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

Peter Michael Sheldon
University of Wollongong

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Chapter 2

1910-20
Perhaps, however, I may take the liberty of saying to the trade-unionists of the State that I have been greatly surprised ... to find how jealous and suspicious Unions are of each other, and how strong is their feeling of mutual hostility. ... Would it not be well for the leading unionists to take some steps to end such a state of things? It must be injurious to their cause. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

Judge Heydon, In re Labourers' Group, No. 1 and 4 Boards, NSWIR, 1915, p. 345.

To match an excess of government on the political level, initiative in the labour movement was resigned more and more into the hands of elected officials who are not simply delegates of the men but delegates of the courts as well, treasurers of union capital and hostages for the good behaviour of the rank and file.


Introduction

Wade's 1908 Act had encouraged the reshaping of union coverage among metropolitan water and sewerage workers. The general story was one of fragmentation between the Board, contractors and the PWD, and between certain categories of workers. All the fragments soon began to look outwards towards the non-unionised or to groups within competing unions. One example was the new Water Board house union. Initially, its officials had protested their lack of interest in groups beyond permanent maintenance. With the prospect of easy expansion through Heydon's whims, Macpherson was only too ready to drop the earlier sectionalism. His union was heading towards coverage of the whole of the Board's workforce including construction workers and salaried officers. Given the conservative industrial tradition of the sewer maintenance group, Clara's affirmations of loyalty and collaboration and the union's rules which suggested a function of workforce control, the Board was quick to support this process. The alternative was no longer between a union and no union; but between a domesticated house union and other unions relying on militancy or outside pressure. The choice was clear.
The 10 years to 1920 therefore marked the consolidation of the particular relationship between the Board and the sewer maintenance group which ran the union. While this relationship developed within the introverted backwater of the Board's industrial relations, it did depend on and have to refer to a wider context. This context — which included the NSW political economy, the structure and behaviour of the arbitration system, the behaviour of the NSW Labor Party, and the water and sewerage industry — is discussed at length in this chapter.

This and the following chapter continue to examine the story of water and sewerage construction workers working outside the Board. On the whole, the type of men who worked on construction did not change much between 1900 and the Second World War. Nor did their industrial politics. Therefore, there will be less discussion of the workers themselves and more of their industrial activity. Such an examination is vitally important to the thesis for a number of reasons. First, it provides evidence of the continuation of different trends in union behaviour to that which Macpherson's group so assiduously pursued. In particular, it makes clear that the construction tradition was as much one of struggle as of accommodation. This contrasts with the Board's own construction workforce and allows for a fuller judgement on the role of the house union. Second, with the great labour mobility among the different employers in the industry, philosophies and practices learnt 'outside' always threatened to emerge within the Board's workforce and even through its union. For this reason, officials of the house union and the Board cooperated to quarantine the Board's workforce from industrial turbulence without and from conflict within. Finally, by the late 1920s the Board and its union had to absorb the vast majority of construction labourers and deal with the resulting tensions.

1. The NSW political economy

Sydney's population and industrial importance continued to grow. The rapidly expanding manufacturing sector was highly labour intensive and became more concentrated in the

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major port cities. Nowhere was this more the case than in Sydney which continued to grow at the expense of rural NSW. Metropolitan housebuilding enjoyed an unprecedented boom as densities increased in established suburbs and developers built new rings of suburban housing. But, Sydney's renewed growth had more familiar roots as well.

The McGowen Labor Government which came to power in NSW in October 1910 initiated a return to the earlier pattern of high capital inflow and immigration. Government policy aimed at rural diversification, settlement and decentralisation in support of the major political priority of population growth. Massive public works spending on development works was to provide the infrastructure and high levels of spending soaked up large quantities of local and imported labour. This activity, continued until the outbreak of war in August 1914. Following Labor policy, Works Minister Griffith had day labour established as the normal working arrangement for PWD projects. Nevertheless, the general level of unemployment rarely fell below six per cent and it reached much higher levels among Sydney's unskilled labourers.

