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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Conclusion

With the election of the Country Liberal Party under the leadership of Francis Nicklin in 1957 four decades of Labor domination in Queensland had ended. Gair and his supporters would eventually join with their southern brethren to form the Democratic Labor Party that would continue to run and occasionally return candidates at the state and federal levels for both upper and lower houses well into the 1970s. Under the burden of the cataclysmic schism of the 1950s the industrial and political leadership of the labour movement had shifted towards the militants at the Trades and Labour Council. Ironically, and despite Labor Party hopes to the contrary, Nicklin and his successors had embarked on a conservative domination of Queensland politics that would rival that of its Labor predecessors. In the space of only a few years the political monolith that had been built with the indelible guidance and control of the AWU over four decades had imploded.

This thesis has concerned itself with the answering of a fundamental question: How did the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers' Union dominate the Australian Labor Party in that State and the Queensland labour movement in general between 1913 and 1957? From this question arose 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?
The pastoral and other rural unions dominated the industrial and political organisation of the Queensland labour movement after the amalgamation of all rural and other unskilled unions in 1913 that would form the Queensland Branch of the Australian Workers' Union. Such was the dependence of Queensland upon its primary industries that any such organisation of the numerous rural workers had the potential to achieve political power. In the sparsely populated and vast state of Queensland the AWU often provided the only industrial and political organisation for workers in remote areas. Using its numerical and organisational superiority the AWU manipulated the rules and constitution of the peak industrial and political body of the labour movement in Queensland - the Queensland Central Executive - to ensure that its officials dominated this body. From this position the AWU could exercise the dominate influence over the movement by ensuring that the policies the Labor Party advocated adhered to the pragmatic and reformist yet conservative and rurally focused policies espoused by the AWU Executive.

The most obvious manifestation of this domination was the steady progression of AWU officials pre-selected to contest elections and then subsequently elected by the constituents to represents those electorates. AWU members and supporters dominated not only the Labor caucus but also more importantly the Cabinet. As a result the AWU provided the majority of Labor leaders in the period 1913-1957 with no less than five of the eight Labor premiers for this period being members and mostly officials of the AWU, whilst Gillies and Hanlon were conspicuous in their support for the Union. Significantly, only the last Labor premier of the period, Vince Gair, had no connection whatsoever with the AWU.
These AWU premiers, most notably, Theodore, McCormack and Forgan-Smith, were characterised by conservative reformism, industrial moderation, and an affinity for the rural sector and the ruthless oppression of their opponents from within the labour movement. These men were closely assisted in their endeavours (with the notable exception of McCormack in 1927) by the AWU Executive typified by the equally ruthless Branch Secretary of the 1930s and 1940s Clarrie 'The Red Terror' Fallon.

To further extend its influence the AWU ensured its supporters were regularly appointed to the many boards and committees established by successive Labor Governments with none more significant or obvious than the appointment of two former branch secretaries, Dunstan and Riordan, as judges of the Industrial Court. As such the AWU sought to and succeeded in infiltrating every major public decision-making body in Queensland and succeeded in affecting not only its own membership or that of the labour movement in general but the whole of Queensland society.

However, despite its apparent successes the relationship the AWU enjoyed with the rest of the movement it sought to lead was never one of complete harmony. Like many relationships there were periods of great harmony and co-operation and periods of disunity and open hostility. At the core of this relationship and its various manifestations was the level of acquiescence the movement and its political and industrial leaders displayed towards the policies, goals and tactics of the AWU Executive and its continued electoral appeal. For it was not only the numerical superiority of the AWU but moreover its ability to continually organise for the return of Labor governments that was the *sine qua non* of the AWU's continued dominance of organised labour in Queensland. This
acquiescence resulted from the ‘sanctions’ – both rewards and punishment – that the AWU leadership exercised over its rank-and-file.

