers in the pastoral and related rural industries and those following the callings coming under the general heading bushwork, with the object of securing better wages and improved working conditions.

(b) To equip all workers in the industries covered with a better knowledge of the class nature of the struggle that goes on in society.

(c) To expose the Arbitration and Conciliation Courts and all forms of class collaboration as the instruments of the ruling class.

(d) To fight all forms of class oppression and exploitation and to organise

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for the ultimate overthrow of capitalism and the introduction of a socialist state as the means of achieving freedom and justice.\textsuperscript{25}

Such objectives certainly indicate the dramatic shift to the Left of a number of pastoral workers. Emerging as it did from the Bushworker’s Propaganda Group and the Rank and File Movement with their aims of reforming the AWU from within, the PWIU clearly betrayed CPA influence and reflected the new ‘social fascist’ line emanating from the Comintern with its repudiation of ‘class collaboration’.

Not surprisingly the PWIU found ready acceptance in western Queensland following the ten per cent cut in shearing rates. In January 1931 the AWU Executive received numerous telegrams and letters from the pastoral disputes committees that had been formed appealing for assistance -- ‘Barcaldine men appeal to you to stand behind men financially in present trouble’\textsuperscript{126} and more ominously, ‘Members here need financial support during pastoral dispute otherwise resigning’.\textsuperscript{27} As the strike was not endorsed by the Executive it always refused these requests. Such an unsympathetic response to these appeals only paved the way for the PWIU. It is difficult to determine whether the AWU gave so little support to the strikers because they wished to maintain the survival of the Union or because the Executive believed that the PWIU was trying to get the AWU de-registered so that it may become the major shearing union.\textsuperscript{28} However, it would seem unlikely that the Industrial Court, the United Graziers Association or the Moore

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Workers’ Weekly}, 25 November, 1930.
\textsuperscript{26} Wilson, Secretary of Pastoral Disputes Committee to AWU Executive, 15 January 1931, \textit{AWU, Queensland Branch Executive Minutes}. NBAC, Canberra, AWU Deposit, M50.
\textsuperscript{27} Hickson, AWU Organiser to AWU Executive, 16 January 1931, \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{28} Costar, B., \textit{op.cit.}, p.190.
Government would have welcomed the presence of such an avowedly militant trade union such as the PWIU over the more moderate and pliant AWU. It is more probable that conservative powers in Queensland would have preferred no union whatsoever, therefore, the AWU may well have been fighting purely for its survival with enemies on both the Left and Right wing of the political spectrum.

The militant stand taken by the PWIU leadership soon encouraged shearers in the western districts to form strike camps. Both the Workers Weekly and the local police claimed that throughout the district in towns such as Toowoomba, Hughenden, Charleville, Cunnamulla, St. George, Blackall, Longreach and Goondiwindi that members were resigning from the AWU and joining the PWIU.29 Indeed it was claimed that PWIU organisers ‘Trucker’ Brown and Bert Buckley had signed up four hundred shearers in the Emerald district.30 The PWIU journal the Rank and File Bulletin produced a special Queensland edition which came out on a weekly basis which attacked the United Graziers Association, the Moore Government and most particularly the AWU Executive and revelled in publishing disparaging lists of perceived ‘scabs’ – many of whom were AWU members working under the new award.

In the face of such a strident attack on its authority the AWU officials wasted no time in denouncing the new union as ‘bogus’ and a Communist front and reaffirming its belief in arbitration with both the Worker and the Annual Delegates Meeting fervently expressing these beliefs.31 Like never before, Fallon demanded unity and loyalty:

29 Workers Weekly, 16 January 1931 and ‘Police Report’, 2 March 1931 item 31/6975, PRE/A1025 QSA
31 See in particular a motion by Harry Boland (Southern District) declaring PWIU a ‘bogus organisation’ in Eighteenth Annual Delegates Meeting, Queensland AWU, 1931.
I do wish to impress on delegates that we must be prepared to abide by the constitution and policy of our movement. Those who are not so prepared are enemies. Men working in industry would be prepared to put a scab on the track, but the same men are looking to political scabs for guidance – scabs infinitely more pernicious and dangerous than industrial scabs. The time has come now when every man not with us is against us, and he is deserving of no quarter ... A display of courage is essential at this juncture; loyalty and honesty of purpose are demanded.32

Fallon and the AWU leadership could no longer tolerate any further diminution of the AWU’s power in the Queensland labour movement and set about ensuring its survival by any means necessary.