The outbreak of the war had a mixed impact on the Australian economy. Primary exports, overseas loan raising and immigration all came to a standstill. A war economy diverted funds from developmental priorities. It also menaced the jobs of many of the thousands of construction workers the government employed. Unemployment rose during 1915, worsening during 1917 as the new Nationalist government closed down public works. Wartime financing also sharply increased the existing inflation.

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3 *ibid*; Sinclair *The Process*, pp. 190-1.
6 PWD Reports; Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-4.
On the other hand, by increasing Australia's isolation, the war diminished import competition and encouraged the growth of manufacturing which further reinforced urbanisation. The rate of housebuilding in Sydney declined but was not as immediately or severely. In fact, in June 1916, the Water Board described the building boom as continuing, 'notwithstanding the war.'

In 1912, McGowen's government repealed the Industrial Disputes Act which, while repressive, had nonetheless fostered the growth in the number of unions and unionism. Yet, the new unions were often merely secessions from existing organisations or creatures of Heydon's whims. They often began with full time secretaries conscious that their union's existence and their own often generous pay were reliant on a deep involvement in compulsory arbitration. They therefore defended the system and their own involvement from criticism or alternatives. Heydon's administration of the 1908 Act had fragmented the public works construction workforce and encouraged an often pitiless and unscrupulous competition between union officials.

In part, the Industrial Arbitration Act of 1912 was a response to union demands for changes to the repressive nature of Wade's Act. It also reflected the government's resistance to such change and its desire to retain for the state a central role and heavy hand in industrial relations. It did away with penal clauses but retained the threat of enormous fines and deregistration for unions involved in strikes. In this it had the support of conservative union officials who depended on arbitration.

General groupings of industries replaced wages boards. Each group contained a number of 'Industries and Callings' for which the Court of Industrial Arbitration could designate industrial boards. Thus under the group 'Government Employees', there were a

number of different boards to deal with the different public employers. The No. 1 Board dealt with the general workers under the Sydney Water Board. Similarly, under the group ‘Labourers’, boards covered different groups of labourers divided by type of work, or employer or both. The No. 2 Board covered rockchoppers and sewer miners while the No. 5 Board was for labourers on water supply construction for the PWD and the Water Board’s contractors.

A board could have two representatives each from unions and employers allowing competing unions one representative each. This opened the way to cooperation over awards rather than wasting time on territorial disputes. Conflict still arose over union preference which the new Act had reinstated. The Act also provided for conciliation committees to stimulate decentralised collective bargaining. Finally, under Section 26 public sector wages were not to be below award rates for similar work outside — a valuable concession for weaker unions in the public sector.14

In 1918, the Nationalists' new Arbitration Act established a Board of Trade to declare a living wage following a cost of living enquiry. The Industrial Court was to set wages and conditions above this minimum. Overall, though, the aim of the Act was to decentralise award making into the various conciliation committees while repressing strikes.15

McGowen's government soon disappointed its union supporters. Wages did not keep pace with rising costs and the government seemed unwilling or unable to enact promised legislation in favour of unions and their members. Government support of strikebreaking during the 1913 gas strike brought particularly bitter criticism. By the outbreak of war, the ‘labourist model’ was under great strain from left wing forces within the party and without.16 War only accentuated these processes.

Holman's government passed the real or imagined economic costs of war onto its long suffering working class supporters. War and patriotism provided an excuse for dropping

14 Grant, op. cit, p. 98; Nelson and Spann, op. cit., pp. 21, 22. For an example of s. 26 and the house union, NSWIR, 1917, p. 243.
15 One advance was that with the appointment of two new judges, Heydon lost much of his power. Grant, op. cit., pp. 100-7, 118. This Act was clearly a different strategy from Beeby to the more benevolent one which appears in C. Nyland, 'Scientific Management and the 44-Hour Week', Labour History, No. 53, November 1987, pp. 29-30.
even the mildest legislative reforms.\textsuperscript{17} During 1914, the PWD and the Water Board put many construction workers on half time work.\textsuperscript{18}