Threats to this power and prestige emerged in many and various guises both from within and outside of the labour movement. Firstly, the natural enemy of organised labour, the forces of conservative capitalism in Queensland who viewed the AWU and the Labor Party’s reforms as direct attacks on the rights of the employer class and as the vanguard of ‘socialism in our time’ which threatened the end of private industry and property. Political parties such as the National/Country/Liberal Parties, the conservative mass media and employer organisations such as the Pastoralists’ Association and the Sugar Growers’ Association represented this group.

The second group that could pose a threat to the AWU were those organisations that allied themselves with the labour movement. Many of these militant groups eschewed the moderate even conservative aspirations of the PLP and the AWU and deplored the centralised and autocratic administration exercised by the AWU (and by extension the QCE and the PLP) to the exclusion of other trade unions and even the AWU’s own rank-and-file. Jealous of its power, and often vehemently opposed to its methods and policies, militant unions housed in the Trades Hall, such as the ARU and the AMIEU, along with militant and socialist political groups such as the IWW and the CPA perceived the AWU-PLP alliance as a bulwark against a radical even revolutionary transformation of Queensland society.

The key components of the AWU’s ability to rally against these challenges was the ability of the Union to command such a high membership in relation to the rest of the trade union membership and its ability to return Labor candidates and Governments
which assured its domination of not only organised labour and its political representatives but also of the legislature. The first component allowed the AWU, and in particular its leadership, to present itself as the legitimate voice of the trade union movement in Queensland. This numerical advantage also operated to give the AWU the ability to dominate the policy and decision-making bodies of the organised labour movement.

However, it must be recognised that the AWU could not have achieved such phenomenally high membership figures if it was not providing some benefits for its membership. Through the arbitration system, largely formulated by the AWU officials and parliamentarians, the Union was able to achieve award agreements granting AWU 'preference' within the industries it covered both in terms of union access to work places and employment opportunities for members. This situation was not only beneficial to the AWU Executive and the Union's finances but also to its many members who were employed in mainly seasonal unskilled or semi-skilled occupations who required only one ticket and one fee to secure employment in a multitude of industries. However, as the AWU infiltrated the arbitration system not only as advocates but eventually as adjudicators, it was not simply the 'no ticket, no job' dictum that secured continued rank-and-file support. With sympathetic legislation providing producers with sustainable returns on their products the AWU and the arbitration system was able to provide AWU members, and often Queensland workers in general, with wages and conditions that were equal to and very often better than those in the other states. Thus despite recurrent complaints from the rank-and-file about corruption, a centralised and authoritarian Executive and some notable outbreaks of militancy during times of financial uncertainty, the AWU membership was placated by the favourable wages and conditions secured by
the AWU Executive and the arbitration system. This, in turn, engendered a sense of loyalty towards the Union from its members. This ethos of loyalty or 'mateship' was diligently cultivated and exploited by the AWU leaders who used it as a solemn rallying cry when the authority of the AWU and often by extension, that of the Labor Party, was challenged from within the movement. These were the very effective sanctions that the AWU imposed on its rank-and-file and by extension to a significant core of Labor Party members and supporters in the electorate.

These factors served both to complement and emphasise the AWU's second component in the fight against its perceived enemies. With its relatively advanced organisational infrastructure the AWU could not only carry out its industrial responsibilities but also provided a basis upon which the Labor Party could organise itself. This factor was particularly true outside of the metropolitan and provincial centres where the AWU, and by extension the Labor Party, was very often the only form of political organisation of any sort in a particular district. As a result, in the areas where economic activity favoured AWU membership – the sugar districts of the south-east, central and north coast; the mining districts of the central and northern inland; and the pastoral districts of the south, central and north west – the AWU was highly successful in organising the return of Labor candidates. Furthermore, not only could the AWU organise to return Labor candidates but it ensured that those candidates were either members of, or at least, sympathetic to the policies and aims of the AWU.

The electoral impetus of the AWU-PLP alliance was further assisted by a series of favourable electoral boundary re-distributions throughout the period. Under successive Labor Governments boundaries for state electorates were manipulated in such a manner
that rural and provincial electors received a disproportionate parliamentary representation
despite its sparse population compared with that of the metropolitan electors. Moreover,
these re-distributions often ensured that the rural bias of the electoral boundaries favoured
those rural areas where AWU support was strongest. This ensured that AWU candidates
were not only over-represented within the Labor Governments but within the Parliament
as a whole.