As ever the conservatives responded in typical style with ‘volunteer’ labour being railed into the strike areas to ensure that wool production was maintained. Such tactics were not new to the UGA or their political representatives, however there was a new factor in the strike-breaking activities of the conservatives in this dispute – the involvement of the AWU. In March, the Rank and File Bulletin claimed that, ‘The AWU Officials are at present in conference with the United Graziers, trying to devise ways and means of preventing the Rank and File from joining the PWIU of A’.33 And they were. In an effort to prevent the growth of the new union the AWU realised that the strike could

32 Presidential Address, Annual Delegates Meeting 1931.
33 Rank and File Bulletin, March 10 1931.
not succeed and thus agreed to assist the UGA and the government in the recruitment of ‘volunteer’ labour. In a remarkable episode in the history of Australian industrial relations, the organisational descendants of the legendary shearing strikes of the 1890s – the central focus of the AWU’s mythology - were now assisting the forces of capital to break a shearers strike in order to maintain its strangle-hold over the trade union movement in Queensland and to prevent the forces of ‘anarchy’ gaining the ascendancy.

The Workers Weekly was direct in its condemnation of the AWU’s involvement, branding the union as ‘the greatest scab agency in Australia’. Fallon and his supporters maintained a clear conscience however with the AWU ensuring that the ‘volunteers’ were or became members of the AWU. Thus, as trade union members working under an approved award they could defend themselves against the accusation of being a ‘scab’. Nevertheless, by these actions the AWU officials had provided considerable fuel to any militant fire that may arise in the future. To add to the ire of the PWIU the Lang Labor Government in New South Wales had even provided police protection for a train load of ‘volunteers’ from Victoria and New South Wales.

As before, the strike-breakers received hostile receptions wherever they disembarked with many clashes occurring between the strikers and the ‘volunteers’. One particular brawl in Emerald developed into a pitched battle between strikers and police with many injuries on both sides and a number of strikers imprisoned. Despite the activities of the PWIU and its supporters most sheds had little difficulty in completing the season with the police providing a guard for the strike-breakers. The only hope for the

^Workers Weekly, 21 January 1931.
The ARU were sympathetic but would not take such action unless they could guarantee the support of the AFULE. In a harsh economic climate the ARU leadership was not about to commit itself to industrial action that did not have the support of the other main railway union. The more conservative AFULE would not expose its members to probable victimisation for the benefit of a militant union especially when its own members had also suffered wage reductions without resorting to strike activity. Without the support of the railway unions the strike soon collapsed in April and the influence of the PWJU in Queensland began to wane.

As politicians at both State and Federal levels battled with the Depression, workers in Queensland, as elsewhere in Australia, continued to suffer. Moore was a fervent believer in a deflationary policy that encouraged reduced public spending and wage reductions as advocated by the Bank of England’s Sir Otto Neimeyer and later in the ‘Premier’s Plan’. For the CPNP the recovery would only eventuate through reduced public expenditure and encouragement to private industry. The Forgan-Smith Opposition, however, whilst never supporting the populist repudiation policies of Jack Lang in New South Wales, rejected these deflationary policies favouring a recovery lead by increased public works in order to increase employment and consumer spending. Whilst Moore followed the economic orthodoxy of the day, Labor in Queensland had embraced

Keynesian fiscal theory long before it became the new orthodoxy in Western democracies.

At the beginning of the Depression Queensland was the only State in Australia to have a system of unemployment relief. The legislation enacted by the Theodore Government in 1922, was only meant to sustain seasonal workers during the off-season and proved to be quite inadequate for the large-scale unemployment that accompanied the economic slump. Under the Moore Government, the unemployed received rations and relief work. The system was paid for by a tax of three pence in the pound on all wage earners, earning the ire of the Labor Party which advocated a tax on a progressive scale. For single men the situation was made worse by the stipulation that unemployment relief could not be collected from the same place for more than a fortnight. This meant that thousands of young men were forced to travel the State in search of work or at the very least the next relief station.