Attacks on working class living standards also came from the arbitration arena. With Holman's approval, an increasingly jingoistic Heydon cut real wages. Heydon not only refused living wage increments to cover wartime price rises, he removed existing catch-up loadings. The excuse was the need to maximise the domestic war effort. He also suspended hearings for new awards although modifying this during 1915 under union pressure. He then reduced the real wages of the majority earning more than the minimum. This affected most water and sewerage workers as they had margins which recognised the heaviness, danger, dirtiness or specialised character of their labour. Heydon only re-opened awards to allow for urgent wage adjustments in 1918.\textsuperscript{19}

Justice Higgins continued to adjust the federal basic wage for wartime inflation. Yet the majority of unionists still came under state jurisdictions. Wages under the NSW system fell behind those in other states. This encouraged NSW unions, and particularly those covering workers on or just above minimum wages, to seek access to the federal arbitration by federating with existing state unions or joining federally registered unions such as the AWU.\textsuperscript{20}

This trend to 'closer unionism' was not just about access to the federal tribunal. It was the major organisational response to the general crisis of the labourist model. Nowhere was this more the case than in NSW. The labour movement had largely supported Australia's entry into the war. Enlistment among unionists had been particularly heavy. Although unemployment and other economic factors played a part, there was also obvious enthusiasm, even jingoism.\textsuperscript{21} As casualties mounted sharply, it became clearer that at home, one class was benefiting and the other, the working class, was suffering a decline in its

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Evatt, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 262, 264, 289; Nelson and Spann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 74.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} ibid., p. 76.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} NB Prices increased 32 per cent between 1914 and 1917 and real wages fell by nearly two percent. see D. Coward, 'Crime and Punishment', in J. Iremonger, J. Merritt and G. Osborne (eds), \textit{Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History}, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973, p. 63; P.G. Macarthy, 'Wage Determination in New South Wales', p. 201; Grant, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 4-6; Evatt, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 262-3. For the operation of Heydon's 'diminishing scale', e.g. \textit{NSWIR}, 1917, p. 244.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Grant, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. ix, 7, 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Turner, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 69, 178; Gollan, \textit{The Coalminers}, pp. 136-7, 141.
\end{itemize}
living standards. War weariness, frustration and resentment at the costs fostered increasing discontent which intensified in reaction to federal government attempts to introduce military conscription and its increasing coercion of unions. 22 A rising tide of strikes was one response. Radicalising sections of the working class wished to abandon not just arbitration, but a Labor Party which at both state and federal levels was totally committed to the war. Yet, majority reaction within the union movement favoured reform. Both rejection and reform travelled down the road of closer unionism.

There were two favoured and often counterposed methods: amalgamation, and thus the dissolution of existing unions into 'one big union' (OBU); or their continued existence within some form of federation. Both were attempts to come to terms with the question of the relationship between the labour movement and parliamentary politics. 23 Officials of the craft unions favoured federation. Amalgamation was the preference of the mass unions, although their reasons varied. The conservative, rural labourist oligarchs of the AWU developed a concerted campaign to make that union the OBU. This would enhance their already substantial power within the NSW Labor Party. To this end, the AWU was rapidly absorbing a number of other large rural unions. One, North Queensland's militant Amalgamated Workers' Association, had hoped to overcome the conservative AWU from within but had itself been totally dispersed and absorbed into the deadening bowels of the now giant union. 24

An alternative vision of the OBU haunted the AWU officials. Growing working class antipathy to state regulation encouraged a return to direct action in a number of industries, including shearing, mining and construction. The revolutionary syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) both fostered and benefited from the more militant and activist mood abroad. The IWW counterposed class to nation, class war to militarism. At a practical level, it could build on local traditions of class conscious job control and

solidarity. Anti-statist and hostile to union sectionalism and union bureaucracies, the IWW argued for local job control, organisation in one big union on an industry basis, and rank and file control of the union. As such, it was the local variant of an international trend which grew out of the second industrial revolution and gained strength from the drift to imperialist war. An early, successful area of IWW organising was among Sydney's unemployed labourers.