Combined these factors provided the AWU leadership with a powerful basis from
which it could confront its enemies, especially those from within the labour movement. It
was the AWU, so it argued, that revived trade unionism and Labor politics in
Queensland. It was the AWU that dominated the QCE and the Labor-in-Politics
Conventions that formulated the movement’s policies and elected its leaders. It was these
policies and leaders which appealed beyond the narrow trade union base to the small to
medium primary producers and business people and the liberal-minded middle classes
that ensured the continued electoral success of the Labor Party in Queensland.

This argument was compelling and as such up until the post-WWII era the AWU
was able to repel the various challenges of the IWW, the ARU, the MMM, the PWIU and
the CPA. With most moderates within the labour movement acquiescing to the will of the
AWU-PLP clique, vocal dissenters such as the ARU were either estranged from the peak
labour bodies or marginalised within them. The AWU hegemony seemed complete.

The Pacific War and the Reconstruction period presented Queensland and the
AWU leadership with changing circumstances. With Queensland serving as Australia’s
‘front line’ and launching base for Allied operations in the Pacific, the manufacturing and
other secondary and tertiary industries began to expand and this was to continue into the
Reconstruction years. This expansion brought industries to Queensland in which the AWU had no coverage and which contained militant leadership. It was the predominance of primary industries in Queensland that was the source of the AWU’s industrial and political strength. The expansion of non-AWU industries and the emergence of militant trade union leaders openly hostile to arbitration provided a direct threat to the AWU. Ironically, despite its position of strength the AWU was in fact industrially weak and relied heavily upon the arbitration system to appease a sometimes hostile and unpredictable rank-and-file membership often working in seasonal occupations and on a strictly contractual basis. Thus any threat to arbitration loomed as a direct threat to the industrial and political authority of the AWU and the Labor Party. This too, was coupled with the growing legitimacy enjoyed by the CPA during the war years.

However, whilst accepting that the AWU commitment to ‘industrial peace’ via arbitration left it susceptible industrially the contention of authors such as Buckley and Wheelwright that this reliance revealed ‘the giant had feet of clay’ cannot be sustained. It is one of the the contentions of this work that compulsory arbitration system supported by the AWU leadership was part of the phalanx of sanctions used to maintain its authority over the rank-and-file and a large proportion of the Queensland labour movement through the period to 1957. The Union embraced Higgins’ assertion that “arbitration is based on unionism”. The AWU specifically chose this course of action as the most effective means of pursuing its programme of social and industrial reform in

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Queensland. It was a decision that was mostly supported by the labour movement in Queensland throughout the period of this work.

At the time the direct threat to AWU power was illusory and the significance of the CPA exaggerated by the emerging ‘Cold War’ mentality. The AWU remained unchallenged as the largest union, it still dominated the machinery of Queensland’s labour movement and its members still proliferated in Labor Governments that commanded secure majorities. However, the political culture of the AWU demanded loyalty and dissent was to be confronted directly and ruthlessly. As such the AWU willingly joined forces with other conservative unions such as the FCU to support the formation of the Industrial Groups in 1947 to root out communist union officials and other militants. In essence, the AWU’s strong support for the Groups was a way of protecting its power in the future. With the changing industrial environment in the Queensland economy the Groups provided the AWU with a means of crushing both old enemies and those that may emerge in the ‘New Order’. By allying itself with the Industrial Groups the AWU could also attempt to control an emergent conservative force within the labour movement. In both instances it failed.

The tumult that would engulf the Queensland labour movement in the 1950s owes much to the AWU’s own insecurity in a changing economic and political environment and its unrelenting quest for domination of the labour movement. Its leadership vacillated between zealous support and then acrimonious condemnation of the Industrial Groups when the latter began to exert its own industrial and political authority. This, in turn, forged a wedge between the pro-Grouper unions and politicians (including AWU supporters) and the AWU leadership that now found itself drawn to the militants within
the Trades Hall to secure support. This unlikely alliance only served to strengthen the divide between the AWU and the PLP as the labour movement in Queensland grappled with the perennial paradigm of Labor in politics: Who controls the movement – the politicians or the machinery of the labour movement that endorses the politicians and formulates policy?