As with other States around Australia, organisations for the unemployed soon emerged in Queensland under a variety of titles such as: the Unemployed Workers’ Movement (UWM), the One Big Union of Unemployed, the Unemployed and Relief Workers’ State Council of Action, the Unemployed Workers’ Committee, the Unemployed Club, the ALP Rank and File Committee and the United Front Committee. Many of the members and titles of these organisations were interchangeable and many had associations with Left wing groups such as the MMM and the CPA. These groups lobbied politicians, organised rallies and other forms of political propaganda, assisted in

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the organisation of relief work and assumed the administration of numerous strike camps where they dealt with everything from food and shelter to hygiene and the maintenance of order. 39

Although central ration distribution depots made it relatively easy for militants to distribute literature and partake in other organising activities amongst the unemployed, especially in the regional centres, 40 the unemployment relief legislation militated against the development of a disciplined broad-based unemployed movement in Queensland. Even if the militants could evoke any sympathy for their aims and ideology from the unemployed, it was probable that those unemployed had moved on within the fortnight in search of work or another ration depot. Thus, despite the claims of the militants to the contrary, there was no large unemployed organisation comparable to that which was found in other States such as New South Wales.

Likewise, with no clear threat from the unemployed and with the CPNP in power, conservatives found no need for the formation of a quasi-military organisation such as the New Guard. The only similar group to emerge in Queensland - the ‘Vigilants’ – was more like a businessmen’s club that directed its efforts towards lobbying their political allies in the Moore Ministry for favourable industrial and economic legislation rather than military action and physical assault. Housed in the same premises as the Chamber of Commerce, the ‘Vigilants’, although assailed by the labour movement as ‘fascists’, were

40 Ibid.
content to concern themselves with the reformation of the Brisbane City Council and had formed themselves into the Civil Reform League to contest municipal elections.

Another factor in the retarded growth of unemployed and worker militancy in Queensland was the relative prosperity enjoyed by the State during the Depression. It has been claimed that Queensland did not suffer as much as other States because of its under-developed manufacturing sector and reliance upon the primary sector. In 1932 18.8 per cent of Queensland's trade unionists were unemployed compared with the national average of 29 per cent. Queensland had the least urbanised population in Australia and had the highest proportion of its workers employed in primary industries. With the manufacturing sector most susceptible to the economic slump it is obvious that Queensland would thus be less affected. Furthermore of the agricultural crop that suffered the largest price reductions - wheat - Queensland had very few acres under cultivation. The fact that domestic consumption and prices for sugar remained consistent throughout the Depression also served to reduce the impact on Queensland. Sugar was Queensland's most valuable crop and it is remarkable that in 1930 in the midst of the Depression the sugar industry in Queensland employed directly or indirectly 100,000 people in a population of just over 900,000. For those in the pastoral industry the Moore Government enacted various legislation that ensured the purchase of wool, attempted to ease the burden of debt repayment and reduced the costs of production, including

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43 Costar, B., 'Was Queensland Different?', *op.cit.*, 1974, p.33
44 Ibid., p. 35

206
wages. Thus, although many Queenslanders did suffer from unemployment and poverty it can be seen that the Depression did not have as big an impact as it did in other parts of Australia. This in turn made it difficult for militant ideologies to get a firm hold in the State. As well, many workers were prepared to accept some reduction in wages and conditions, content in the realisation that they did at least have jobs with which to support themselves and their families, unlike many others.

Nevertheless, strikes still occurred and the AWU had to decide how best to deal with them. The last major dispute of the Depression began in November 1931 when mine owners around Cloncurry used the fact that Moore had removed metalliferous miners from the ambit of the Industrial Court to reduce wages. The miners at Dobbyn, Mt. Oxide and Orphan mines went on strike. Working in dreadful conditions and in an isolated part of the State the men were largely unorganised with only one of their number a member of the AWU. Despite pleas from the AWU and the Labor Party, Moore refused to repeal his Order-in-Council and allow the miners to have their case heard in the Industrial Court. The strike soon developed into a railway strike in the North as most northern railway unionists went out in support of the miners. The strike was characterised by a number of violent clashes including in the attack and seizure of the weapons of two police officers. This incident convinced Moore to introduce the *Railway Strike and Public Safety Preservation Bill*. The Bill gave the Governor-in-Council the right to declare a state of

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45 See for example *Lessees Relief Act, Land Act Review of Cattle Holdings Act, Agricultural Bank Amendment Act* and the *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act*. 

