Maintaining control: a history of unionism among employees of the Sydney Water Board

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Chapter 1

The Years to 1910
Introduction

This chapter begins by examining Sydney's urban growth and its damaging impact on public health. It then shows how public health issues received official recognition through the establishment, in 1888, of a metropolitan board to control Sydney's water supply and sewerage and the separate funding of the necessary works by the Public Works Department (PWD). In particular, it examines those forces which encouraged the emerging water supply and sewerage industry to generate a momentum of its own.

Attention then turns to the economic and political context between 1888 and 1910, focusing on the effects of depression and industrial defeat on the labour movement. Two important results were the foundation of the Labor Party and the introduction of compulsory arbitration.

The third section examines the early development of the Board within the metropolitan water and sewerage industry. The establishment of the Board and its operation not only boosted the industry, it also fractured it. The government directed major construction work to the PWD. The Board had responsibility for reticulation and maintenance. Even between these last two though, there was a decisive split reflecting quite different sources and types of funding. Maintenance was indispensable and had stable and rising funds. Reticulation was not and did not.

These divisions helped shape the workforce. The different employers, PWD and Water Board were the most obvious sign. The use of contractors added further fragmentation. More critical though was the way the Board developed employment and industrial policies to take account of the divisions of finance and function. The main dividing line within the manual workforce was over job security.

Therefore, the fourth section examines the work, working conditions and work cultures of some of the most important of the permanent and casual work groups. The
context is the massive body of often itinerant, casual labourers on building and construction sites. While almost all workers in these groups did heavy, difficult and often dangerous work, the mass of casuals faced extremely uncertain working lives. This helps explain the individual and collective responses of those with permanent jobs.

Finally, the chapter draws out these informal tendencies to explain the contradictory patterns of unionism which emerged in Sydney's water and sewerage industry to 1910. This sheds light on the genesis of the house union, and on the people who created, controlled and subsequently ran it.

1. Urban growth and public health to 1888

Historically, the development of a water supply and sewerage industry has been a result of urbanisation. The same was true for Sydney where, because of peculiarities of climate and geography, the needs for town water supply soon became apparent. Here as elsewhere in Australia, the provision of water supply and sewerage works during the late nineteenth century drew on the experience of other countries but also developed administrative and technical practices to meet local needs. If the effects of urbanisation brought forth demands for such works, the industrial revolution stimulated improved salutary techniques and products to ameliorate the dangers and miseries of city life. This was the case of fittings such as water closets and, later, cisterns to separate those water closets from water supply mains and thereby avoid contamination of water supply by sewage. The same was true for more systematic technological responses, particularly for pipes and tunnels fundamental to the design of new interconnected sewerage systems. Better pipes were also necessary for a

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constant water supply, the basis for the major improvements in both water and sewerage systems throughout Australia during this period.

In Australia, as in Britain, the lack of adequate metropolitan approaches to water and sewerage hampered attempts to mitigate the evils of uncontrolled urban growth. This was not by chance. The widespread introduction of improved techniques required coordinated urban planning and vast sums of money. Major reforms came only in response to grave crises in public health. For Sydney, a hotter climate and greater aridity made water supply the main priority. The need for a system of underground sewers came later.

In the early years, the absence of public transport forced working class people to live close to sources of work. The importance of work around the port concentrated them into the City. Continued population growth exacerbated the existing overcrowding and unsanitary housing and spread the pattern to the developing inner suburbs. The poor in these areas lived in dark, cramped and badly ventilated houses which usually lacked water and sewerage facilities. Streets, lanes and alleyways were generally undrained. Yet, intolerably bad working class living conditions only really became of wider interest when they threatened the lives of the metropolitan middle class; it then became a problem of 'public health'.

Agitation for sanitary reform derived its urgency from the experience and further fears of epidemic. Sydney, as an international port, was particularly prone to diseases brought in by visiting ships and incubated in the teeming and dirty dwelling areas around the docks.

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News of overseas epidemics heightened fears that the dreaded smallpox and cholera would find fertile ground in Sydney's 'rookeries'.

Most Sydney sanitary reformers sought comprehensive NSW government intervention to lessen the collective costs of uncontrolled private capitalism. This involved the removal or improvement of cesspits, the provision of water closets and underground sewers or other methods of dealing with human excrement, and finally the construction of adequate town drainage. Fundamental then was the need for a constant supply of running water. This could only come from a system with abundant reserve supplies.

Sydney languished behind Melbourne and Adelaide without an effective supply or supply authority. Water supply, together with other aspects of sanitation in Sydney, suffered from grossly inadequate institutional structures and action. This was not for any lack of governmental finance or experience in planning, funding and constructing public works. Indeed, NSW governments played a major, direct and fundamental role in economic development. They carried out those essential projects which demanded large amounts of finance but offered little immediate return. In particular, major areas of public works spending, such as railways, underpinned private investment in export industries. Government refusal to fund metropolitan water and sewerage works reflected a political bias against spending which did not aid those interests.

As a result, Sydney developed a tradition of inadequate water supply, both for quantity and quality. Provision of sewerage and drainage came very late and the early works merely removed wastes from the streets to foul the harbour. As most properties remained unconnected prior to 1888, human excrement as well as house and street drainage often flowed through open gutters into natural watercourses close to areas of dense population.

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Water supply was initially the most pressing problem but institutional weaknesses stymied any effective solution. From 1842, water supply and sewerage was the responsibility of the new City Council. It had few real powers and little political will for resolving the problems. The NSW Government abdicated any real role in this area yet would not grant Council the necessary administrative or financial powers to provide an adequate service. Only extreme crises brought the necessary bridging finance from the legislature. As a result, the Council incurred large debts for ad hoc schemes with little potential for future supply.14

A scheme based on the Botany Swamps became the main supply source in the three decades prior to 1888 by which time, in the face of rapid population growth, it was clearly inadequate.15 Drought-induced shortages and the pollution plagued supply. To resolve problems of quantity and quality, a series of official enquiries recommended securing the more distant Upper Nepean as Sydney's source. While promising a more bountiful, secure and pure supply, any Nepean scheme would also be enormously expensive.16 Parliament rejected the necessary financial commitment, notwithstanding Premier Parkes' best efforts. His attempt, in 1874, to resolve the administrative impasse by establishing a metropolitan water and sewerage board also lapsed.17

Attention soon turned from water supply to sewerage. Overflowing cesspits created one problem.18 As well, the lack of proper sewerage connections for the growing number of flush toilets meant there was little to prevent faecal matter entering the water supply.19

Typhus, typhoid, cholera, dysentery and other epidemics threatened. Once again, expert warnings received official neglect.

A smallpox epidemic in the City created sufficient public panic for government action. An exhaustive official enquiry led to immediate regulation of sanitary connections and other areas of waste disposal. There was action to put into effect other important recommendations: for the start of an Upper Nepean scheme and for a comprehensive system of ocean outfall sewers. Both required heavy spending.

With the continuation of the health crisis and a lack of clear agreement as to correct responses, the government engaged an overseas expert, W. Clark, at the end of 1876. He recommended in favour of the Upper Nepean and a system of intercepting sewers to avoid pollution of the harbour. The intercepting sewers would connect to a mains sewer discharging into the ocean near Bondi. He also recommended the establishment of an independent Central Board of Works, of mixed municipal and NSW government representation, to construct and manage water and sewerage works for the City and suburbs. As expected, his proposals carried great weight.

Continued criticism of the City Council's administration made change easier. As well, a growing number of suburban councils complained about their exclusion from decision making despite having long contributed rate revenues for an inadequate service. For these councils, the idea of a metropolitan authority now appeared desirable. The result, in 1880, was an Act to establish a Board of Water Supply and Sewerage for the metropolitan area.

The Public Works Department already had authority to construct all major works and had access to loans to finance them. The Act postponed the establishment of the Board until the completion of the major water and sewerage works Clark had recommended. The Act remained a declaration of intent rather than a working document until 1888 when a second Act brought the Board into existence. The Board first took control of water supply but had

20 Mayne, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
to wait another year for sewerage. Ownership and control of City Council works passed to the new Board and the NSW government transferred to it the PWD's metropolitan water supply and sewerage works upon their completion. The Board had authority for minor construction works, mainly the reticulation off completed PWD projects and was to repair, maintain and administer all works.

2. Economy, politics and industrial relations 1888-1910

Between 1888 and 1910, NSW witnessed dramatic changes in its economy, politics and institutional arrangements. At first it seemed that the pattern of a short, mild trade cycle was going to continue. A reduction in public works and other government spending was a major contributor to a downturn in 1888-90. After that, renewed high government spending compensated for problems in private sector activity and helped fuel strong a recovery which peaked in late 1891. For NSW, long-run structural problems interacted with an international crisis to create recession from the end of 1891, and deep depression between 1892 and 1895.

The depression had its origins in an over-extension of the successful pattern of NSW economic development during the 'Long Boom'. Heavy spending of borrowed money on marginal pastoral production and railway facilities meant a reduced ability to service the growing overseas debt in the short term. To fill the gap, there was a further recourse to borrowing abroad. This made the local economy increasingly vulnerable to either less favourable terms of trade or a cessation of lending. Both occurred.

From late 1891, rapidly deteriorating terms of trade caused heavy falls in national income. International banking crises and growing British financial disfavour towards Australian government borrowings meant that loans became unavailable just as the colonial

24 Metropolitan Water and Sewerage Act (Amendment) Acts of 1888 (51 Vic 28) and 1889 (53 Vic 16). The Board later became known as the 'Metropolitan' Board to distinguish it from the Hunter District Board of Water Supply and Sewerage established in 1892 for the Newcastle district to the north. W.V. Aird, The Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage of Sydney, MWSDB, Sydney, 1961, p. 21.


26 Boehm, op. cit., pp. 170-1, N.G. Butlin, IAED, ch. VI (1).
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economies needed them most. One result was the stopping of many major NSW public works and the unemployment of thousands of construction workers. This was disastrous as much of this activity was to counteract unemployment from downturns in other areas of the economy. Financial instability and bank failures during 1892 and 1893 further depressed the economy and employment.27

The depression was long and deep, causing massive unemployment and misery. Still, some workers survived the depression relatively unscathed. Among them were those permanent employees in public employment whose relatively constant work and fixed money wages benefited from declining prices.28

Recovery during 1900-1 soon gave way to renewed drought-induced recession. Heavy public works expenditure reduced the impact of the crisis until 1903, when borrowing overseas again became difficult. Recovery only came after 1905 with increasing returns from the earlier heavy investment and the continued growth of a more diversified rural sector. As a result, the NSW economy regained something of its former prosperity during the last years of the decade. In particular, Sydney experienced a building boom after 1906.29

The labour movement had grown in confidence, ambition and organisation through the late eighties. Central to this was a more militant class consciousness. Socialist ideas were gaining acceptance but in an unsophisticated and often contradictory form.30 Unions expanded, encouraged emulation among unionised areas and entered into agreements for mutual support in the fight for the closed shop.31 This provoked similar combativeness and

31 Rimmer and Sheldon, op. cit., pp. 200-1;
organisation among employers. Mobilisation by labour and capital was particularly strong in the mining, pastoral and shipping industries.32

The eruption of major conflict began in the maritime industry in August 1890 and spread and intensified rapidly. The state intervened heavily on behalf of capital. The outcome was a major disaster for the labour movement. For those unionists directly involved, the first result was the loss of industrial power. Employers enforced unilateral regulation through 'freedom of contract'. Some unions folded. Others, badly weakened, regrouped but soon faced the debilitating effects of depression and a further run of major defeats in metal mining, shearing and shipping.33

As a consequence of this loss of industrial power, the union movement more fully embraced the idea of establishing a labour party. Unions and their peak councils had long lobbied the existing parties. At times, they had also supported individual 'good labour men' at elections. The first displayed great limitations; the second mostly proved to be a bitter disappointment. By the late eighties prominent union officials were talking of a specific trade union party; however apathy or even antipathy to the idea was common in many unions. Disaster on the industrial field changed the ideas of many.34

For some, the election of labour representatives to parliament would neutralise the evident class bias suffered during the Maritime Strike. The liberal equilibrium would return and with it the dignity of the working class. Others, more ambitious, sought labour representation which would 'capture' the state. The promise was favourable legislation for unions, regulation of dangerous industries, land redistribution and, the maximalist demand, nationalisation of industry. In either view, involvement in the parliamentary process was to overcome the weaknesses of, if not replace, industrial direct action.

In NSW, the Labour Council established a Labor party soon after the strike. In 1891, the new party achieved electoral success giving it the balance of power. Elation soon turned

33 Boehm, Prosperity and Depression, p. 46; Rickard, op. cit., pp. 21-2; Markey, The Labor Party, pp. 158-60; Bray and Rimmer, Delivering the Goods, pp. 19-22;
to despair as opportunism and lack of political coherence among those elected contributed to a series of splits and massive defections. By 1893 too, a depression-weakened Labour Council had lost control of the party to a group of radical liberal professional politicians. Lacking an organisational base outside parliament, they in turn came to rely on the AWU which had built a strong organisation and bureaucracy in rural areas. The party's preoccupations increasingly came to reflect not only the liberal views of the urban intellectuals who dominated caucus, but the populist ideas of settlers cum shearer and navvies prominent in the AWU. Apart from strong support from northern mining districts, the Labor Party in NSW came increasingly to resemble a radical country party rather than a party of militant unionists. As this extra-parliamentary organisation continued to exert a strong influence, many socialists who had contributed to the party's formation left it in anger.

By 1894, the parliamentary party was more cohesive. It used its numbers to support G.H. Reid as Free Trade Premier between 1894 and 1899 in exchange for concessions. To consolidate his position, Reid recast his programme to accommodate Labor demands and to compete for the support of lower income earners. Having exhausted concessions available from Reid, the Labor politicians sided in 1899 with the Protectionists whose leader, W. Lyne, promised more.