After intense propaganda and job agitation, the IWW was important in a series of major and successful strikes during 1916, including organising a shearsers' strike against the wishes of the AWU officials. The latter launched a bitter and spiteful campaign to destroy IWW influence within the AWU ranks. At the same time, they sought an 'industrialist' coalition with militant or socialist influenced unions in their bid for control of the Labor Party machine.

There was a logic to this seeming contradiction. The AWU oligarchs ably exploited the fundamental weaknesses in much of the official OBU strategy: the centralism and initiative from above which made OBU leaders appear at times to be merely the left wing of the Labor Party's palace intrigues. The AWU machine was fighting to defend the place of labourism as the core of the Australian labour movement. At the same time, it fought off competitors for control of those industrial and political organisations which this tradition had inspired.

Militant working class discontent soon came into conflict with the more cohesive resolve from employers and the state. The outcome was a series of monumental social conflicts during 1916 and 1917. First, there were the two unsuccessful conscription

25 Gollan, The Coalminers, p. 123; Sheldon, 'Job Control', pp. 53-4; Cutler, op. cit., p. 152.
27 TLC Exec. Minutes, 18 February 1913.
28 Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, op. cit., p. 138; Turner, op. cit., pp. 83, 91; I. Turner, '1914-19', in Crowley (ed), op. cit., pp. 327-8. For the tone of AWU officials' response to the IWW, e.g. Organiser J. Bailey's description of the IWW in the USA as a strike breaking organisation. If this was not enough, the IWW in Australia, a 'German-American' organisation, had organised 'a team of blackleg Chinamen' to replace striking AWU members on the Darwin wharves. Australian Worker, 17 August 1916, pp. 19-20.
referenda. The first of these resulted in major splits within the Labor Party at all levels. In NSW, Holman led the pro-conscription forces into a coalition with the conservative parties. Their exit symbolised the final takeover of the Labor Party by the industrialists, the representatives of the major, non-urban mass unions. These included unions covering metropolitan water and sewerage workers.30

At the same time, state suppression of the IWW provided a crippling setback for an OBU through revolutionary syndicalism.31 The dramatic defeat in the 1917 general strike had a similar effect on militancy within existing unions. About one third of NSW unionists went out on strike, mostly in sympathy with railway and tramway workers struggling against the introduction of the card system. Others stopped work for reasons more closely related to their industry or workplace. One outcome of the strike defeat — a spate of deregistrations and official recognition of blackleg unions — also redrew the boundaries of unionism in the areas affected.32

The attention of socialist militants turned once again to the Labor Party. Not long after their victory against Holman and his supporters in 1916, the industrialists' coalition of convenience foundered on the rocks of opposing ideologies and clashing personal ambitions. In the wake of the 1917 strike debacle, the Marxist and opportunist J.S. Garden had become Secretary of the Labour Council. During 1918 and 1919, surrounded by a tight group of similarly minded union officials, the 'Trades Hall Reds', Garden began his push towards an OBU, organised from above. In this he met strong opposition from the AWU officials, intent on their union's expansion.33

The result of the first clashes was victory to the AWU oligarchy and the Labor politicians over a socialist coalition. For Garden and many of his allies, it meant expulsion from the Party. Attempts to set up rival parties and an OBU came to very little and it was

only with their successful attempts to re-enter the Labor Party in the new decade that they again exerted a notable organisational influence.

2. Sydney's water and sewerage industry, 1910-1920

The divisions in the workforce were only too obvious during the decade after 1910. There continued to be a construction employer, the PWD, and an employer concentrating on maintenance and revenue collection, the Board. This explains the shifting balance between construction for water and sewerage. With the exception of Cataract Dam, sewerage work had dominated the industry's construction programme in the first decade of the century and this continued for the first few years after 1910.