207
emergency whenever and wherever it was deemed that public safety was threatened and provided for harsh punitive measures for alleged offenders.46

The course and details of what became a six month strike are not relevant here. However, it must be acknowledged that internecine struggles in the ARU47 and between it and the AFULE did not assist the miners’ cause. The latter refused to imperil the employment opportunities of its members for a dispute it did not think could be resolved successfully, leading to the collapse of the railway strike on 29 November, leaving the miners without effective support. What is relevant was the role of the AWU in this dispute. The AWU Executive gave the striking miners its full support and welcomed and encouraged the involvement of the railway unions, with the direct involvement of Clarrie Fallon securing a resolution to the dispute.

How then did the miners’ dispute differ from that of the shearers’ strike for the AWU leadership? Firstly, the miners were not defying any award or any decision of the Industrial Court. On the contrary the Moore Government explicitly denied these workers access to the industrial relations mechanism that was at the very core of AWU philosophy. So it was that the AWU’s initial efforts in this dispute were directed towards encouraging Moore to repeal the Order-in-Council. Convinced of the justness of the cause and the intransigence of the Moore Government48 the AWU provided the strikers with food and clothing and a small amount of strike pay. Secondly, unlike the shearers’ strike the miners received no obvious leadership from the CPA, the MMM or any rival

47 For one contemporary view of the ARU’s role in this strike see Nolan, F., (edited by Murphy, D.J.), You Pass This Way Only Once, Stafford, 1974, p. 60.
48 Worker, June 1931.
group of militants such as the PWIU that could pose a threat to the AWU. As such the only great ideological principle at stake was that of the right to arbitration.

The role of the AWU Executive during the miners' dispute was calculated and timely. The Executive were diminished in the eyes of many AWU members and others within the labour movement following its dubious strike-breaking role in the shearers' strike and this dispute provided a ready made opportunity for redeeming itself. Furthermore, the Moore Government's callous refusal to intervene and its dramatic introduction of punitive emergency powers allowed Forgan-Smith and the Labor Opposition to launch sustained attacks upon the Government in support of the defenceless workers. In short, the dispute provided a much needed avenue by which the AWU and the Labor Party could realign themselves with the interests and goals of trade unionists and Labor supporters. Most significantly, the dispute allowed the AWU to reassert its hegemony over the Queensland labour movement and revive support for moderate reforms such as arbitration and conciliation over the direct action tactics of the militant Left.

Under such conditions with over two years of Depression and the Moore Government behind them, the official representatives of the labour movement in Queensland met in Brisbane in January 1932 for the Labor-in-Politics Convention to organise its assault on the forces of capitalism. And there were many issues upon which the labour movement could support its claim to be returned to power. Apart from the areas of unemployment, wage reductions and the emasculation of the Industrial Court there were numerous other grievances.
Firstly, the Moore Government had wasted no time in establishing a Royal Commission into the Mungana Mines affair and the role of former Premiers, McCormack and Theodore (the latter now Federal Treasurer in the Scullin Ministry). The whole drawn out affair with its accompanying civil court case, quickly appeared little more than political vindictiveness. Although the court case eventually cleared both of any crime\(^{49}\), Theodore was forced to stand down from the Ministry throughout, both proceedings only succeeding in hindering the Scullin Government's ability to adequately deal with the economic crisis. The QCE vigorously objected to the Royal Commission and its findings in favour of criminal proceedings claiming that it was, 'A political conspiracy to destroy the Labour Movement by discrediting its leaders and to stampede public support ...'^\(^{50}\) A claim almost confirmed by the Attorney-General, Neil Macroarty, who when defending the amount of money he was paid in legal fees to prosecute the civil case stated:

The Mungana case smashed the Labor Party in Australia almost beyond mending. Thousands of persons throughout the Commonwealth consider that I was worth what I was paid for in that case.\(^{51}\)

Furthermore the CPNP continued the practice that would become a feature of Queensland politics – gerrymandering the electoral boundaries. The redistribution reduced the size of the Legislative Assembly from seventy two seats to sixty two seats.


\(^{50}\) Minutes of the Executive Committee of the QCE, 7 July 1930.

Of the ten seats to go, three were held by the CPNP whilst seven were held by Labor. Significantly for the Labor Party and the AWU was the Government’s reduction of western electorates from fourteen to eight. Despite Government claims that this was due to these areas losing population it could also be seen that this redistribution was a barely disguised attack upon the electoral successes of the Labor Party and the AWU in the Western Districts. The redistribution favoured those seats in which the CPNP felt they were strongest – the metropolitan areas and the south-east, at the expense of those areas where Labor was strongest – the west and the north.  