The result was legislation and administration more favourable to workers and their unions. While the Labor Party always took credit, Labor members were often sluggish in advancing industrial questions. In contrast, Attorney General B.R. Wise and Public Works Minister E.W. O'Sullivan initiated major reforms. This generated conflict from their party's bourgeois supporters and an increasingly reactionary rural middle class without weaning sufficient support away from the Labor Party. With the economy again depressed

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37 L.F. Crisp, George Houston Reid, Canberra 1979, pp. 9-10; Loveday, op. cit., pp. 27, 40, 42.
38 The Protectionists subsequently became the Progressive Party.
and the state budget in crisis, the Progressives suffered a major rout at the 1904 elections. J. Carruthers became the new Liberal premier and Labor, under J. McGowen, the new opposition.

Carruthers promised a package of anti-union measures as well as major reductions in the public service. To a greater extent though, it was his successor, C.G. Wade who delivered them. As a result, for all its obvious weaknesses, the Labor Party in NSW was able to retain and consolidate the loyal support of major sections of the organised working class at the same time as it developed its strength in rural areas and among public servants. This combination helped it to power in 1910.

Industrial losses during the nineties wrought another major change in labour movement attitudes. Once again it meant greater involvement with the state, this time through compulsory arbitration. Prior to 1890, a few unions had either sought or accepted voluntary arbitration, usually when facing industrial defeat. On the whole, the more militant preferred to trust their strength in the field. The weaker or more conservative put their faith in deputations and public pressure. Those unions and employers who saw benefits in compulsion did so for very different reasons and to facilitate the opposite ends of a bargaining process. Unions wanted it to force employer recognition so as to allow the opening of negotiations. Employers rejected this but saw the need for compulsion when it came to enforcing the terms of agreements on recalcitrant unions or workforces.

For unionists, the devastation of their collective power during the 1890s increased the attractiveness of measures compelling employer recognition and negotiation. In 1895, the Labor Party placed compulsory arbitration in its platform and Labor politicians argued for the acceptance of legal enforceability. Given their weak industrial position, many union officials and members agreed. Employers were moving in the opposite direction. The re-emergence of successful union organising from 1899 reminded them of the benefits of penalties for non-observance. There was also a grudging acceptance among some of the


need to accept mandatory recognition. Among others, increased competition greatly weakened their collective cohesion and ability to mobilise politically. Reid's refusal to enact a compulsory scheme was one reason for Labor dropping him in 1899. Through Wise's initiative, NSW got compulsory arbitration in 1901.43

The number of unions and union members grew dramatically after 1900. Arbitration, a stronger economy and government support all played a part.44 The first to revive were the craft unions which opened to the less skilled or encouraged their separate unionisation. There was also a resurgence of the mass unions, now often with conservative Labor politicians at their head. This marked the early growth of a caste of professional, conservative union officials and the parliamentary party's penetration of the industrial movement.45

Wise intended the new arbitration court to settle disputes by fostering collective bargaining. Compulsory recognition, the common rule and union preference were not only to restore the status and standing of unions but were to help them grow. Nonetheless, the court rapidly became a legalistic court of first instance arbitrating on wages and conditions. This encouraged the growth of a union officialdom familiar with legal technicalities.

The arbitration system soon disappointed its union supporters. Chronic understaffing created a massive backlog of cases while employers' successful legal action greatly hindered the court's freedom of movement. By 1905, it was clear that many unions had little to gain from their involvement. Some wanted reforms to make the institution work. Others, like the increasingly militant coalminers, left the system to rely on their local strength.46 Employers found that arbitration did not stop strikes and felt it did not punish strikers sufficiently.

Wade's 1908 Industrial Disputes Act paradoxically resolved some of the problems. As it included heavy penalties for striking, and specified 'industries' rather than unions, the

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43 ibid., pp. 73-9; 143-52, 154-61; 283-6
union movement quickly recognised it as viciously anti-union. Another objection was that it did not grant preference. Tripartite wages boards under the Industrial Court were to determine wages, hours and conditions for each of the 'industries' defined under the Act. Ultimately, this provided unions with a quicker and more accessible way to have employers negotiate. But, at the time, unionists mainly saw the fines, supported by gaol terms.

The Labour Council promoted a boycott of the new legislation but a number of non-affiliates registered at once and then applied for exclusive access to the wages boards for their industries. This prompted a slow but steady leakage of affiliated unions and the boycott collapsed during 1909. Rising living costs, resentment towards the administration of Wade's Act and the growing influence of direct action ideas increased industrial tensions. During 1908, there had been a number of major and sometimes bitter strikes and others erupted the following year. In all cases, Wade's government clearly supported the employers. The result was the gaoling of many unionists, and a series of bitter defeats. The only relief was an important victory by a union of water and sewerage workers.

The 1890s depression also caused a heavy decline in public works spending. By mid 1896, it was little more than half the 1892 level and only recovered slowly during the rest of the decade. O'Sullivan, as Minister for Works from 1899, greatly expanded public works activity, particularly in Sydney. By 1901-2, PWD expenditure reached record levels. O'Sullivan also introduced day labour on a massive scale. This answered an important union demand. So too did his setting of an eight hour day and seven shilling (7/-) minimum wage on PWD works. He also organised PWD hiring so as to increase employment of unionists.

During 1903, drought and problems borrowing overseas forced heavy reductions in spending. The accession to power in 1904 of a government committed to balanced budgets

48 Rydon and Spann, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-8, 106; TLC Minutes, 1908-9; Sheldon, 'Job Control'.
49 PWD Reports.
50 Until then, the PWD had paid 6/- for city labourers and 5/- in the country. *Worker*, 7 January 1899; 30 March 1901; PWD Report, 1901-2, p. 102; B. Mansfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-8, 237. For fuller discussion on the day labour question, see P. Sheldon, 'The Dimming of Illusions' and 'Public vs Private Employers on NSW Public Works, 1890-1910', *Australian Economic History Review*, (resubmitted).
depressed levels of public investment, construction and employment. The new minister, C.A. Lee, redirected the remaining activity to the country. He also reinstated contractors. This situation did not change until the election of a Labor government in 1910.\footnote{51}

### 3. Sydney’s water and sewerage industry 1888–1910\footnote{52}

In November 1886, Nepean water finally replaced the Botany supply.\footnote{53} The new metropolitan system had no storage dam at the watershed. Three types of reservoir — storage, balance and service — allowed maintenance workers to regulate the flow. Water from the Nepean and the Cataract Rivers flowed via a series of weirs, tunnels and open canals to Prospect Reservoir — for nearly two decades the major storage reservoir for metropolitan supply.\footnote{54}

The 1888 Amendment Act provided for a seven member Board. The NSW Government was to appoint three members, one of whom was to be President. The City of Sydney Council was to elect two City Members. Representatives of the remaining local authorities within the County of Cumberland were to elect two Suburban Members. All members had four year terms.

The division of responsibilities between Water Board and PWD largely excluded the Board from constructing the works it was to own, control and administer. The PWD was to have sole authority to construct the larger works. This introduced difficulties in engineering priorities and design, in planning and in finance. Attempts at coordination failed.\footnote{55}

The Board also suffered a lack of financial autonomy, a position it shared with the other statutory authorities. When the PWD transferred completed works to the Board, the government added the cost to the Board’s capital debt with the Colonial (later State)....
The Board needed ministerial approval for all expenditure. It raised loan funds for reticulation work through the government’s borrowings. These constituted the Board’s Loan Account.\textsuperscript{56} It received its expenses for maintenance and general operations after submitting annual estimates for parliamentary votes. This was the Revenue Account.

The division between the two authorities split the water and sewerage workforce. The PWD manual employees worked on large construction jobs. The major responsibility for the Board’s manual workforce was maintenance. But the Board also had responsibility for minor construction works (mainly reticulation). Thus there was a similar division within the Board’s workforce: between those employed under loan or revenue accounts. The necessity for continuous operations and the Board’s capacity to generate income through rates meant its revenue funding was much more consistent. This allowed the Board to appoint a small core of permanent workers for the more sensitive and highly specialised maintenance work. There was no such technical need to keep a permanent workforce for construction. Here, permanency would have only added financial rigidities to a very unpredictable loan schedule. This divided the Board’s workforce between permanent workers doing maintenance and casuals on construction.\textsuperscript{57}

Heavy public spending on Sydney water and sewerage works was a response to earlier urban growth. There were long time lags before these necessary, large and indivisible ‘lumps’ of investment moved from the arena of public debate to the schedules of public works expenditure. Despite conservative rural opposition, the threat of an imminent public health catastrophe finally encouraged necessary spending in this area.\textsuperscript{58}

Once committed, the momentum of this spending and corresponding levels of employment depended on a number of factors. Public health was one. A second was economic. The costs of large-scale water supply and sewerage construction gradually diminished towards the end of each project. Expensive headworks (dams or sewerage


\textsuperscript{57} MWSDB Minutes, 24 April 1907.

\textsuperscript{58} See e.g. \textit{NSWPD}, Session of 1889, p. 5341.
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outlets and their major conduits) gave way to the laying of ever smaller branch and reticulation mains. Similarly, returns rapidly increased during this process. Headworks and branchworks were not income generating. The rates and charges from reticulation gradually recouped the costs of the whole system. There was therefore a financial imperative to complete the entire system expeditiously.59 Another element, counter-cyclical spending due in part to labour agitation, was common to all areas of public works activity.60 Yet, water supply and sewerage were particularly appropriate avenues. They were socially useful. As well, they provided metropolitan employment at a time when the Sydney unemployed very publicly demanded work in town.61 A final stimulus came from the building industry and local councils which favoured extensive reticulation needed for subdivisions.62

The only real check came under Lee.63 Overall though, water and sewerage construction gained to the extent that its proponents could differentiate these works from other areas of public works spending. For example, Sydney sewerage construction recovered remarkably from the depression and, in 1897-8, accounted for just under one tenth of all PWD spending. This was not much below the expenditure on railways and tramways for all of NSW.64

Unlike the PWD, the Board had problems getting sufficient finance for new sewerage works during the 1890s. As before, concessions only followed crises. In 1888, the Board declared its intention to run the organisation: 'on as near a commercial basis as possible.'65

59 Senior PWD officers stressed this combination of public health and economics. In early 1893, amid dramatic falls in PWD spending, R. Hickson, Commissioner and Engineer-in-Chief, championed further heavy spending for the sewering of Sydney's western suburbs. He concluded: 'I would submit, that the drainage of Sydney and suburbs rests on a different footing from almost any other public work. Not only is the health of a large and growing community, equaling about one third of the population of the Colony, dependent upon its rapid completion, but its financial success is assured.' PWD Report, 1892, p. 6. The Board defended deficit financing on similar grounds. MWSDB Reports, 1891, p. 63; 1899-1900, pp. 5, 10; 1903-4, p. 5.

60 Hall, op. cit., p. 164.


62 Master Builders' Association of NSW (MBA), Draft Annual Report, 1906, p. 1; MWSDB Reports, 1903-4, p. 5; 1905-6, p. 58.

63 A final and symbolic affirmation of this trend was the splitting of the Water and Sewerage Branch of the PWD in April 1909. What little remained of Sydney sewerage construction joined the ascendent activities of irrigation and rural drainage. Water Supply rejoined harbours as the junior section of another branch. PWD Report, 1908-9, p. 5.

64 Ibid., 1897-8, p.

65 MWSDB Report, 1888, p.3.
A decade later, it had to revise this credo to take account of the cost of providing adequate sanitation for the growing metropolis:

...the Board is not a dividend paying institution, but a body engaged upon a work of a national character, viz., the reduction of the death-rate of the community and the improvement of the health of the Metropolis generally, which work ... is an advantage also to residents of the Colony as a whole.66

There were very pressing reasons for this stance. Pure Nepean water provided the potential for a major improvement in public health and personal hygiene. The steady extension of sewerage was even more important. Yet urban overcrowding and poor domestic sanitation continued. Filth, disease and premature death persisted or even worsened.67 Typhoid was one of the major killers in nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia.68 Like tuberculosis, diphtheria and diarrhoea, it was a result of inadequate sanitation, public hygiene and housing.69 These problems improved in direct relation to the provision of adequate sewerage, sanitary connections and fittings.

In the decade to 1903, a series of typhoid epidemics claimed 914 lives. The Board's Medical Officer, T.M. Kendall, denounced official neglect and urged immediate action to provide improved working class housing and sanitation. Typhoid was avoidable; it was only a question of getting rid of filth.70 Bubonic plague in January 1900 forced public health authorities to make an urgent reassessment. Typically the victims and survivors came from the crowded, low lying working class areas of the City. When investigations confirmed Kendall's reports, government responses included having PWD labourers urgently lay an extensive system of low level sewers. The incidence of plague declined markedly.71 With

66 ibid., 1897-8, p. 11.
67 About 70 per cent of the 5,961 deaths during 1896 were children under five and one third were less than one year old. ibid., 1896-7, p. 32.
69 Low lying areas which still relied upon cesspits suffered most. In 1894, Marrickville had 41 cases of typhoid or 31 cases per 1,000 population. Erskineville had 31 (6.1) and Leichhardt 23 (13.3) For the same reasons, the 1897 diphtheria epidemic hit hardest in Botany and Camperdown. MWSDB Reports, 1894, p. 33; 1897-8, p. 50; 1898-9, p. 48.
70 ibid., 1894, p.32; 1898-9, pp. 52, 54, 56; 1899-1900, p. 54.
the extension of sewerage and better fittings, so did death rates from other contagious
diseases.\(^\text{72}\)

In January 1890, workers for PWD contractors had almost completed two major
disposal schemes which subsequently replaced the City’s ovular brick sewers and the host
of suburban household privies and cesspits. The Northern Ocean (or Bondi) Outfall System
diverted effluent to a new outfall near Bondi. Effluent from the Southern Outfall System
flowed into Botany Bay via an outfall on a sewage farm at Botany.\(^\text{73}\) (see Map 2) Many
areas were still not connected.\(^\text{74}\) To remedy this problem, PWD contractor labour
completed the new Western and Illawarra Suburbs Outfall System between 1898 and
1900.\(^\text{75}\)

An important element in the Board’s expansion of sewerage was a programme of
ventilation. Sydney’s sewers had become damp and airless, often stagnant, slimy and foul.
The presence of hydrogen sulphide gas made them: ‘decidedly dangerous’ for both public
and maintenance workers.\(^\text{76}\) A ventilation system using raised inflow and outflow shafts
gradually overcame these problems.\(^\text{77}\)

Sewerage was a major component of PWD spending during the nineties while Board
spending had languished. Water supply construction presented the opposite case.
Completion of the the Upper Nepean Scheme had removed any urgent pressure on tight
government finances. Board reticulation partially compensated for low PWD spending.
The respective fortunes of water and sewerage were reversed during the 1900s. With the

\(^\text{72}\) ibid., 1902-3, p. 39; N. Hicks, ‘Demographic Transition in the Antipodes: Australian Population
Structure and Growth, 1891-1911’, \textit{Australian Economic History Review}, Vol. XIV, No. 2,
September 1974, p. 128.