Yet, the housing boom and the development of manufacturing put renewed pressure on water supplies. At first the problem was one of making the enlarged capacity more readily available. Thus, in the early years after 1910, while there was a boom in PWD activity on behalf of country town water supply, it spent virtually nothing on supplying the metropolis. Cataract Dam sufficed at first and attention turned to Water Board reticulation. Here loans spending on construction grew rapidly.

Soon, increasing population, connections and demand again placed stress on storage capacity. Past droughts and water shortages had finally created a climate of opinion favourable to large scale spending on metropolitan water supply. Expenditure on urban projects was now seen as a necessary support for the development of the metropolis and its secondary and tertiary industries.34

In 1916, another drought year, the PWD finally received the necessary authority for the construction of Cordeaux Dam. Preliminary work soon began.35 The war hampered progress and the change of government in 1916 further upset the schedule of public works. In 1917, the government slashed PWD and Water Board spending, which then remained at

35 PWD Reports, 1915-6, p. 16; 1916-7, p. 13.
a low level for the duration of the war.  Both organisations sacked hundreds of employees, further retarding progress at Cordeaux.  

War did not uniformly effect the Board's spending. While some areas suffered heavily, the Board increased water reticulation as a response to the housing boom and to recoup revenue for the debts amassed. In 1910-1, it had spent £134,000 from loan funds. Five years later that figure had increased more than four times. Due to government restrictions, spending fluctuated more strongly towards the end of the decade but never fell below £300,000. This phenomenal level of expenditure brought results. Despite shortages of pipes, the number of houses connected to the metropolitan system rose from 139,237 in June 1911 to 175,758 four years later. Shortages continued but 1915-6 proved to be a record year for mains laying. Budget cuts added to the problems of widespread shortages between 1917 and 1919 but, by mid 1920 there were 212,046 houses connected. The Board also had major works built to boost its distribution system and to make it more flexible.  

Still, Water Board and PWD officers recognised that within a very few years, even Cordeaux and Cataract could not cope with Sydney's strong growth rates. A 1918 PWD report proposed that future works maximise potential supply from the Upper Nepean and, when this was no longer sufficient, to look to the Woronora and finally the mighty Warragamba River catchments. As this implied a massive expenditure by the PWD on behalf of the Water Board, more thorough investigations were in order. The Minister appointed a board of experts to specify a works programme to cater for Sydney's needs over

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36 ibid., 1917-8, p. 1; 1918-9, p. 1, MWSDB Reports, see MWSDB Minutes, 5 June 1918 re the Government's intention to cut Water Board loan funding to 70 per cent of the previous year's level. 
37 E.g. almost all railway works on the North Coast came to a sudden stop and about 2,000 'received their time' in only three days. Australian Worker (AW), 3 May 1917, p. 23. For references to water and sewer workers put off, see NSWIGs; Evatt, op. cit., p. 326, MWSDB Minutes, 19 June 1918; 5 July 1918. 
38 MWSDB Reports. 
39 ibid., 1910-1, p2; 1914-5, p. 1; 1915-6, p. 2; 1918-9, p. 4; 1919-20, p.1 re pipes, 1912-3, p. 1; 1913-4, p. 2. 
40 The most important was the large Potts Hill No. 2 Reservoir. Aird, op. cit., pp. 51, 59-63, 80. 
41 PWD Report, 1918-9, pp. 8, 32-46.
the following 30 years. In November 1918, they pronounced unanimously in favour of the construction of a dam across the Avon. Preliminary work began immediately.42

During the decade, the construction of two major ocean outfall sewers dominated PWD sewerage activity in Sydney. Work on the second project followed directly on the completion of the first and there were a number of other, smaller projects. Nevertheless, PWD spending fluctuated widely until the collapse of spending during 1916-7. Low levels of activity continued until the early twenties.