Other grievances included the final dissolution of state enterprises and changes to the franchise qualifications. (Although the former had also been commenced under McCormack, the Labor Party lost no opportunity for denouncing Moore for this action). The changes to franchise qualifications was, however a particularly obvious and pernicious attack on the voting rights of Queensland workers. The Moore Government raised the residential qualification for an electorate from six weeks to three months. At a time when many workers were ‘on the track’ in search of work and when the legislation providing relief rations prevented a person from staying in the one area for long it can be seen that this new legislation disenfranchised many people. More importantly from the perspective of the Labor Party, it can also be assumed that the majority of these newly disenfranchised people were Labor voters.

Of all the delegates that attended the Labor-in-Politics Convention at the Trades Hall in Brisbane in January 1932 it was the AWU that provided the largest single number  

with ten delegates – the next highest union representation was the AMIEU with two delegates. This figure does not allow for the AWU’s many supporters representing the forty eight electorates delegates or those unions who were sympathetic. The Convention would need to serve as a basis for regaining power from the CPNP and divesting itself of the bitterness that characterised the later part of the 1920s.

Unity and loyalty would be of the utmost importance in this struggle and there was no time for ideologues and disruptors. This theme was taken up enthusiastically by William Demaine in his Presidential Address:

We have tried to get at the reason of the great setback, and can only attribute it to the improved conditions having been attained without any special effort or exercise of any self-denial on the part of the workers, and of the fact that the new generation had never suffered hardship, such as their fathers and mothers had undergone … stirred up by malcontents and visionaries, they became dissatisfied, restless, and impatient at the seeming slowness of the march of progress … and they forgot all that the Labor Party had done for them Industrially. Politically and Socially, and, like Samson, they wrecked the edifice that had taken thirty years of hard toil and suffering and fourteen years of special legislation to build up. …

And now we come to the question of the solidarity of the Socialist-Labor Movement, industrially and politically, and the need for a closing up of the ranks. The plain fact is that our greatest enemy is not the Capitalist System. … The internecine strife that is so persistent amongst us is making us … an easy prey to our capitalist foes. … No great cause was ever built up on the shifting sands of
petty differences, jealousies and rivalries, or selfish ambitions. There is only one solid rock foundation on which such a structure can be built for all time endurance, and that is Solidarity.\textsuperscript{53}

The Convention would be the last until after World War II in which any heated debates would occur. The main issue for debate were motions insisting upon the immediate implementation of the Socialist Objective emanating from the Northern electorates of Bowen and Cook. Predictably, the AWU and the PLP used its numbers to reject the motions, arguing forcefully in favour of ‘gradualism’ and the reality that the electorate would not accept such radical proposals. Motions were also moved to increase branch representation at the Convention at the expense of union representation. Again the AWU and the PLP (most notably Forgan-Smith and Hynes) quashed the debate claiming, as McCormack did in 1916, that the unions contributed the most funds and resources and thus deserved representation. In the voting for the Queensland Central Executive (QCE) the AWU/PLP clique once again asserted its domination over the Queensland Labour Movement. The movement could now be directed towards winning the election.

A final factor in the re-emergence of the AWU/PLP clique was the way in which the daily operation of the QCE had evolved by 1932. From the mid-1920s there had been an Executive Committee comprising of the President, Vice-President, Secretary and usually about five members elected from the QCE by the members of that body. Of course, with the AWU/PLP dominating the QCE it is not surprising that this group

\textsuperscript{53} William Demaine, Presidential Address, \textit{Official Record of the Fourteenth Queensland Labor-in-Politics Convention, Trades Hall, Brisbane, 11 January 1932.}
dominated the Executive Committee. This Committee was designed to administer the
day-to-day administrivia of the QCE. However, from early 1930 this Executive assumed
extraordinary powers within the Queensland labour movement. Within the difficult
financial climate the QCE Executive Committee deemed the expenditure of the regular
QCE meetings prohibitive. As such the Executive Committee assumed responsibility for
almost all decisions that needed to be made as they arose. The full QCE met irregularly
and were only really required for the Annual General Meeting and for any extraordinary
meeting which may be called to deal with the most serious issues that may arise.\textsuperscript{54}

Included amongst the many responsibilities given to the Executive were the power to deal
with discipline within the branches, expenditure of the QCE's budget, response to
political questions that arose in the course of public debate, confirmation and explanation
of QCE policy and even the nomination and endorsement of Labor candidates when
plebiscites were deemed to expensive.