\(^\text{73}\) Aird, \textit{op. cit.} pp. 132-3, 139-40.

\(^\text{74}\) ‘Report to the Public Works Department Roads Branch by Geo. H. Stayton on a System of
MWSDB Archs.

\(^\text{75}\) It also had its outfall at the sewage farm. Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 142, 144-5. ‘Illawarra’ then referred to
what is now the St George area.

\(^\text{76}\) MWSDB Report, 1890, p. 48. J.M. Smail, the Board’s first Engineer for Sewerage, and not one to
exaggerate, wrote of the first section of sewer ventilated:
‘During the erection of the shafts, the men employed were often compelled to stop work, being
attacked by vomiting and modified forms of tonsillitis, or sewer-air throat, the Inspector also being
a sufferer. On one occasion one of the men had to be removed in a semi-unconscious state.’ \textit{ibid.}, p
49.

\(^\text{77}\) ibid., 1893, pp. 40, 44.
completion of the major outfall works by 1902, PWD spending on sewerage dropped sharply. In the meantime, growing demand and, in 1902 severe drought, again pushed Sydney's water supply into crisis. A Royal Commission proposed a dam across the Cataract River and subsequent expansion of the Upper Nepean scheme through successive dams on the Cordeaux, Avon and Nepean Rivers. Not long after its completion in 1908, it became clear that growing demand had exceeded Cataract's capacity.

Sydney's water and sewerage industry maintained a more constant level of activity and employment than had others during the very difficult economic conditions between 1888 and 1910. Yet, there were important shifts in its location. These were due to factors internal to the industry, in particular the differences between water and sewerage, between construction and maintenance, between the PWD and the Board.

Water and sewerage works were also, at times, a special case in the conflict between contract and day labour. In general, with maintenance almost totally the province of permanent workers, the conflict only affected construction. PWD engineers soon became disenchanted with the poor quality, unreliability and inflexibility of contract work and the contractors' notorious abuses of the tendering system. Board engineers initially preferred using contractors for cost reasons. Over time, they too began to press for day labour as it gave them greater quality control over sensitive and unpredictable work. Like their PWD counterparts, they also found day labour achieved satisfactory costs, given full control over discipline.

While both sets of engineers increasingly preferred day labour, it was politics which largely determined the choice of system. For the PWD, the question was relatively simple: government policy determined which system ruled. For the relatively autonomous Board,

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79 PWD Reports, 1902-3, pp. 11, 114; 1903-4, p 40; 1905-6, p 69; 1906-7, pp. 2, 42; 1907-8, p 26; Lone Hand,, April 1, 1908, p. 657.
80 MWSDB, Reports, 1888, pp. 6, 9; 1890, p. 50. Re railways, Palmore, op. cit., pp. 94-5.
81 Report of the Royal Commission as to Improper Conduct between contractors and the Department of Public Works, (RCPWD), 1896, pp. xii, xvi-xvii, Minutes of Evidence, pp. 1, 2, 399-400, 540-1, (ML Q 620.0991/1A1.); PWD Report, 1896-7, pp. 3-4.
82 MWSDB Reports, 1892, pp. 7, 37; 1897-8, p. 74; MWSDB Minutes, 17 March 1904.
its mixture of state and municipal politics clouded the question. Until the mid 1900s, many
government appointees and municipal members were businessmen sympathetic to
contracting.\textsuperscript{84} The effect was to moderate the swings to day labour apparent in the PWD.

Under O'Sullivan, by early 1901, the number of PWD labourers on sewer construction
rose from approximately 40 to 600.\textsuperscript{85} Through his influence, day labour also spread within
the Water Board.\textsuperscript{86} Under Lee, by June 1907 almost all PWD sewerage construction was
back in contractors' hands.\textsuperscript{87} The same occurred for water supply, within which Cataract
Dam dominated.\textsuperscript{88}

At the same time, the Board policy began to move in the opposite direction. Tough
industrial action by sewerage construction workers after 1907 frightened away contractors or
made their tenders too expensive.\textsuperscript{89} As well, the election of new members at times altered
the balance of power on the Board in favour of day labour.\textsuperscript{90} This was particularly
important on sewerage construction where the Board dominated activity.

The nature of the industry and employers' choices structured the working lives of
construction labourers. To maximise cost flexibility, the Board and PWD took them on as
casuals, dipping into the mass of labourers moving between city and country, between water
and sewerage and other construction and, finally, between the Water Board, the PWD and
their contractors. These workers suffered most from inconsistent and unpredictable funding.

Hiring was on an hourly basis and readily terminated to the disadvantage of the slow
or insubordinate. Where industrial conflict erupted, employers merely closed down the job,

\textsuperscript{84} Federated Builders and contractors' Association of Australasia/ Federated Master Builders'
MBA of NSW, \textit{Ten Years of Labour Rule}, op. cit.; Ald. T. Henley, a prominent member of the
NSW MBA and Treasurer of its federal body (FMBA) between 1898 and 1900, was an energetic
advocate of contract work.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{PSJ}, 10 May 1901, p. 7; \textit{Worker}, 30 March 1901.

\textsuperscript{86} B.E. Mansfield, 'The State as Employer: An Early Twentieth Century Discussion', \textit{Australian
of Inquiry into Prince Alfred Hospital and the Day Labour System' (PSB on PAH), \textit{NSWLAVP},
Session of 1904, p. 659; FMBA, op. cit., p. 269; PWD Reports, 1899-1900, p. 11; 1901-2, p. 102;
1902-3, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{ibid.}, 1906-7, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{ibid.}, 1904-5, p. 3; 1905-6, p. 69; MWSDB Minutes, 2 August 1905.

\textsuperscript{89} MWSDB Report, 1908-9, pp. 85, 88.

\textsuperscript{90} Those most supportive were City Members R.D. Meagher and E. Jones and Suburban Member
J.G. Griffin. E.g. MWSDB Minutes, 12 May 1908.
sacked the workers and re-started the work some time later with a new workforce. For example, in high demand during 1896-7, rockchoppers and sewer miners pushed up their wages and hence the cost of the works. As a result, the PWD delayed one of its sewer extension works 'in the interest of the ratepayers'. Such delays rarely made a crucial difference to public health or convenience or, more importantly, to the public's perception of PWD or Board activities.

The Water Board had a great deal more autonomy over employment and used it to the full. It could and did draw on the experience of the departmental public service and the NSW Railways but developed its own managerial culture and practice, partly reflecting its connection to local government. For much of this period it had a reputation for 'sweating' manual workers. The labour press was generally critical of the Board as a collection of wealthy and autocratic individuals and called for changes to the Board's composition.

Section 28 of the original 1880 Act gave the Board complete independence in the hiring, firing and promotion of its 'officers and servants'. The former were the Board's salaried officers. The latter, the wages employees, were permanent manual workers largely involved in maintenance and ancillary work. The Act made no mention of casual labour. Both wages and salaried employees were to retain their permanency 'during the pleasure of the Board' and received their pay from the annual parliamentary (revenue) appropriations.

The Board's income was more stable than the Railways' and its maintenance costs were lower. As a result, its maintenance budget actually rose during the 1890s and its maintenance workforce suffered much less than did the Railways'. Yet, there was still no certainty that the Board would receive the revenue funds requested or required. One result was that the Board kept its permanent employees to a minimum and concentrated them in

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94 MWSDB Reports. The same spending pattern was true for NSW local and semi-government spending on water and sewerage within which the Board was the dominant element. N.G. Butlin, Australian Domestic Product, Investment and Foreign Borrowing 1861-1938-9, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1962, pp, 371, 372. For railway maintenance workers and the 1890s, Patmore, op.cit., pp. 106-7.
those areas connected to revenue raising or which required constant attention. Within the wages workforce, the beneficiaries were those working on maintenance or on areas connected to rate collection, such as the meter branch.

Water supply and sewerage were largely services of passive flows. They required only a small number of very specialised workers to run a large and expensive system of capital works. Maintenance could not stop without heavy costs to plant and without directly endangering people's comfort and health. Government, the constituent municipal councils, the press and the public put more constant pressure on this area. Yet, here, where the effects of disruption were large and soon noticeable, the Board, as an employer, was most technically and industrially vulnerable. Maintenance workers potentially had great industrial power. This was true even in a passive or negative sense: the Board could not afford a high turnover of workers with rare knowledge of its systems and the specific skills necessary to maintain them.

It was therefore in the Board's interest to develop a loyal, long-serving and thoroughly knowledgeable maintenance workforce. For this reason, the Board 'appointed' them to permanent positions and granted them 'privileges', such as six days' paid annual leave plus paid public holidays. There was also sick and accident pay on a declining scale for up to three months. These were concessions largely unknown to workers outside the Board. No wonder then, given the great instability of most unskilled work, that labourers prized permanent positions.

There were other better placed labourers too. These were experienced men who had learnt the skills pertaining to pipe laying and rough plumbing while working for the Board. The Board then moved them between maintenance and construction. These long term casuals for many years suffered the worst aspects of the Board's casual and permanent employment. One was the broken time due to the stop-go nature of the Board's activities and wet weather. Another was the lack of clear definition as to maximum daily hours or

95 Cf. for example, railways. *ibid.*
97 There were 532 applicants for the advertised position of assistant ranger for the Catchment Area and 37 for leading man, Lower Canal. MWSDB Minutes, 9 May 1907.
work. In 1904, when the Board introduced the category of ‘temporary permanent’, they finally received the basic conditions for permanent employees: paid public holidays and one week’s annual leave.99

Despite its financial dependence, the Board’s autonomy over employment conditions allowed it to adjust pay rates to take account of internal factors or market rates for categories in short supply.100 The President had the greatest single influence but could not prevail alone. The opinions of the Engineer-in-Chief carried considerable weight. Small, especially, was influential and supported some of the claims of those permanent wages employees whom he felt suffered through hard toil and unhealthy conditions.

The Board itself did not always reach unanimity and industrial questions often caused prolonged disagreements. Some members consistently favoured austerity for employees on behalf of ratepayers, a convenient excuse for the anti-labour majority on the Board. Compared to other public employers, the Board’s majority were tough, mean and arrogant. The two Official Members, often both businessmen, together with the President and Henley formed the core of the anti-concession alliance but normally favoured larger rewards for the highest echelons.101 The other municipal representatives were more sympathetic to the plight of the low paid but were mostly in the minority.102

99 Temporary permanents were initially those with more than 12 months' continuous employment. Some benefitted but others, kept uninformed of their new rights, did not. In 1907, the Board re-interpreted ‘continuous service’ as an aggregate 11 months during the previous year. This was still a very restrictive definition compared to the six months needed for temporary status on the NSW Railways. MBWSSEA Wages Board, 1910, pp. 523, 597, 611, 632A, 636, 649, 651, 653; MWSDB Minutes, 8 June 1904; 1 May 1907; Transcripts of the Industrial Court (ICT), 11 April 1910, p. 7, Vol. 2/145. State Archs, NSW


101 MWSDB Minutes, 3 August 1904; 15 May 1907; 1 June 1910; PSJ 10 November 1904, p. 10. Henley also led a determined but unsuccessful effort to wrest the initiative on industrial relations from the President, the Engineer-in-Chief and the Secretary. MWSDB Minutes, 18 February 1903, 27 May 1903.

102 Once again the most important were Meagher, Jones and Griffin. They gained most concessions during a short time when Board President Keele was an ally, partly due to his deep and mutual hostility to Henley. ibid., 8 January 1907, 22 February 1907, 13 March 1907, 25 March 1907, 18-9 May 1907. Keele’s successor, Milner also sometimes joined Meagher et al., ibid., 27 March 1908. For Meagher, ibid., 6 and 12 May 1908, 18-9 May 1909, 29 June 1909. In 1910, one outspoken casual labourer gave a clear picture of the Board’s reputation:

'... we have the impression that because the men in the Railways, the Harbour Trust, the Municipal Council are paid for holidays that it is only natural we should look forward to it, seeing we are all
The Board was also paternalistic. One feature was its preference for hiring relatives of ailing or deceased employees. There was also an informal working preference for family members of existing employees. These came in at the lower levels — by applying to district engineers, inspectors and overseers. Given the labour market for the unskilled, this linked families into the Board for generations. Their lives became increasingly enmeshed with the Board's history and their families became storehouses of lore as to the Board and its workings. Whatever they felt about the Board as an employer, they inevitably identified with the 'service'.

The Board's grievance procedure maximised low placed employees' recognition of the Board's hierarchy and the debts owed for their 'privileges'. The approved methods were signed complaints, petitions and finally deputations. Unsigned complaints received no recognition. This of course limited the nature and extent of complaints. Acceptable requests went to heads of branches but real change only occurred if Small or the President took them up. Although most were not successful, and many were simply discarded within the bureaucracy, there was no alternative. The Board expressed hurt and aggression at grievances taken outside this hierarchy. Few permanent employees took the risk.