One of these major ocean outfall sewer works served large areas to the south of Sydney harbour, the other primarily an area to the north. Both were responses to rising populations in unserviced areas and increasing residential dissatisfaction with existing local schemes, particularly the sewage farm. They therefore intercepted the local mains and carried the effluent away from those districts to the Pacific Ocean outfalls. Work on the first phase of the Southern and Western Suburbs Ocean Outfall Sewer (SWSOOS) began in 1911. The ocean outfall was near Long Bay.43 The PWD intended to push the project along quickly and hired a large workforce.44 After 1914, war priorities delayed progress.

The other system, the Northern Suburbs Ocean Outfall Sewer (NSOOS) was to discharge into the ocean near Manly. An enormous project, it was to also to receive the effluent from Parramatta and nearby suburbs, especially those growing rapidly to its east. Work began in 1917.45 It was a very difficult job with shafts up to 300 feet deep and the change of government had worsened the terms of employment. During 1918-9, for example, the PWD resurrected the cruelly exploitative bonus system. The following year, lack of government finance almost brought work to a standstill.46

As usual, Water Board reticulation work presented a different story. Spending on construction more than matched that of the PWD and the decline during the bad years after 1916 was nowhere as severe. At the beginning of the decade there were just over 100,000

42 ibid., 1918-9, pp. 8, 23.
43 Aird, op cit., p. 146.
46 PWD Reports, 1916-7, p. 16; 1918-9, p. 10; 1919-20, p. 3.
houses, representing over half a million inhabitants, connected to sewerage systems under the Board’s control. At the end of the decade these figures were half as high again.47

Maintenance of Sydney’s water and sewerage systems was of course much more stable. The Board’s revenue grew steadily: expenditure on water maintenance almost tripled, and on sewerage more than doubled. Yet even this was often not enough to cope with major repairs and improvements to an ageing and growing system. Thus while the routine maintenance continued unabated, major improvements or overhauls of water supply headworks had to await the end of wartime austerity.48 A similar situation had occurred even earlier with sewer maintenance as the rising budgets merely reflected rising costs, including rising wages.49

The question of day labour or contract proved less controversial. One factor was a growing union disillusionment with government employment. Under a Labor government, the PWD enforced half-time working on the SWSOOS and introduced piecework.50 Water and sewerage were special cases as the Board’s autonomy helped insulate it from swings in government policy and PWD and Board engineers continued to side strongly with day labour.51 From 1910, the Labor Government reintroduced day labour and it played a much larger role in PWD work. The apex of this trend occurred during 1912-3.52

During the six years of Labor rule, the Board’s reticulation in particular moved from the realm of private to public work. Due to the ‘requests’ of the Government, by 1915, the Board was no longer entering into new contracts. During 1915-6, all but three of 161 sewerage reticulation works went to day labour.53 Yet, there continued to be a majority of

47 MWSDB Reports, 1910-11, p. 7; 1919-20, p. 6.
48 Cf. ibid., 1913-4, p. 3 and 1917-8, p. 2.
49 ibid., 1912-3, p. 74.
50 PWD Reports, 1914-5, p. 55; 1915-6, p. 18; Navvy, 26 October 1914, p. 7; 11 January 1915, p. 7; J.P. Osborne, Nine Crowded Years, George A. Jones, Sydney, 1921, p. 91; Nelson and Spann, op. cit., pp. 39, 63; Sheldon, ‘The Dimming’.
51 MWSDB Reports, 1910-11, p. 7; 1912-3, p. 7; 1913-4, pp. 7, 76; 1914-5, p. 6; 1915-6, pp. 3, 85; MWSDB Minutes, 25 May 1911.
52 Nelson and Spann, op. cit., p. 16; PWD Reports, 1911-2, p. 2; 1912-3, p. 2; 1914-5 p. 20.
53 MWSDB Report, 1915-6, p. 87.
Board members sceptical of the cost efficiency of day labour and in favour of contract work.54

With the change of government in 1916, day labour continued on some Water Board projects, particularly on sewerage work, but the traditionally pro-contractor majority on the Board was pleased to revert to letting contracts for water main laying.55 By the middle of 1918, there was very little day labour left on Water Board pipelaying but contractors soon had to contend with a resurgence of industrial action. As engineers continued to press for day labour, it re-emerged dominant for mains laying during the closing years of the decade.56 Day labour also became entwined with mechanisation.