Whilst originally conceived as a strategy for economic efficiency amidst a crisis,
the powers given to the Executive Committee during the Depression only served to
further concentrate the power within the organised labour movement in Queensland into
the hands of the few - and those few, more often than not owed their political careers to
the AWU. In Chapter Two it was argued that whomever controlled the QCE controlled
the labour movement in Queensland. From the 1930s onwards the same could be said of
the Executive Committee of the QCE.

The elections of June 1932 would most obviously be fought upon the Moore
Government's ability to counter the effects of the Great Depression. Moore and the

\textsuperscript{54} QCE Minutes, January 1930.
CPNP clung doggedly to fiscal restraint and the full implementation of the deflationary 'Premiers' Plan' stating, 'the Government will stand or fall by the Premiers' Plan ...' Forgan-Smith and the Labor Party trod more warily. The Labor Party realised that to flatly reject the Premiers' Plan would only marginalise Queensland from the majority of the other States and the Federal Government (the latter now in the hands of the newly created and anti-Labor, United Australia Party). Nor did the Labor Party wish to endorse a deflationary policy that it did not agree with. Thus Forgan-Smith pledged to initiate some of the fiscal economies of the Plan whilst allowing himself the scope to 'review' other elements of the Plan that would prevent the expanded public works the Labor Party deemed necessary for redressing the issues of unemployment and consumer spending with his proposed two-and-a-half million pound 'Revival Loan'. Such a pragmatic tactic along with the ruthless efforts of the Executive Committee ensured that the schism which 'Lang Labor' had unleashed upon the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party was effectively suppressed in Queensland.

Whilst Moore's campaign was characterised by a grim determination to reduce wages further, retrench public servants, and ill-tempered gaffes such as referring to the workers as 'parasites', Forgan-Smith's was an electoral tour de force. With widespread discontent and unemployment it was easy for Forgan-Smith to expose the CPNP's deficiencies whilst at the same time promising increased public spending and

55 Brisbane Courier, 30 April 1932.
58 Daily Standard, 10 May, 1932.
employment opportunities. In an exhausting campaign designed to unite Labor's traditional supporters the Opposition Leader, was met by rousing receptions in Labor strongholds in the North and Central-West. More significant was his triumphal reception at the Brisbane City Hall. If Labor was to win it not only had to recapture the disgruntled Labor voters from the rural and provincial seats but most importantly the metropolitan voters which had deserted Labor in droves at the 1929 election.

The seven seat majority attained by the Labor Party on 11 June 1932 was more emphatic than it may first appear when Moore's manipulations of the electoral boundaries are taken into account. Every government, both State and Federal, which had presided at the end of 1929 had been defeated by the end of 1932 and as such it would be convenient to attribute Moore's defeat to the deprivations of the Depression. However this would deny the realities of the CPNP's ruthless pursuit of its political enemies and the favouritism given to its allies amidst much social distress. Through its virtual destruction of the arbitration system, dramatic reductions in wages and conditions, the insensitive approach to relief and massive reduction of public services and public servants the CPNP proved itself almost puritanical in its attempts to elevate the primacy of private enterprise. Its excesses alienated the small to medium business people and farmers who gained little if anything from these harsh measures and only served to re-unite a dispirited and divided labour movement behind its leadership to combat a common foe. For many within the labour movement the Moore Government only seemed to lend credibility to the adage that even a bad Labor Government was always better than

an anti-Labor Government. The catch-cry of 'Remember Moore' would serve successive Labor Governments well in Queensland.

For the AWU the years of the Depression had been both tumultuous and triumphal. It had fought and defeated, at considerable cost to its own reputation, the militant PWIU. It had revived its fighting tradition through the Cloncurry miners whilst simultaneously reasserting the principle of arbitration. Despite a significant reduction in its own membership the ravages of the Depression had had a more disastrous impact upon other unions in Queensland and provided the AWU with a relatively larger numerical strength than it had previously enjoyed. With its allies in the PLP it reigned almost unchallenged in the QCE and on the floor of the Labor-in-Politics Convention and it benefited more than any other group from the increased powers of the Executive Committee. The officials now rallied behind the leadership of the ruthlessly efficient Clarrie Fallon who could now look to not only assert the principles of the Queensland AWU over that States industrial and political labour movement but also that of the national bodies. Most importantly it was the AWU's organisational and political skills and resources which had helped facilitate and lead the revival of the labour movement in Queensland and the eventual victory of the Labor Party.