The annual picnic symbolised the contradiction between the apparent paternalistic harmony within the Board and its class and hierarchical structure. It was important that all, from the highest to the lowest, should be present to indicate their belonging to the 'service'. By all accounts the large number of employees and their families had a very enjoyable day's outing. There were games, races and competitions of all types with prizes and lollies for the children. Workers' families had a picnic lunch on the grassy area by the harbour where they listened to speeches from 'distinguished guests'. The latter did not lunch on the grass, instead partaking of a most sumptious but free feast inside a pavilion.

under the one head and are all taxpayers. It is perhaps selfishness on our part to look for the good and easy times our superior officers enjoy.' MBWSSEA Wages Board, 1910, p. 677.

103 MWSDB Minutes, 19 April 1900, 30 May 1905, 13 March 1907.

104 Again this was not uncommon where firms tried to maximise cost flexibility and production stability in industries with a volatile product market. Lee and Fahey, op. cit., p. 25.

105 MWSDB Minutes, 31 December 1900, 9 January 1901 13 December 1905; 22 February 1907; PSJ, 10 May 1902, p. 1; 10 April, 1903, p. 18.

106 The Board made the day a paid holiday. To receive payment, all those not having to do essential work attended.
Here they raised their glasses and responded to a series of toasts: to royalty, to the NSW ministry and parliament, the press, members of the Board, the visitors, the ladies and, finally, to the chairman. There was no mention of the employees, whether blue or white collared, who designed, built, maintained and administered the Board's works and organisation and who lunched much more modestly at their own expense outside.\textsuperscript{107}

4. Principal groups of water and sewerage workers

a. Labourers and construction: an overview

The construction of water supply and sewerage works was the work of large numbers of labourers. Labourers did a wide variety of jobs in different industries. They had in common experience on building, construction and quarrying works and a lack of formal craft skills. Irrespective of the skills peculiar to the different jobs (and many of these were interchangeable), the work required great strength and endurance.

Within this large, general category, there were identifiable core groups who remained in relatively stable employment. This stability, like the instability for the majority, was a product of general economic conditions, the pattern of economic development and the peculiarities of each section of the labour market. The most important of these groups were specialised rather than general labourers — builders' labourers, rock miners and those labourers permanently employed by government instrumentalities.\textsuperscript{108} These became the areas of most persistent unionisation.

Navvies, the largest and most typical group of construction labourers, inhabited the most open and least stable section of the market for labourers.\textsuperscript{109} They were general construction labourers building roads, railways, dams and canals, typically with pick and shovel. Much of their work was casual and itinerant and they also did a range of other unskilled and semi-skilled work.\textsuperscript{110} As navvies, they often lived in tent camps which at

\textsuperscript{107} PSJ, 10 October 1903, p. 3; MWSDB Minutes, 21 October 1908.
\textsuperscript{108} Builders' labourers were not prominent on water and sewerage works.
\textsuperscript{109} Sheldon, 'In Division'.
\textsuperscript{110} In mines or as shearsers, cutting cane, labouring in the pastoral industry or in agriculture or casual labouring around the ports.
The Years to 1910

times took on the character of demountable townships. Overseers and gangers moved
general labourers between jobs as needed — getting them to use pick and shovel, mix, wheel
or pack concrete or do any other work.

Their was extremely arduous toil in a cruel climate and around them developed
something of an aura as to their size and strength, Irishness, heavy drinking and
rowdiness. Most workers on the bottom rung wielded a shovel or 'banjo'. One step up
was pickwork. On the other hand, they could aspire to a hierarchy of jobs through dint of
skill, literacy or sobriety. There was the chance of direct promotion to ganger or of
advancement to the better jobs such as powder monkey, trench timberer, rock miner,
quarryman, platelayer and rough construction carpenter. Where continuous employment
allowed for sufficient saving, buying a horse and cart made the family's moves between
jobs easier and, if the navvy's teenage children used it around the works, provided a useful
addition to family income.

Sydney was an important part of the labourers' world. Housebuilding and
construction of infrastructure as well as work around the port and some manufacturing were
all subject to seasonal and cyclical fluctuations. Similar fluctuations in employment in rural
areas meant large flows of unskilled workers between city and country. These flows
included the large number of labourers working on Sydney's dams, pipe lines and sewer
mains.

Cataract Dam, with an average of more than 500 workers, was easily the largest water
supply job. With upward of 1,500 inhabitants, it was also the first work to need an onsite
construction town. In common with later dam construction, it attracted Sydney and rural

111 D. Rowe, 'The Robust Navvy: The Railway Construction Worker in Northern New South
42-3; This even extended to distinctive language. 'Blow up' meant starting and 'yo ho' finishing
112 RCPWD, 1896, pp. 388-9, 394.
113 Ibid., pp. 33, 36; 'John Monash's Description of the Navvy, 1891', Labour History, No. 40, May
1981, pp. 93-4. Strength of Irish feeling was evident from the prominent celebration of St Patrick's
Day. See e.g. MWSDB Minutes, 11 March 1903.
114 'John Monash's Description of the Navvy', op. cit., pp. 93-4; Interviews with Don Taylor,
115 S.H. Fisher, 'The Family and the Sydney Economy in the Late Nineteenth Century', in P.
Grimshaw, C. McConville and E. McEwen (eds), Families in Colonial Australia, Sydney, 1985,
pp. 154, 158.
labourers as well as locals from depressed farming communities. Surviving photos suggest a rough, dusty frontier settlement. Most of the workers at Cataract were navvies.

There were also specialised groupings of labourers on water and sewerage works. Sewer construction began with rock miners who cut through rock and sand. The breaking of fallen rock into transportable size was the job of ‘spawlers’. ‘Wheelers’ removed rubble or ‘mullock’. The larger sewers initially had all brick and mortar or cement lining. Carpenters, bricklayers, plasterers and their labourers followed the miners along the tunnels. Pipelaying involved trenching through rock, sand and soil, manually lowering the heavy pipes and then jointing them. The cutting of trenches for smaller sewers or water mains was the job of ‘rockchoppers’ (or rockgutterers).

Rockchoppers needed more than great strength and endurance. Only experience with their special pick imparted the skill to achieve the necessary accuracy or smooth finish. Another specialisation was the use of the ‘jumper’, a long steel bar with a diamond-shaped tip, used to drill deep holes in rock for placing explosives. The jumperman drove the bar vertically into the ground, giving it a final twist at the moment of impact. It was both heavy and skilled work. Labourers usually required many months of constant practice before they could drive the rod and twist it at the right angle to continue the hole. Many never learnt. Labourers who did jumpering often mixed it with spawling.

While many picked up the knack, a small group specialised in the laying and connecting of pipes. This was work largely specific to the industry and restricted to the trunk and reticulation works. They tended to move between the PWD, contractors and the Board depending on the finance and the stage of construction and the balance between day labour and contract. Jointing of iron pipes was a complex process. It involved the placing of a ring of greasy hemp around the narrower end of the pipe, the ‘spigot’, which fitted inside the socket of the next pipe. The jointer would build a small clay dam around the joint into which to pour molten lead. The caulker, often the same person who did the jointing,

116 PSB on PAH, p. 712; PWD Reports, 1902-3, p. 114; 1905-6, p. 69; 1906-7, p. 42.
117 MWSDB Reports, 1904-5, p. 73; 1906-7, p. 3; PWD Reports, 1902-3, p. 111, 1903-4, p. 40.
118 ICT, 19 October 1909, 2/138, Vol. 85, p. 7; Interview with Don Taylor, op. cit; Evidence of G. Tennant, Transcript, MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910, pp. 661-5.
119 Transcript, Water and Sewerage Employees' Wages Board, No. 1, 9 December 1913, pp. 5-6, 27, 29. WSEU Archs.
then used special caulking irons to bang the lead in and around the joint for a perfect seal. The hemp around the spiggot stopped the lead entering further into the pipe and coming into contact with the water supply.\textsuperscript{120}

Other tasks changed with the introduction of new technology. Sewer miners, and to a lesser extent, spawlers increasingly used explosives to break up rock.\textsuperscript{121} Further, from 1895, the PWD and then the Water Board gradually introduced reinforced concrete in place of brick or stonework for the construction of sewers, drains, bridges, aqueducts and water tanks.\textsuperscript{122} This called for skills in making, setting and joining the monier plates.

\textbf{b. The sewer miners and rockchoppers}

The rock miners and rockchoppers faced overwhelming danger from the fine dust they raised cutting through the sandstone rock underlying Sydney. When inhaled, this dust caused silicosis, then popularly known as ‘sewer miners' disease’. The effects of explosives, damp and poor ventilation compounded the risk.

The introduction of explosives had gone some way to reducing the amount of dust but, even in 1901, contractors, such as S. Butcher, reckoned as many as three out of four sewer miners died from tunnel work. Between 60 and 70 per cent of his best hands had died this way: ‘Real good men. Mostly young men between 30 and 40; some between 40 and 50.’\textsuperscript{123} Physique was not a factor in explaining mortality as the work demanded and got the strongest and hardiest of labourers.\textsuperscript{124}

The later and much smaller secondary drives brought other problems. Many measured only four feet by three and the miners, many of whom stood six feet tall, had to work by candlelight sitting, kneeling or stooping in water.\textsuperscript{125} With no change sheds supplied, sweaty miners had to change their wet clothes out of doors. On night shifts, and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[120] It did however burn the workers and they could always taste the lead on their lips. Their answer was to drink copious amounts of milk to dissolve the lead and the supply of milk became part of the Board’s regular provisions for lead jointing work. Interviews with Noel Thorpe, 9 October 1986; and Don Hodgson, op. cit.; MWSDB Report 1891, pp. 31-2.
\item[121] ICT, 29 September 1910, 2/145, p. 2.
\item[122] D.J. Fraser, ‘Early Reinforced Concrete in New South Wales (1895-1915)’, Institution of Engineers, Australia, \textit{Transactions: Multi-disciplinary Engineering}, 1985, ss. 1, 4.4, 7-8.
\item[124] \textit{ibid.}, p. 1050.
\item[125] \textit{ibid.}, pp. 1039, 1049.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
particularly in winter, this exposed them to great extremes of temperature increasing their chance of also contracting tuberculosis. Silicosis and tuberculosis joined to squeeze the life out of many a sewer miner.  

Fumes from explosives also damaged their health and decreased their resistance to the effects of dust. Employers had miners use the explosives dynamite and rack-a-rock which gave off dangerous gases. These caused workers violent headaches, nausea and fainting upon re-entering the drives. The various forms of ventilation were mostly ineffective. If contractors proved callous in this matter, the officials of the PWD and the Board appeared uninterested in enforcing pure air on contract jobs.

Sewer miners responded, in part, through individual resistance. More importantly, they forged a strong group identity and solidarity initially expressed though informal responses. In this way, they gained some control over the time they had before re-entering tunnels after blasting, the use of explosives, the extent of scabbling and output levels. Employers fought back with tighter controls, bonus schemes (‘blood money’), changes to payment systems and the sack. Whether it was fear of the sack or the promise of extra pay which induced miners to troop back down the shafts before the fumes and danger had cleared, the result was the same. It was not uncommon for miners, topmen or even a contractor to carry out an unconscious miner.

In 1901, O’Sullivan appointed a Board of Inquiry into these notoriously bad working conditions. The Inquiry advanced proposals to eliminate dust. Where blasting was impractical, mechanical drilling was to take over. The Report called for an improvement in ventilation and for employers to provide proper changing sheds at each shaft. Finally, the

126 ibid., pp. 1051, 1057, 1062-3, 1111.
127 ibid., pp. 1058, 1085.
128 Carbon monoxide and nitrous oxide,
129 ibid., pp. 1063, 1120.
132 ibid., pp. 1048, 1054, 1067. For more detail, Sheldon, ‘Job Control’, pp. 41-2..
135 ibid., pp. 1102-3.
Inquiry called for a six hour working day for mining the dangerous sandstone, with no decline in earnings. O'Sullivan enforced the six hour day on PWD day labour works but the Water Board refused his recommendations to adopt these reforms. By mid 1910, ventilation had not improved and there was no mechanical mining.

The Inquiry also shifted public attention to silicosis problems of the rockchoppers. Employers placed lines of rockchoppers as close together as possible. Some trenches were very deep, up to 20 feet, but only two feet wide. Rockchoppers could not help enveloping each other in thick clouds of dust. Here too, the Report looked to mechanisation. Meanwhile, there was to be a minimum distance of eight feet between those in deeper trenches. There was no mention of reduced hours. Unlike sewer miners whose work required increasing judgment and less concerted muscle, rockchoppers had to toil unceasingly during their eight hour working day. Nor did they have any control over their time at work. There was no let-up and workers had to achieve daily quotas. Gangers prowled the works weeding out those unable to keep up.

As employers made very few improvements, work continued to kill rockchoppers in large numbers. The Labour Council and sympathetic newspapers periodically referred to an epidemic of silicosis due to the 'sweating' conditions under the Water Board and its contractors. The *Lone Hand* concluded that Sydney's citizens should not: 'enjoy the sanitary benefits of [their] water and sewerage service without thought for the men whose lives provided it.' The answer was machine cutting as soon as possible. In the meantime, there should be the most generous treatment for those still working or already

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136 *ibid.*, pp. 1034-6. Some of the medical witnesses and contractors had suggested an even greater reduction in hours. *ibid.*, pp. 1111, 1114.
137 MWSDB Minutes, 15 April and 3 September 1902; ULPS Minutes, 14 April and 2 June 1903.
139 ‘Sewerage Works Ventilation Board’, p. 1043
140 *ibid.*, 1035-6; MBWSSEA Wages Board, 1910, p. 593.
141 E.g. TLC Minutes 17 and 24 January 1907, 26 February 1908; *Lone Hand*, op. cit., pp. 312-6. Such was its infamy that the isolated Wollongong workers who did not have to cut sandstone knew all about the problems in Sydney and passed on accurate accounts to successive generations of workmates. Interview with Don Hodgson, *op. cit*.
142 *Lone Hand*, 1 July 1909, p. 312.
incapacitated. Rockchoppers and sewer miners came to the same conclusion. Dying from waiting, they were going to use their unionism to get it.

c. Sewer Maintenance

The Board initially divided the sewerage system between City and Suburban Divisions. In March 1897, these employed 80 maintenance labourers, the largest single body of the Board's permanent workforce. Subsequently, despite a continuing expansion of the system, restricted maintenance funds did not allow for the necessary increases in permanent workers. Supervisors merely increased the work load. The greater flow of water from an expanding system also made the work more difficult and sometimes dangerous. Whereas the water had previously come up just above their ankles, it now flowed above their knees.