On this most fundamental of issues the AWU sought only that it should prevail by whatever means. The confusing and inconsistent actions of the AWU leadership made the once dominant monolith weak and vulnerable as the confusion spread to the rank-and-file membership and the electorate in general. The ambitious but erratic Joe Bukowski, now in the unfamiliar role of militant trade unionist, was prepared to do something that was a complete anathema to his predecessors - risk the fall of a Labor Government to ensure that the authority of the movement’s machinery prevailed over that of the PLP. Yet it was the unity and moderate industrial and political leadership provided by the AWU-PLP clique that appealed to the electorate and was the real source of the AWU’s power.

With this traditional AWU-PLP alliance weakened, so too was the labour movement with the driving organisational force that perpetually returned Labor Governments now fragmenting. Given the choice between a conservative coalition and a divided, militant and unpredictable Labor Party, a traditionally conservative electorate chose the former. For nearly forty years the stability and moderate policies offered by the AWU-PLP clique had ensured an almost unbroken succession of Labor Governments in Queensland. With this traditional alliance shattered and the AWU increasingly marginalised in the organised labour movement that would re-emerge in the post-1957
era, the Parliamentary Labor Party in Queensland was cast into the political abyss of Opposition politics for the next forty years.

From the outset this thesis has contended that a central theme of this work is the exercise of power - its attainment and maintenance. For the AWU in Queensland the essence of its power was its ability to deliver consistent policy and tangible rewards for its supporters and the movement it represented and to sanction those who work outside of the set frameworks of the Union. This thesis has considered at length the peculiar economic, demographic, geographic, industrial and political circumstances that allowed the AWU to manipulate and control the organisational machinery of the industrial and political labour movement in Queensland. All of these are vital components to the overall exercise of the AWU's power. However, the AWU leadership along with its allies in the Labor Party was only able to maintain this position of dominance on one very important condition - it consistently provided beneficial social, economic and industrial reform to not only the movement it dominated but also the broader Queensland community.

As has been considered throughout this thesis the relationship between the AWU leadership, its rank-and-file and the labour movement in general was tumultuous. The AWU ruthlessly crushed dissent from within, was autocratic, sometimes corrupt, conservative and was even shown to have colluded with employers against workers. Nevertheless the labour movement (and beyond) subordinated itself to this leadership for nearly fifty years. Had the AWU/PLP leadership not consistently delivered beneficial conditions for the labour movement and Queensland society in general this relationship would have been short-lived. The AWUs ability to provide these benefits gave it legitimacy and power in spite of its shortcomings.
Thus, in the 1950s when the leadership of the AWU vacillated between reaction and militancy it was this inconsistency this doubt about the direction it was heading that ultimately led to its demise as the most powerful organisation in Queensland. When Joe Bukowski turned his back on the AWU/PLP alliance to counter the Groups and embraced the militancy of the Trades Hall the AWU announced to its supporters that it could no longer guarantee the benefits and consistency that it once had. The giant's 'feet of clay' only became visible when the Union executive disavowed its own sanctions: industrial peace through arbitration and the equal significance of both industrial and political action as pursued through AWU-PLP alliance during the period 1913-57.

The mechanics of the AWU's power were still very much apparent in the period 1955-57. The AWU still had by far the largest membership in the state, still had many members in parliament and in the major bodies within the labour movement and still had an extensive political and industrial infrastructure throughout non-metropolitan Queensland. It had, however, lost its credibility in its attempts to maintain power at any cost. It had lost the faith of its supporters within and outside of the labour movement to provide stability. Without stability there could be no legitimacy and without legitimacy there could no longer be the expectation of leadership nor the exercise of power.
Map 1 Pastoral districts of Queensland, 1891, showing railways.