Both the PWD and the Board faced increasingly rebellious construction workforces. Advantages from contracting disappeared as worker militancy discouraged contractors from tendering. With the election of Labor governments so did much of the choice. As a result, both employers had to reconcile the political and technical pressures for cheap work under day labour. Their first strategy to regain control was to re-introduce piecework and bonus systems.57 The second was a greater use of labour saving machinery.58 There was enormous earth moving equipment for large open jobs, continuous concrete mixers for reservoir walls and floors and electricity on the SWSOOS to power lighting, shaft lifts, pumps, air compressors for drills and ventilation fans.59 The use of pneumatic popper drills and explosives replaced hand scabbling and the use of a water jet with each drill helped keep down the dust.60 There were also improvements in timbering, excavation and removal of spoil through the use of heavy steam powered plant.61

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54 In fact, for two consecutive years, the Board's Annual Reports spoke testily of the use of day labour as 'in vogue'. MWSDB Reports, 1911-2, p. 70; 1914-5, p. 6; 1915-6, p. 3.
55 ibid., 1916-7, p. 59.
56 ibid., 1917-8, pp. 6, 58; 1918-9, pp. 6, 58; 1919-20, p. 6.
57 This was in line with a general introduction of systematic management in state instrumentalities. Patmore, op. cit., p. 314.
60 PWD Reports, 1910-1, pp. 7, 55; 1911-2, pp. 59-60.
61 PWD Report, 1911-2, p. 60.
There were even greater changes for Water Board sewerage construction due to the continued antagonism between the Board, its contractors and the militant RSMU. Prior to the outbreak of war, the greater awareness of the health risks and the hardness of the rock to be cut in the suburban sewerage programme discouraged workers from taking on this work. With a tight labour market in its favour, the RSMU continued to press its demands through direct action.\textsuperscript{62}

At first, the Board unsuccessfully sought to bring in unemployed miners from Newcastle.\textsuperscript{63} Then, during 1912-3, the Board introduced trenching machines as the focus of its counterattack. The public rationale was the protection of the workers' health, a hollow claim given the Board's continued resistance to improvements not enforced by industrial action.\textsuperscript{64} While improved safety was vital, the real motive was the destruction of the conditions which underpinned the rockchoppers' power, their shorter hours and higher wages.

The Board initially couched this in terms of the machinery hastening and reducing the cost of the work, an important public health advance. When it let slip its benevolent mask, the Board was quite explicit. The new trenching machine and drills for boring holes could: 'be used by any workman of ordinary intelligence without danger.'\textsuperscript{65} The difficulties of the work which kept the labour market tight were going to disappear. However, these advantages would be lost if the rockchoppers' union continued: 'to claim the same short hours and high rates of pay' as it had for manual rockchopping. The Board's 1912-3 Report continued that: 'As it is intended ... to use machinery wherever practicable, this tendency on the part of the Union to claim undue concessions must, in the interests of the ratepayers be discouraged.'\textsuperscript{66} Small insisted on wage cuts and increased hours of work. Des-skillling trench work would break the union's resistance.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{62} MWSDB Reports, 1910-1, pp. 7, 75; 1911-2, p. 73; 1912-3, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{63} MWSDB Minutes, 22 March 1911; 5 April 1911.
\textsuperscript{64} It had been experimenting with the machines for some time. MWSDB Report, 1912-3, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid., 1912-3, p. 7. For discussion of a similar process linking mechanisation and union militancy in NSW coal mining, Gollan, The Coalminers, pp. 114-5.
\textsuperscript{66} MWSDB Report, 1912-3, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{67} ibid., 1912-3, p. 74.
As the Board was only too happy to sell the new machines, mechanisation answered the contractors’ difficulties too. The same deskill could finally domesticate their workforce. It would also allow the Board to readily fragment the construction workforce among contractors.