The appointment during 1900 and 1901 of many additional permanent maintenance labourers from the Board's temporary workforce did not overcome the shortage. Although understaffed, by 1902 the sewer maintenance workforce of 129 accounted for nearly one quarter of all Water Board officers and employees. Almost all were labourers. By 1909, the Board had made another clear organisational distinction, this time between high and low level maintenance.

Sewer maintenance continued day and night. Some worked permanently on the day shift, others on the night and still others moved between the two. Where they worked in groups of three, there was considerable informal swapping of surface and underground work and of tasks inside the tunnels. There were a variety of tasks: cleaning out the tunnels; cleaning the tidal flaps, intercepts and sandpits on the low levels; removing 'chokages'; putting in junctions; renovating, lifting and lowering manhole covers, and a host of general repairs. Some required a knowledge of rockchopping, pipelaying or concreting, but the skills learnt from daily working and from seasoned workmates were even more important. These men were very proud of their practical ability and experience. It was difficult for

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143 RCMBWSS, 1897, Appendix p. 57. Smaller numbers of maintenance labourers worked outside the two large systems on the sewage farms, the suburban outfalls, and the pumping stations. The Board classed them separately and for this and other reasons pertaining to its central argument, this thesis also treats them apart.
144 MWSDB Report, 1898-9, p. 82; MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910, pp. 173, 199, 238.
145 ibid., pp. 20, 119.
ordinary surface labourers or even the mighty rockchoppers to get: 'into the system ... for working a sewer.' This, they felt, differentiated them from other labourers inside and outside of the Board’s workforce.

Underground sewer work also held dangers unknown to those working above. Not for nothing did foremen insist on new workers spending time on surface jobs before climbing down manholes. First, there was the danger of flooding from sudden rainstorms. The overflow from street gutters fed directly into the sewers raising their levels and accelerating their flow. In the early days, flash floods coursing through sewer tunnels had swept unwary maintenance labourers to their deaths. As a result, Small ordered workers not to go into the sewers if there was a chance of rain and no worker was to enter a sewer unless another worker remained above to keep a look out. Nevertheless, some of those working below continued to have narrow escapes when circumstances hindered a rapid exit.

Breathing was the second major occupational danger. Beyond the stench, there were also the dangers of sewer gas. Maintenance workers complained of headaches and dizziness, nausea, collapsing below and of having to be helped or carried out. Sometimes the illness lasted for a couple of days, at other times it was a question of weeks. They found Dr Kendall unsympathetic and his successor, Dr E.S. Stokes, more so.

Some workers took preventive care. On Kendall’s suggestion, John Potter took up smoking a pipe, as close to the nose as possible, to kill airborne germs. His other precaution was to keep ‘well physiced’. Jeremiah Patrick Ring, otherwise a light drinker, took a

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146 Evidence of Rigg, p. 31. Also pp. 100-1, 134, ibid.
147 ibid., p. 33. See also p. 135.
148 ibid., pp. 21, 33, 38, 65, 127, 133, 139, 146-7.
149 ibid., pp. 19, 32, 36, 67, 97, 124, 164, 189, 227.
150 Kendall always sought to ingratiate himself with the Board. MWSDB Reports, 1893, p. 8, 1897-8, p. 32, 1902, p. 38. Stokes used dubious sampling methods to argue that sewer maintenance work was the healthiest in the Board’s service and that the sewers were more conducive to good health than the atmosphere on the surface. It was only a short step from advertising Sydney’s sewers as health clinics! As a result, the men preferred to go to their local or friendly society doctors although this frequently caused problems in convincing the Board to provide sick pay. MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910, pp. 67, 98, 179, 288-9, 837-8, 840.
151 ibid., pp. 133-4.
touch of medicinal brandy to calm his queasy stomach. Small passed off complaints by noting that: ‘When you joined the service you knew you were not going on a rose farm.’

Other risks were common to all who worked in the sewers. With no change sheds, workers had to change out of their wet and filthy clothes on the surface with no protection from the winter chill. There was also the risk that the sewer gases could catch fire. Some workers were lucky to escape with their lives when gases in manholes or sewers ignited or even exploded off the lamps, candles or matches they used for light.

Aside from the general dangers, most tasks were very unpleasant and some arduous. There was ‘dredging’, where a team of three, moving along the line of the larger sewers, removed residues. One pulled a rope dragging a heavy cup through the silt on the tunnel floor between manholes. The cup, held about three gallons and when full, they emptied it, often into a special barrow. The second worker below then pulled the cup back to the point where the silt had accumulated. The third, who remained on the surface, used a windlass of shearlegs to pull the bucket or barrow up when full. Even working on the downgrade to take advantage of the flow of water, it was often killing work. Where manholes were further apart the toil increased. Leading man William Dwyer, no longer had to dredge, but recalled that: ‘You are pulling yourself to pieces when dredging. It would take a horse sometimes to shift the bucket.’ Working in the narrower sewers was even more difficult. The men were always stooping or crawling and, when dredging heavy loads: ‘I suppose ... we had about 15 inches from our nose to the water, and make no mistake we had to work hard.’ The cup shifted solid matter giving off putrid smells which rushed along the tunnel to assault the dredger. As Potter complained: ‘The man has his head down on to die rope and he gets the full blast of it.’

Another vital but obnoxious task was removing ‘chokages’, the blockages in the smaller pipes, by ‘rodding’. They would insert up to 30 short rods in an effort to shift it.

152 ibid., p. 98.
153 ibid., p. 50.
154 ibid., pp. 23, 33, 64, 116-7.
155 ibid., pp. 171. See also pp. 24, 29-30, 815. One worker complained of pulling a two inch rope hand over head for more than 200 yards at a time.
156 Evidence of Rigg p. 33, ibid. See also pp. 16, 135, 163.
157 ibid., p.141. Also p. 33.
Sometimes the pipes were very tightly blocked and Potter had seen: 'chokages coming out of a pipe like meat coming out of a sausage filler.' The more packed chokes often held back large quantities and maintenance men had to exit quickly to avoid being swept along the pipe. This work always meant getting covered in filthy water and Thomas Linkenbagh remembered one big choke where: '[I] sank to my waist or just enough to keep my face out of it; I found it was two blocks ... I worked for about 3 hours at it in the water.' Often decaying, putrid matter such as dead animals were the cause of the choke or were banked up behind. When shifted, they gave off a nauseating stench. Henry Rigg did not suffer from the odours because of his poor sense of smell, but noted that: 'It is a weekly occurrence pulling them up and finding them reaching their heart up. I have been down the sewer with mates who could not live in it, and have had to go out.' The low level sewers presented special problems. As the pipes were narrow (six or nine inches), maintenance workers had to clear chokages and do other cleaning work while cramped in the intercept pits or manholes.

Who were these workers whose very difficult, unpleasant and unhealthy work contributed so much to the health of the rest of Sydney's population? In 1902, most of the City Division workforce were the labourers the Board had hired as young men in 1890 and 1891. This workforce gradually aged prior to Small's new appointments a decade later. As much of the suburban system was newer and also less labour intensive, more than half its workforce had had much shorter periods of service. Here again, 1900 and 1901 had been years of heavy recruitment. It was not a decisively younger workforce because recent appointments had come from the ranks of seasoned temporary labourers. By 1909, both sections had aged further.

158 ibid., p. 132.
159 ibid., p. 178. See also pp. 32, 58, 132, 163, 191.
160 ibid., p. 100.
161 ibid., p. 33. It was different when supervisory staff went below. Then, six or more labourers worked to removed a string of manhole covers to increase the ventilation and reduce the discomfort below. ibid., pp. 23, 133.
162 ibid., pp. 62, 194, 206.
163 From the Board's 'Annual Returns of Officers and Servants' etc. MWSDB Archs.
The evidence of 23 sewer maintenance labourers and leading men before 1910 Wages Board hearings allows a closer view of these workers.\textsuperscript{164} In age and service they were quite representative of the combined sewer maintenance workforce. Most had started with the Board in their twenties or early thirties. In common with much of Sydney’s labouring population at the time, they almost all lived in the first and second rings of working class housing around the City.\textsuperscript{165}

Nine had previously worked predominantly as construction or quarrying labourers, mainly for the PWD or its contractors. They had done a range of tasks including pipelaying, rockchopping, wheeling and timbering. Others had also spent time on pick and shovel. These included three ex-miners, an ex-shearer and an ex-seafarer/fisherman.

George Davis had travelled NSW and Victoria — bridge building, shearing, gold mining, sewer mining, dredging and cleaning. By 1910, he was 58, married with five children and had buried seven others. He had brought his family to Sydney for his wife’s health, never intending to stay. There had been work as a contract rockchopper and rockminer, a ganger on City Council pipe laying and on fumigating sewers. More children and much broken time had made it financially impossible to return to the country.\textsuperscript{166}

Charles Young had left coal mining in Newcastle because of the irregularity of the work. Ring had mainly worked as a ‘gun’ shearer in Australia and New Zealand. Finding married life and itinerant work incompatible, he had given up the latter. William Dwyer had been a railway carter. Unable to afford to replace his dead horse, he had then worked as a labourer on the railways until they dismissed him: ‘as they usually do when you get in a certain time and are entitled to a rise; they then knock you off and start you again next week.’ John Duff had been a supervisor on the construction of the Glebe Island Bridge until the 1904 PWD retrenchments. Martin O’Mara, an apprentice carpenter, had given up his indenture to take his deceased father’s position in the Board’s service. Of the two ex-coal lumpers, Rigg had been victimised during the Maritime Strike.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{164} MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{165} Balmain, Alexandria, Surry Hills, Darlinghurst, Newtown, Marrickville, Glebe, Pyrmont.
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{ibid.}, p. 47-8
\textsuperscript{167} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 85, 87, 101, 151, 166, 174, 191-2, 204-5, 218, 244, 247.
These experiences explain their readiness to do such unpleasant work for lower wages than they could receive outside during prosperous times. It was permanent employment that appealed to these men with their typically large families.168 There was none of the impoverishing broken time common elsewhere. Then there were paid annual and public holidays and sick and accident pay.

Nor was work discipline as harsh as on construction. The leading men came from and remained close to the permanent labourers.169 The labourers regarded the higher echelons such as the inspectors and Small as ‘hard but fair’ who might support claims for improvements in working conditions.170 Finally, if the work below was oppressive and unwholesome, it had improved in the ten years since the turn of the century.

One area of improvement was in hours of work. At first all worked a 48 hour week, the same as or better than most workers in NSW at the time.171 Night workers, in particular, desired recognition of their highly unpleasant work through reduced hours. In 1905, after the men, on Rigg’s initiative, had petitioned him, Small agreed to a 36 hour week for night work underground. He then extended the reduced hours to some of the smellier day jobs but most continued working 48 hours.172

The Board had good reasons for this special recognition apart from the vulnerability of maintenance work to industrial conflict. It organised sewer maintenance into a very flat hierarchy with almost all on the lowest rung. Given the spread of the work, this meant little constant supervision.173 The Board therefore relied a great deal on the skills and knowledge

168 ibid., pp. 101, 130.
169 Nevertheless, fear of surprise visits from an inspector or foreman drove them to vigilant supervision of the jobs they visited. It even moved them to take their coats off and lend a hand when the work was slow, something unthinkable for gangers, their peers on construction. ibid., pp. 152-3.
170 However they had a terrible time with the foreman Ben Nettleton whose Orangeman’s hatred for the many of Irish Catholic origin working as Board labourers fuelled his tyrannical hostility towards those below him. (Interview with W.H. Ring, Parramatta Nursing Home, 28.1 1986.) His hatred showed in a series of totally false accusations which embarrassed other officers at the 1910 hearings. MBWSSEA Wages Board, 1910, pp. 750, 760-2, 771-2, 778-9
173 In the early years, there were no leading hands on night shifts and the oldest worker usually took responsibility. Even in 1910, there were no permanent leading men on the City sections. The few suburban leading men oversaw a number of gangs on different runs or sections and this often meant walking two or three hours each day. ibid., pp. 55-6; 286.
of its permanent labourers, on their autonomy and their good will. There was no doubt about their skill and experience and leading men attested warmly to their autonomy and reliability. The sewer workers' commitment to their often odious work was also evident.\footnote{ibid., pp. 100-1, 165-8, 171, 175.}

The contrast with the position of construction labourers could not have been starker. The sewer maintenance workers had permanent jobs, a range of favourable employment conditions and access to their supervisors over grievances. Further there was a lack of conflict over work discipline. These advantages tied them to the Board whom they found to be a reasonable employer. This is crucial as it was these sewer maintenance men who founded and for many years dominated the Board's house union.

d. Water Supply Maintenance

Separate groups of workers undertook the two distinct types of water supply maintenance. The first were the core maintenance staff looking after the operation of headworks, pumping stations and city and suburban reticulation. Given the need for unceasing vigilance and for specialised knowledge of the system, the Board made these workers permanent employees. The second group had much more in common with casual construction labourers whose job insecurity they largely shared. As the government underfunded the Board's water supply maintenance, and basic maintenance and repairs had to continue, this retarded renewal and upgrading works.\footnote{MWSDB Reports, 1893, p. 67; 1900-1, p. 3; 1903-4, p. 4; 1904-5, p. 3.} It was the casual maintenance workforce doing, what in practice were construction jobs, who suffered.

In 1909, there were 47 permanent workers divided among City and suburban water maintenance districts. Prospect and the other headworks were separate. In charge of each of these districts was a turncock, the most vital and typical figure of water maintenance.\footnote{The present day Water Service Operator.}

With the responsibility for turning the district's water on and off, they had to be able to react swiftly and surely in emergency shutdowns as large breaks posed a threat to nearby property. Similarly, in the event of fires, turncocks had to promptly control water pressure in cooperation with the Fire Brigade. Then there were interruptions for the repair or replacement of pipes, the actual repairing and flushing of mains and attending to complaints.
from the public. They had to attend all mainlaying in their district and oversee hydrant repairs and the work of plumbers. The work required a detailed understanding of the locks, valves and the local system of mains and pipes and a mastery of the necessary skills of pipe jointing and caulking. This came from long experience. By 1909, all the 18 turncocks bar two had been working for the Board's water service since its inception in 1888.\textsuperscript{177}

In the early days of the Board's operations, turncocks worked alone and often had to cover large areas of their district on foot. As population densities increased, the Board appointed a couple of maintenance workers to assist each turncock with the heavier work. This made life easier for an aging group of turncocks, most of whom were in their fifties by 1909.\textsuperscript{178} With the growth of the system, turncocks became the water maintenance equivalents of overseers on construction or sewer maintenance, an anomalous situation as they alone remained wages employees.

The turncocks' main grievance was their hours of work. Paid for a formal minimum of 48 hours over six days, they remained on call 24 hours each day, seven days a week. It was almost impossible for them to get a Sunday off. To compensate, they received 14 days annual leave. In common with other permanent maintenance employees, initially they received no payment for the first eight hours of overtime worked each shift. In 1901, the Board reduced the hours of overtime labour without pay to four and, after 1908, finally paid for all overtime formally worked.\textsuperscript{179} But turncocks remained tied to their job day and night without respite. As Thomas Armitage explained in 1910: 'I asked on one occasion what constituted my day's work and was informed that I had to be there when called upon.'\textsuperscript{180}

The Board provided each turncock's home with a telephone. It often rang every night and in the early years, more than once. While the turncock was out looking after one job, his wife lost her sleep answering the other calls. She, of course, received no recognition from the Board.\textsuperscript{181} Small defended this industrial slavery on the grounds that turncocks had a soft job, an 'easy billet'. Further, being on call was not the same as being at work because

\textsuperscript{177} Some had even previously done this work for the City Council. MBWSSEA Wages Board, 1910, pp. 500, 516-518, 580, 582, 628.
\textsuperscript{178} ibid., pp. 506, 510, 512-3, 580-1.
\textsuperscript{179} ibid., pp. 502-3, 505, 516-7, 521, 881, 887.
\textsuperscript{180} ibid., p. 500.
\textsuperscript{181} ibid., pp. 501, 511, 517.
the turncocks were probably asleep much of that time. As to complaints about being unable
to go elsewhere outside the formal working hours, this was part of their duty as the Board's
servants and the reason the Board blessed them with a telephone. 182 Nevertheless, like the
other permanent employees, turncocks were extremely conscientious in their work and
proud of their key role in the provision of water to Sydney. 183

The Board promoted turncocks from the small permanent water service maintenance
workforce doing minor rockchopping as well as pipelaying, jointing and caulking. In 1902,
there were 12 permanent water maintenance men in the City and suburbs and another 17 in
the separate Prospect Branch. A similar picture prevailed in 1909. Together with turncocks,
the maintenance men were the highest status group of water and sewerage labourers.

The casual water maintenance groups did repairs, cleaning and painting as well as the
upgrading or replacing of existing works. As with construction labourers, their job security
depended on the vagaries of finance, rainfall and urgency. Despite broken time for bad
weather and slackness of work, they often worked for the Board over a number of years. A
large group of these workers lived and worked around Prospect Reservoir, supplementing
the permanent maintenance workers on the Reservoir and Canals. 184

Nine Prospect men gave evidence before the 1910 Wages Board. Eight of them were
labourers, doing a variety of jobs. Some had done monier lining of the Lower Canal.
Others swept the canal, usually three abreast. It was hard work as although the water had
been turned off, they worked all day with water up to the knees. 185 Between the major tasks
there was the routine work requiring some of the many skills of construction labouring. 186
As Edward Dwyer said: 'They simply say "come here and do this" and you jump up and
take hold of a pick and shovel and do it.' 187 And jump they did even though the Water
Board treated them shabbily indeed.

182 ibid., pp. 509, 522.
183 One chose to pay a crippling rent so that he could live close to the controlling valves and have a
yard large enough to store the pipes needed for repairing nearby mains. When Smail suggested
that the Board might supply a house at less than half that rent, he accepted, providing it also had
sufficient space for his working materials. ibid., pp. 583-4.
184 MWSDB Reports, 1892, pp. 3, 48; 1896-7, p. 1; 1897-8, p. 2; 1903-4, p. 4; 1907-8, p. 1.
186 ibid., pp. 692, 694, 713, 722, 733, 739.
187 ibid., p. 732.
Although many had worked intermittently for the Board for many years, and some for continuous periods of up to three years, the Board still classed them as casual. This meant very low earnings due to broken time and no paid public holidays apart from the obligatory picnic day. In 1910, after successive inflationary years, they averaged only about 32/- per week. The lowest paid permanent labourers had been taking home a minimum 42/- for 20 years.188

Generally settled married men in their thirties and forties and often with large families, they lived close to their work. They owned their houses which they had built or bought prior to working for the Board. Most of the houses had only three rooms and were extremely primitive. Home and family provided stability but made the search for alternative employment difficult. There was a shortage of work in isolated, semi-rural Prospect where Water Board employment was: 'the biggest thing going in the labouring line.'189 Home ownership and family tied them to Prospect. The Board took advantage to tie them to a life of insecurity and poverty on the semi-rural fringe of the metropolis.

Closer to town, long term casual labourers or ‘temporaries’, often moved between maintenance and construction and had similar skills and similar complaints to other water and sewerage labourers.190 Again, they conformed to the general picture of water and sewerage labourers. They tended to live in the inner working class suburbs and had done a variety of labouring jobs prior to starting with the Board.191 Like most of the Board’s labourers, they came and stayed for the promise of sustained work in a cut-throat market for labourers.192 Until 1901 they too did not receive payment for overtime worked. The need to finish repairs before going home greatly stretched their nominal 48 hour week, at times to 60 hours over five days. For this, the Board usually conceded Saturday off in lieu.193

f. Conclusion

188 MWSDB Minutes, 5 February 1909; WSEU Wages Board, 1910, pp. 699, 704, 713, 714, 723, 725, 726, 732, 739.
189 ibid., p. 707, also p. 737.
190 ibid., pp.525-6, 531, 587, 632-634, 646, 648-9, 652.
191 ibid., pp. 324-6, 531, 588, 653.
192 Charles Kenny, formerly a pipelayer for Water Board contractors: ‘left 9/- to work for 7/- as I thought I would get a steady job. With the contractors I was off and on, losing time.’ Kenny got a rude shock when Board employment showed the same patterns of insecurity. ibid., p. 636.
193 MWSDB Minutes, 21 August 1901.
Water supply and sewerage was a divided industry in Sydney during these years. Similar workers faced quite different conditions depending on whether they worked for the Board, the PWD or for contractors. Many workers probably worked under all three types of employers and carried the lessons learnt with them. This tended to tie together the construction side of the industry which, in turn, was part of the larger body of often itinerant unskilled labour.

Then there were the jobs which were purely the province of the Water Board. Many of those who worked there developed a deferential work culture reinforced by family preference in employment. This was particularly true for the maintenance workers who tended to develop in isolation from the broader labouring milieu.

Each group developed its own ethos. This was true for the rockchoppers and sewer miners who faced terrible work hazards. They clearly owed their employers nothing but contempt. The industrial tradition they developed was conflictual and based on rank and file control. On the other hand, there were the sewer maintenance workers. They coped with grossly unpleasant work but under favourable employment conditions. As a result, they identified with their work, accepted their employer's paternalism and sought advance through collaboration within the Board's hierarchy. These two groups were to be central in the establishment of unionism among Water Board employees.

5. Unionism among Sydney water and sewerage workers

Municipal water and sewerage labourers were active industrially as early as 1843, whether through informal combination or as part of a coalition of workers.\textsuperscript{194} Even Council's permanent water and sewerage workers combined informally for higher wages just prior to the Gold Rush. While their petition received only condescension, those who stayed on during the exodus, like those elsewhere, made good gains.\textsuperscript{195}


\textsuperscript{195} Clark, 'The Development', pp. 71-3, 101, 115.
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After that, there is little but fragmentary information available on the industrial activities of the industry's workers until the twentieth century. There was some informal combination: among those working for contractors in the building of Prospect Reservoir, for example. They struck over wages and safety but whether this was an isolated case or emblematic is uncertain.¹⁹⁶

Whatever the case, industrial organisation among water and sewerage construction workers remained informal until, in the wake of the Maritime Strike, the union movement attempted to regroup by spreading unionism among labourers.¹⁹⁷ This trend partially accounts for the birth, in 1892, of a militant but short-lived Sewer Miners' Union which formalised their heritage of informal resistance.¹⁹⁸

Subsequent formal organisation had to await economic recovery. It came, in 1899, as the result of an old, sectional union of builders' labourers opening its doors to the previously excluded construction labourers. The United Laborers' Protective Society (ULPS) did not just aim to attract water and sewerage workers. On the contrary, it now intended to become the union of all Sydney construction labourers.¹⁹⁹

Activists had organised informally and with some success among labourers on water and sewerage relief works during the depression.²⁰⁰ Under a change of union rules, they began the new century with extensive formal organising among the whole range of Sydney labourers. The ULPS gained greatly from and became increasingly dependent on O'Sullivan's day labour programme.²⁰¹ In the process, the ULPS, for decades a democratic, participatory and militant body — in the exclusive craft mould — developed the hallmarks

¹⁹⁶ In this case, it appears that the building artisans involved took the lead. 'Diary of the Resident Engineer, Prospect Dam', 1883-91, 10 April 1883, 30 May 1884, 17 and 19 January 1887. Ms. MWSDB Archives. Cf. railways, Rowe, op. cit., pp. 39, 45.
¹⁹⁸ TLC Organising Committee (Org.) Minutes, 16 and 17 June 1892; TLC Minutes, 18 August 1892; TLC Executive Committee (Exec.) Minutes, 13 September 1892.
¹⁹⁹ For a fuller treatment, see Sheldon, 'In Division'.
²⁰⁰ TLC Minutes, 29 March 1894, 10 May 1894. See also, Sheldon, 'In Division'.
²⁰¹ ULPS Minutes, 19 September 1902. A similar tendency towards dependence on Labor MLAs was evident among railway unionists. Patmore, op. cit., pp. 165, 172.
of a general labourers' union.\footnote{202} As a result of this activity, total membership jumped from 280 in 1900 to 2,207 in 1903.

The idea of a single ULPS ticket, valid on all jobs, allowed labourers to move between tasks on a single job, move to new jobs in the same sector or change to a completely different area of labouring. This avoided labourers on short and badly paid work having to recurrently pay joining fees. It safeguarded access to the union's benefit fund and maintained financial membership in areas which were poorly or only partially unionised. It was an inducement to remain a unionist through the uncertainties of a life of casual labour. For water and sewerage labourers it held out a special promise. It could be the means of joining labourers working for contractors or on day labour, working for the PWD or the Water Board, as casual workers or permanent, doing maintenance or construction work.

Early organising efforts included inner suburban sewerage reticulation and drainage jobs, a number of which displayed active job organisation.\footnote{203} Rockchoppers and sewer miners, in particular, effectively used the union's access to O'Sullivan as a backup for their traditional use of direct action.\footnote{204} It brought them ULPS rates as standard on all PWD sewer works. Sewer miners now received 10/- for their daily six hours work, rockchoppers 9/- for eight hours and other labourers 8/-.\footnote{205} The same was true to a lesser extent when the ULPS began organising on large water distribution projects in the outer western suburbs from 1903.\footnote{206}

Most important was the branch at Cataract Dam which also provides an example of the union's growing dependence on O'Sullivan. Because of the dam's geographical isolation, the Resident Engineer, who ruled over the works, its occupational village and outlaying camps, had greater than usual autonomy. It was rare for conflicts to reach beyond the village to PWD headquarters, let alone the Minister. Instead, through the local hierarchy of

\footnote{203} ULPS Minutes, 26 March 1900; 30 April 1900; 39 July 1900; 6, 13 and 20 August 1900; 15 October 1900; 5 November 1900, 12 November 1901, 6 January 1902; 10 and 24 February 1902; 7 and 14 April 1902; 16 June 1902; 25 August 1902.
\footnote{204} ibid., 19 January 1903; 2, 9, 16, 23 and 30 March 1903; 8 June 1903.
\footnote{205} ibid., 6 January 1902; 14 April 1903.
\footnote{206} ibid., 14 and 28 September 1903; 6,12, 19 and 26 October 1903.
inspectors and gangers, the Engineer got rid of insubordinate labourers by casting them back into the mass of casual navvies.207 This made union organisation very difficult.

The Cataract Branch formed in March 1903 in response to ULPS intervention over victimisation. Unable to win concessions locally, it depended on the initiative of the Sydney Branch in taking grievances before O'Sullivan. It also required organising visits from Sydney United Laborers to keep the members together.208 O'Sullivan's exit from his portfolio and the return of contractors brought major difficulties for the ULPS.

The ULPS had much less success with the Board and its contractors. The majority of those labouring on Board works still worked for contractors and the ULPS extended its use of deputations on their behalf. The Board refused to make contractors pay union rates.209 Labour Council support of the ULPS got it no further.210 211

During 1901, the ULPS received the Board's permission to interview its employees during their meal hour. Yet, the anti-labour majority of Board members easily resisted the ULPS's pressures.212 The union recruited among labourers on construction and among some of the casual and temporary labourers moving between construction and maintenance.

It had no success with the permanent maintenance workers. Some, especially those on sewer maintenance, were becoming increasingly disgruntled about their long hours and the lack of paid overtime. A single, transferable labourers' union card, however, held no attraction for those tied to life-long 'service' with the Board. Perhaps intimidated by their supervisors, they were unwilling to jeopardise their positions by joining an 'outside' union which had a militant tradition and had publicly clashed with the Board. Also, unlike the casuals, they had access to senior Board officers who, on certain issues, were not unsympathetic. Experience had demonstrated that it was much safer to try for concessions from within the Board's hierarchy.

207 *ibid.*, 2 February 1903, 2 March 1903.
208 *ibid.*, 9, 16 and 23 March 1903; 4 May 1903; 6 and 20 July 1903; 7 September 1903; 26 October 1903; 3 November 1903.
209 ULPS Minutes, 20 April 1903, 11 May 1903; MWSDB Minutes, 5 May 1903.
210 *ibid.*, 24 June 1903; TLC Minutes, 14 and 21 May 1903; 18 June 1903.
211 *ibid.*, 2 July 1903.
212 ULPS Minutes, 19 and 26 August 1901, 2 and 16 September 1901; MWSDB Minutes, 24 June 1903.
The union's drive to gather in all labourers came up against strong sectional tendencies. One took the form of the secession, in April 1901, of the small, Newtown Branch. It became the Builders' Labourers' Union (BLU) with the stated aim of retaining the ULPS's old identity as a union of skilled builders' labourers. Until 1908, an absence of effective organising brought dismal results.213

On the other hand, the ULPS also aided in the foundation of a number of small unions. One was the tiny Pipelayers and Caulkers' Union, founded at the end of 1900. Militant action in a tight labour market for their skills brought wage increases from Board contractors.214 Attempts to have the Board guarantee union rates on all pipelaying contracts failed and the union disappeared during 1902.215

The Sydney and Suburban Sewerage Employees' Union, which began in 1902, was also militant but shortlived due to the collapse of sewerage construction activity. It covered sewerage labourers, such as rockchoppers, working for the Board and its contractors. Like other unions, it was unsuccessful in pressuring the Board to enforce wage uniformity between day labour and contract. Nor did it or the ULPS manage to win the six hour day for sewer miners on Board jobs.216 217 Those members still in work when the union collapsed probably (re)joined the ULPS.

The permanent Water Board maintenance labourers remained outside these two trends in labourers' unionism. They were neither caught up in the growth and spreading of the ULPS nor did they succumb to the temptation of sectional unionism. Instead, they joined with the other permanent employees of the Water Board, the salaried officers and parallel groups in the PWD in the birth of a distinct public service unionism. The heart of this development was the Public Service Association of NSW (PSA).

The PSA began in 1899 as an 'all grades' or house union for public servants employed under the Public Service Act. Unionisation was the result of longstanding grievances arising out of the impact of the depression on the public service as well as more

213 Sheldon, 'In Division', p. 53.
214 Worker, 24 November 1900, p.6; TLC Minutes, 8 November 1900, 31 January 1901.
215 Worker, 9 February 1901, p. 5; MWSDB Minutes, 27 November 1901.
216 ULPS Minutes, 12 November 1901.
217 MWSDB Minutes, 15 May 1902, 3 September 1902, 10 and 30 September 1903, 21 October 1903.
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recent 'service' grievances. From the beginning, the union was a very middle class organisation.218 Headed by very highly placed public servants, it distanced itself from contact with the rest of the labour movement and disdained traditional manual union strategies and tactics. Instead, it concentrated on lobbying relevant ministers and a close working relationship with the Public Service Board (PSB). Nevertheless, it secured a number of important concessions for its members.219

The PSA refused to extend its coverage beyond those working for the PSB. It nevertheless encouraged other public sector employees to organise along similar lines.220 There had been social organisations of Water Board employees since the Board's inception. The most durable and important was the Picnic Committee. These groups provided some of the nucleus and cohesion for the establishment of the first specifically Water Board union.221 In late 1900, the Water and Sewerage Board Service Association (WSBSA) informed the Board of its recent formation and duly received Board approval. The process of formation had been remarkably similar to that of the PSA. Informal meetings of 'gentlemen' from the various branches had led to the appointment of a provisional committee of young and mainly middle and upper level officers. The committee framed a draft constitution modelled on the PSA. A mass meeting in October, 1900, largely adopted the draft.222

The new union's Honorary Secretary was J.G.S. Purvis, the Board's 38 year old Designing Engineer who had an annual salary of £350. By early 1901, more than 400 of a possible 600 permanent employees had joined and others were joining daily.223 The union was not open to temporary nor casual Board employees. The WSBSA covered permanent maintenance labourers receiving between £102 and £117 per annum. To a lesser degree than the PSA, better placed salaried staff made up its Council which also tried diplomatic

218 For discussion of this concept and its use here, see Sheldon, 'A Middle Class Union'.
219 Sheldon, 'Middle Class', op. cit.
220 PSJ, 10 April 1901, p. 1.
221 Cf. Railways, Patmore, op. cit., p. 20.
222 MWSDB Minutes, 7 November 1900; (Annual Report of the Water and Sewerage Board Service Association) PSJ, 10 February 1902, p. 24.
223 PSJ, 9 March 1901, pp. 3, 18.
persuasion to gain concessions from a tight-fisted Board.\textsuperscript{224} There is no evidence as to why these mostly well placed, middle class staff became union activists.

Lack of clear regulation meant widespread abuse of the working hours of the lower placed employees.\textsuperscript{225} The worst example was the case of water and sewerage maintenance workers doing long stretches of unpaid overtime. The new union’s first requests included clarification of overtime regulations and payment for overtime worked. The only real gain was the reduction from eight to four hours of unpaid overtime worked each shift before overtime payment began. Maintenance workers had at last begun to shorten their working day.\textsuperscript{226}

By their first Annual Meeting in January 1902, members of the WSBSA had realised that they were making no real headway. Their union could not enforce favourable public service regulations on the Board and they were unwilling to countenance a different industrial strategy. Instead, they enthusiastically amalgamated with the PSA which had just extended its membership criteria.\textsuperscript{227} By March 1902, nearly all Water Board officers and permanent employees were members of the PSA. After a PSA deputation and much delay, the Board recognised the PSA.\textsuperscript{228}

In the following few years, the composition of the Committee of the Water Board PSA sub-branch shifted away from the senior officials. Indicative of the spread of the membership were the attempts of gangers and sewer maintenance labourers to gain election. But the clerical staff still dominated.\textsuperscript{229} There was also an unevenness in the achievements.

\textsuperscript{224} The union’s Chairman was A.E. Flint, the 44 year old Paymaster and Comptroller. He was on the fourth highest clerical rung, behind the Board’s Secretary, Auditor and Accountant. The Vice Chairman, H. E. Riggs, was Draftsman-in-Charge for House Drainage and of similar age, service and salary. Most of the other officers and councillors were younger and were middle level clerical staff although there was another draftsman from house drainage, a suburban turncock (£140.8.0) and an Inspector of Plumbing (£234).


\textsuperscript{226} MWSDB Minutes, 20 July 1904 21 August 1901; \textit{PSJ}, 10 February 1902, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{227} This was a recognition on the part of the PSA Council, that, with the growing number and size of statutory authorities and special commissions, an increasing number of public servants were destined to remain outside the control of the PSB. Many of these groups were keen to join the PSA. \textit{Ibid.}, 10 February 1902, pp. 9, 22.

\textsuperscript{228} \textit{Ibid.}, 10 March 1902, pp. 2,4; MWSDB Minutes, 11 June 1902, 27 August 1902.

\textsuperscript{229} \textit{PSJ}, 10 July 1902, p. 9; 11 August, 1902, pp. 7, 9; 10 September 1902, p. 3; 10 January 1904, p. 2.
The Board made concessions for salaried officers on the highest rungs but large numbers of Board labourers continued to receive lower wages than those outside.230

After 1902, the PSA's failure to win wage and salary increases caused a waning of enthusiasm among Water Board employees. The PSA and its sub-branch committee counselled patience. They were dealing with a high-handed and autocratic employer and had to go softly.231 O'Sullivan's appointment of Keele, a former PSA activist, as the Board's President in early 1904 promised better times. A PSA deputation to Keele resulted in annual leave for all maintenance workers and labourers with more than twelve months continuous service.232 This was the first recognition of the large number of long-suffering, temporary manual workers in the Board's employment and a significant advance given conditions elsewhere. No further improvements came before the change of government.

Economic revival after 1905 seemed to offer Sydney labourers brighter prospects. The ULPS continued to broaden its appeal among the metropolitan unskilled.233 Yet, for those unions like the PSA, ULPS and the railway unions which had come to rely heavily on access to sympathetic ministers, it was a lean time indeed.234 Lee and Wade were much less amenable to deputations but both the ULPS and the PSA clung to their strategy of pressure from above.

This prompted another secession from the ULPS, this time by militant rockchoppers and miners willing to try their hand while their skills were in short supply. The Water Board continued to hold out on a six hour day and better wages. Under pressure from the ULPS which had Labour Council support, the Board finally made concessions. It then reneged.235

230 ibid. 10 June 1902, p. 2; 17 September 1902, p. 1; 10 October 1902, p. 3; 11 February 1903, p. 1; 16 September 1903, p. 1. The ULPS had managed to have labourers' daily rates under the PWD raised above the 7/- which the Board paid during 1903. ULPS Minutes, 14 January 1901, 6 January 1902, 10 February 1902, 14 and 28 July 1902; 13 October 1902; 19 January 1903, 22 September 1903. O'Sullivan also increased the paid public holidays to seven per year for all PWD labour, PSJ, 10 March 1903, p. 3.

231 There were calls for decreases to the already low subscription rates, attendances at general meetings were falling and so was membership. ibid., 10 July 1903, p. 6; 10 September, 1903, p. 3; 10 January 1904, p. 2.

232 ibid., 9 July 1904, p. 2; MWSDB Minutes, 8 June 1904, 20 July 1904.

233 TLC Minutes, 5 April 1906, 28 February 1907, 6 February 1908, 15 October 1908; 'In Division is Strength'.

234 Paunore, op. cit., p. 172; Sheldon, 'Middle Class', pp. 114-5.

235 TLC Minutes, 24 January 1907, 14 February 1907, 18 April 1907, 6 and 20 June 1907; MWSDB Minutes, 16 January 1907, 6 and 13 February 1907.
Dust continued to kill great numbers of these workers in their prime so that the task of building up formal organisation had to begin anew with different people every few years. But, the tradition of job level militancy was still alive.236

In January 1908, they formed the Rockchoppers and Sewer Miners' Union of NSW (RSMU) which soon organised almost all the 500 or so of those workers on water and sewerage jobs.237 The reasons for this level of rank and file loyalty and the new union's militancy were obvious. There was the tradition of job level action, through a union or without one and, most important, their work's terrible toll in suffering and death. They quickly forced their employers to concede 10/- for a six hour day for tunnelling, the first time under the Board, then for 'first class', and finally 'second class' rockchoppers. Within a few months, the Board and the contractors had to comply with the union's interpretations of classifications, wages and safe working. The union then began agitating on behalf of other labourers on sewerage construction.238

Contractors balked at this state of affairs. To get the work done, the Water Board reintroduced day labour on a wider scale. The union's attentions therefore focussed more directly on a less complacent although consistently arrogant Board. After years of ignoring all the evidence, the Board now talked pompously of having treated the rockchoppers fairly, even 'liberally'. Their antipathy to claims for even modest improvements for construction labourers could not have been clearer.239 Yet, Smail had to admit circumstances now ran against the Board:

As a matter of expediency the Board granted the increases in order to push on the works in the interests of public health, as this class of labour outside the union was very scarce.

I regret to say that, notwithstanding the concessions granted, trouble did not cease, as further demands were made .... 240

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236 TLC Minutes, 17 January 1907.
237 Co-operator Eight-Hour Souvenir, 7 October 1912, p. 15.
238 Australian Star, 20 February 1908; MWSDB Report, 1907-8, pp. 65-6; MWSDB Minutes, 31 March 1908, 12 and 20 May 1908, 15 July 1908, 5 August 1908; SMH, 22 October 1908.
239 Keele spoke of postponing works rather than having to grant rockchoppers a 1/- per day increase to 10/-. Another Board member muttered darkly about replacing them with Italian labourers. Australian Star, op. cit.
240 MWSDB Report, 1907-8, p. 66.
The Board seemed publicly, and to a lesser extent privately, unwilling to accept that some of its employees had dared to make demands and force their acceptance. This had not happened in the past. When forced to make improvements, the Board spoke of doing so on 'humanitarian grounds'.\textsuperscript{241} The evidence showed otherwise. Six years after the 1902 Inquiry, this union, in the space of a few months, had finally forced the Water Board to concede the Report's recommendations and more.

Success brought the rockchoppers growing confidence and organisational ability. The test came in October 1908 when they generalised one of their many job site disputes. The initial cause was a dispute over safe working which came to involve the union's internal discipline. Ultimately, both the local walkout and its subsequent extension to all rockchoppers working for the Board and its contractors was about whether or not the union's job control was going to prevail. The answer was clear. In a stirring strike lasting only a little over three weeks, the Rockchoppers and Sewer Miners' Union became the only union to decisively defeat their employers and the new, more repressive legislation.\textsuperscript{242}

While this was a spectacular victory, the establishment of wages boards had a more lasting impact on the organisation of water and sewerage workers. The ULPS adhered to the Labour Council boycott. The PSA Council completely ignored arbitration as the Industrial Disputes Act specifically excluded its members under the PSB. The RSMU initially boycotted state regulation. It saw no reason to become enmeshed. Instead, members continued their job level activity and the push to spread their gains.\textsuperscript{243}

Ultimately though, the Court's deliberations over the composition of the wages boards involved all unions covering water and sewerage labourers. The Act divided the Sydney labouring workforce into different 'industries' and thus into different boards cutting across the ULPS's membership.\textsuperscript{244} This and Heydon's erratic interpretations and preferences

\textsuperscript{241} ibid., 1907-8, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{242} For a detailed account, see Sheldon, 'Job control', pp. 47-50.
\textsuperscript{243} In fact, the Board had to take over contract jobs after contractors retreated and yet tried to find contractors to take over its own besieged day labour jobs. MWSDB Minutes, 28 July 1909, 20 September 1909, 6 July 1910, 12 October 1910, 16 November 1910, MWSDB Report, 1908-9, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{244} For divisions of labourers under Act, see Schedule 1. For Heydon's reasoning, ICT, 29 March 1909, p. 21, 2/125, Vol. 24.
The Years to 1910

redrew the contours of labourers' unionism in NSW to the disadvantage of the ULPS.245 The first case before Heydon pitted the ULPS against the tiny BLU for tradesmen's assistants. The ULPS lost. As refusal to register was an important factor, the ULPS quickly registered.246 This did not stop subsequent losses.

While the RSMU did not seek a wages board, it successfully contested ULPS claims to cover those rockchoppers and sewer miners working for the Water Board. They were not only the largest group of these workers, they were also the best placed and most tightly organised. This had brought them better wages, hours and conditions than those existing elsewhere. On these grounds, argued the RSMU officials, they had specific interests which should be recognised through exclusion from the ULPS wages board.247

Another new union made inroads into the ULPS's coverage. It too used the argument of a distinct employer and hence distinct interests. The Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association (MBWSSEA) had only begun in February 1909, when some of the Board's manual employees took advantage of the openings under the new Act to secede from the PSA. There was widespread discontent among the large sewer maintenance groups. After many years' gruelling, dirty service, their real and relative wages had declined. For many, money wages had remained unchanged since joining the Board 19 years earlier. The PSA's Water Board branch had gone into decline and the PSA had never won on wages. It had refused to register under the new Act or to represent individual members' cases in courts of law. Though disgruntled, these conservative permanent employees continued to closely identify with the Board. They shunned confrontation.

Forming a separate, recognised organisation could bolster their declining success with petitions. Small had earlier failed to acknowledge a sewer maintenance petition for extra

245 For a more complete account, see Sheldon, 'In Division'. A similar process occurred in other industries. For engineering, see Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers*, pp. 170, 174, 178-9, 184-5, 199.
247 *ibid.*, 19 October 1909, pp. 1-11. NB This did not include rockchoppers working for Water Board contractors. The PWCA subsequently applied for a wages board to have things fixed 'definitively' with the rebellious union. *ibid.*, November 16 1909, p. 2. Heydon agreed but the RSMU boycotted the wages board and the court for some time. *ibid.*, p. 8; 26 November 1909, p. 1; 3 December 1909, p. 1; 13 December 1909, p. 1.
pay to cover rising living costs. Registration promised other possibilities. When internal channels proved unresponsive, these workers sought help from the same State which, ultimately, provided them with permanent jobs and special employment conditions.

The founding group had met at the Club House Hotel, Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, in the heart of industrial inner Sydney. At its first general meeting at Trades Hall on 26 February 1909, the union enrolled some 130 members and claimed to cover all grades of the Board's permanent employees, including labourers. Its earliest rules opened membership to all with more than 12 months continuous employment. This widened the coverage to include temporary workers. This was a recognition of the shared 'privileges'. Yet, in the early years, it was clearly the creation of and vehicle for permanent sewer maintenance workers. Water maintenance workers largely remained aloof until 1910 and salaried staff, whether blue collar or white, remained in the PSA for most of the following decade.

Ring was the union's first President. Nine workmates from City sewer maintenance were among the 19 on the Executive and Committee of Management. The most important was W.A. (Bill) Macpherson who became the first Secretary, a job he was to hold for nearly five decades. Potter was one of the two Vice Presidents and Rigg one of the Trustees. There were also four suburban sewer maintenance workers including Henry (Jersey) Flegg. Treasurer J.J. (John) Toohey and O'Mara were two of only three representatives from low level sewerage operations and there was one each from water maintenance and ventilation shaft sections. Most of this group were between 30 and 45 years old and, significantly, given the large number with longer service, had become permanent Board employees after the mid 1890s. The veterans of the Branch were probably too accustomed to the Board's repressive paternalism to take an active part. Overall, those most involved appear to have previously worked in industries with a greater union presence.

248 Co-operator Eight-Hour Souvenir, p. 22 re being 'subject to any petty tyranny ... without the right of reply or appeal.' MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910, pp. 25, 31, 62, 95, 131.  
249 Labour Daily, 22 June 1929.  
250 Co-operator, op. cit., p. 22.  
251 MBWSSEA Minutes 19 and 26 February 1909, crosschecked with 1910 MBWSSEA Wages Board 1910 and MWSDB Staff Return for 1909.
New Committee members elected in late 1909 reinforced the stranglehold of permanent sewer maintenance workers. Among those elected was the union's advocate, P.J. Clara. There was still only one from among those in permanent employment on water maintenance. A full election in December 1909 brought William (Bill) Carey onto the Committee. Carey was to be a vital element in determining the union's strategy over the next 16 years.

These sewer maintenance men built a highly conservative union, one which, like them, clearly identified with the employer and with the importance of their work. The Preface to the union's first *Rules* gives a clear picture of the union's deferential conception of itself:

> We wish it to be distinctly understood that our association has not been formed in antagonism to our employers, the Board, but rather with the idea of assisting them to find the real grievances which exist in the Service, ... and to urge in a proper and respectful manner the alterations and improvements which should be made to ensure the better working of the Service, and the comfort and convenience of those who work it. To the members we urge the necessity of doing their duty conscientiously, so that the fact of being a member ... will be a guarantee to the Board that the duties of such employees will be fulfilled thoroughly and well.

The union's founders adopted concerns and style which reflected their highly subservient nature. Their initial interest was to secure the union's institutional position by registering under the Industrial Disputes Act and applying for a wages board. They could then move towards gaining an award for the different groups they claimed to cover. Fearing the involvement of the state industrial machinery, the Board immediately made some long overdue concessions as to overtime pay as well as starting welfare schemes. But it was too late.

The union's officials later claimed that rival unions had no legitimate claim over this membership as they had previously left Water Board employees in 'splendid isolation'. This was of course untrue. Heydon's administration of the 1908 Act now favoured the new union against the ULPS. The ULPS claimed to cover large numbers of casual labourers

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252 MBWSSEA Minutes, 23 March 1909; 27 August 1909; 3 December 1909.
253 *Rules of Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association*, Sydney, 1909, ML. The first recognised railway house union also initially distinguished itself by promising to help management stop strikes. Patmore, op. cit., p. 70
255 *Co-operator*, op. cit.
working for the Board and its contractors. These included general labourers and more specialised groups such as pipe caulkers and joiners. The new Water Board union countered by claiming strength among ventshaft workers, yet another ‘skilled’ group of labourers who had little in common with pick and shovel workers. This was a ridiculous basis for a claim. The Ventilation Branch had only 11 people and these included two plumbers and a mechanic who were likely to have been members of their craft unions, and the four supervisory staff who remained in the PSA. The mass of ventshaft labourers worked for contractors on construction and therefore were not eligible for membership of the Water Board union. Thus, the new union claimed entitlement to a separate wages board for the sake of three plumbers’ assistants and a carter!256 But Heydon noted that the Water Board was a separate ‘industry’ under the Act and removed all the Board’s labourers from the ULPS wages board for unskilled labourers.

The house union’s solicitor then served notice that he would apply for a wages board to cover all the Board’s wages employees whether labourers or artisans. The intention was clear: ‘All we want is to keep the industry separate to the outside industry.’257 Their specific location and the different conditions ‘enjoyed’ by the Board’s permanent employees ensured that they had little in common with those outside. According to the new union’s representatives, location also had other implications, especially for labourers. In fact, anyone who worked for the Water Board, by dint of the work processes involved, was automatically more skilled than those who did not.258 This, they claimed was another reason to keep them separate. Again this was nonsense as almost all labouring under the Board, except for core maintenance, was no different to work which contractors’ labourers did.

This distinction suited the Water Board which had at first objected to any wages board as conflicting with its statutory freedoms to hire and fire.259 The continued obstructiveness

256 ICT, 19 October 1909, op. cit., pp. 12, 16. The irony was that Clara later exclaimed: ‘20 men ... will form themselves into a union, and that means a Secretary. We have endless Secretaries.’ ibid., 27 April 1910, p. 22, 2/145.
257 ibid., 19 October 1909, op. cit., p. 17.
258 ibid., pp. 12, 16, 17.
259 Small sought exemption from any common rule. MWSDB Minutes, 19 August 1908, 24 March 1909, 15 September 1909.
of the Board and other public employers such as the railways annoyed Heydon who had already placed the Board's craft workers under the relevant sectional wages boards of the applicant craft unions.\footnote{260} Faced with the 'irksome' inconvenience of dealing with the craft unions, the Water Board changed direction and supported the idea of a single wages board for all its employees. For the employer's convenience, the house union's officials put forward a similar proposal. This time, Heydon refused to take away what he had already given.\footnote{261} The Board's craftsmen and labourers were now divided by industrial jurisdiction and the hopes of the house union's officials to cover all Board employees had suffered an initial setback.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the Board's wages employees were labourers. The Water Board union had hoped to take in clericals and professionals but, by the end of 1909, none of these had left the PSA for the house union. Under the new legislation they remained outside the province of arbitration. Heydon granted the new union a wages board for all non casual, blue collar Water Board employees outside the exempted craft unions. This more or less coincided with the realities of the union's membership of 235 and its immediate aspirations.\footnote{262}

Officials of the Water Board union and the ULPS agreed that the ULPS could cover the casuals as Macpherson's group were only really interested in permanent employees and the new union's rules explicitly excluded casuals until early 1910. Yet, Heydon's bizarre exemptions from the ULPS wages board had left Water Board casuals without a relevant board. Two delegates from the 150 maintenance casuals on the Lower Canal and Prospect Reservoir appealed to the new union. The officials promptly forgot their earlier protestations about the important distinction of 'privileges' and immediately sought to represent the casuals before their wages board, again in competition with the ULPS.\footnote{263}
The Board again found the concept of wages boards and unions inconvenient and argued against representation for the casuals. Again, circumstances encouraged a rapid change of mind. Clara stressed the advantages to both the Board and orderly industrial relations of his union rather than the ULPS gaining coverage of these labourers. The ULPS was affiliated to the Labour Council and was therefore liable at any time to call out its members in solidarity with other affiliated unions. The new union did not intend to affiliate. It was therefore a barrier against possible industrial chaos, an important factor for the public as water was essential to life. Further: ‘We are [said Clara] assisting the administration in every respect.’\textsuperscript{264} The Water Board now faced the choice of two unions with very different stances. The position of the new house union was clear. The alternative, the ULPS, had a history of activism on Labour Council. Further, it had never shown the Board any respect or ‘assistance’. Rather, the ULPS had publicly attacked the Board over its treatment of rockchoppers, its nepotism and its granting of salary increases to highly paid officials.\textsuperscript{265} In no way did it threaten the turbulence that Clara so dramatically prophesised but it was less ‘convenient’.

Heydon at first followed some of his previous decisions and favoured ULPS representation. The Water Board’s solicitor now strongly indicated the house union for ‘convenience’ and, as the judge demurred, finally pleaded: ‘I do not think it necessary to remind your Honour of the possibility of an industrial upheaval ....’\textsuperscript{266} Heydon again used some of the tortured logic which had so damaged the ULPS over the previous year and came down on the side of convenience for the Water Board. The Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees’ Association now covered all labourers employed by the Board, even those on a short-term casual basis. In this sense, although it was the result of a trend towards sectionalism within Sydney’s labouring workforce, it was probably more comprehensive than the ARTSA on the railways.\textsuperscript{267} The clerical, engineering and much of the field supervisory staff remained in the local branch of the PSA.\textsuperscript{268}

\textsuperscript{264} ibid., pp. 22-3. Also p. 16. The early railway house union, the ARTSA had a similar perspective. Patmore, op. cit., p. 65.

\textsuperscript{265} TLC Minutes, 9 April 1903, 18 June 1903, 22 July 1903, 3 September 1903, 17 January 1907.

\textsuperscript{266} ICT, op. cit., p. 26

\textsuperscript{267} ibid., p. 27. Patmore, op. cit., p. 63.

\textsuperscript{268} MWSDB Minutes, 4 April 1906.
Conclusion

In the momentous years between 1888 and 1910, a clear pattern began to emerge within the Water Board and the wider industry. Water supply and sewerage were no longer neglected relative to other areas of public spending. Yet, the administrative, financial and technical structuring of the industry had produced a workforce divided in a number of directions.

The policy of the Board as an employer accentuated many of these divisions and contributed to the development of two distinct manual workforces, industrial relations cultures and, finally, union profiles. The most distinctively 'Board' practice offered job security, access to better employment conditions and varying degrees of career progression. In return the Board received long, loyal and trustworthy service in areas crucial to the its rate gathering and indispensable maintenance functions.

Yet while they felt a remarkably close identification with the Board and its service, even among maintenance workers dissatisfaction built up from time to time. In the last years before 1910, those on sewer maintenance in particular began to chafe at low wages. At the same time, they came to realise the severe limits of the Board's traditional, paternalistic system of grievance appeals. As a result, they established a unionism which stressed both their close dependence on their employer and on the arbitration system which had guaranteed their union's future. In appealing to both, these conservative, permanent employees displayed a clear resolve to maintain industrial harmony within the Board and to keep outside industrial turmoil from their door. This of course brought support from the Board just as it was coming to realise that it could no longer hope to keep unionism outside its workforce.

The result of Heydon's promotion of the house union was to split Water Board workers from the wider labouring workforce. As they extended their union's coverage, the founders of the house union came to control the less favoured casuals in the interests of harmonious industrial relations. This was of crucial importance as casual labourers had shown themselves willing and able to strike, whether against contractors or the Board. In particular, the rockchippers and sewer miners had a tough and successful tradition of workplace action. They remained largely outside the Board's house union, as of course, did
those many ULPS members working for contractors or the PWD. Neither the members of the RSMU or the ULPS felt beholden to employers who hired and fired them with such great regularity. Over the next decade they were to continue with quite different patterns of industrial behaviour to those which Macpherson and his sewer maintenance supporters were busy fashioning for their Water Board house union.