3. Unionism among construction labourers

The Water Board union had, through Heydon, received coverage of permanent and casual labourers working for the Board on construction and maintenance. The RSMU, through its successful militancy, spoke for those doing specialised work for the Board and its sewerage contractors. This left labourers uncovered those working for the PWD and its contractors, the Board’s water supply construction contractors as well as those on sewerage construction outside the RSMU’s categories — the bulk of the water and sewerage workforce. Competition to enrol them only intensified during the decade.

With the shortage of work in rural areas after 1910, dam construction and other large projects brought construction labourers onto metropolitan water and sewerage works in greater numbers than ever before. The United Laborers had organised among them in the Sydney region since 1900 but had little sustained experience with the migratory rural navvies many of whom found work on building the dams and the construction of Potts Hill No. 2 Reservoir. While the ULPS had tried to attract them all through its single ticket, it was still very much a Sydney labourers’ union.

One reason was that it came up against the emerging power of the Railway Workers and General Labourers' Association (RWGLA). This union had begun in July 1908 among casual navvies building the North Coast Railway. It soon enrolled many metropolitan water supply and sewerage construction workers outside the Water Board union. There was

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68 MWSDB Minutes, 15 March 1911; 11 October 1911.
69 The Board also gained from sales of the machines over which it held the patent. MWSDB Report, 1913-4, p. 7.
70 In the City, they congregated at two pubs, known as ‘the bite’ opposite the Town Hall, swapping news of work, talk of politics and sport. Taylor interview, op..cit..
71 ICT, 18 October 1910, p. 8, 2/147; Navvy, 13 April, 1912, p. 1.
no immediate clash of interests between the RWGLA and the ULPS because they agreed to demarcate their area of operations at the County of Cumberland.72

Largely decentralised with a district organisation spanning NSW, the RWGLA had an active and informed rank and file which elected the various paid District Secretaries for administrative and organising work as well as the very few, very highly paid officials at the central office.73 Its first General Secretary, Daniel O'Sullivan, was pompous and relatively conservative, but had a sincere belief in the cause of the organisation he had helped found. Among other prominent officials were two who had previously been very active within the ULPS: Cornelius (Con) Hogan became a RWGLA full time Organiser in early 1911 and Hugh Gallagher was the new union's President during its first six years.74

The RWGLA grew quickly. At the end of 1909, it had 3,554 members. Organising among railway labourers brought steady progress and two years later the figure was 5,522. These figures then improved dramatically. In 1912 there were 13,848 members and the total jumped to 17,451 at the end of 1914. The RWGLA was now the second largest union in NSW, behind only the AWU. With £14,509 in accumulated reserves, it was also the second wealthiest.

There was nothing unusual about its industrial behaviour. Officially it favoured conciliation and arbitration with the strike to be used only where there was no access to the courts. Within the NSW arbitration system it was fortunate in gaining access to wages or industrial boards for disputed categories.75 This was a potent inducement for recruiting ahead of competitors.76 But the major growth came among the thousands of non-union labourers in rural districts.

72 Worker, 28 January 1909, p. 13. Rather, the RWGLA soon came into conflict with the powerful railways house union, the ARTSA which was becoming active on behalf of unskilled labour. Patmore, op. cit., pp. 247-57.
73 E.g. the General Secretary and the Organising President each received £6 per week in 1915, more than double than the best paid navvies in constant full time work. The Assistant Secretary and Organisers received only marginally less and they also received expenses. Navvy, 20 September 1915, p. 3; These rates increased in 1916. Ibid., 28 March 1916, p. 1. The IWW categorised RWGLA organisers as 'mere ticket peddlars'. Direct Action, 1 May 1915, p. 4.
74 ULPS Minutes, e.g. 30 July 1900, 3 December 1900; TLC Minutes, e.g. 6 June 1901, 2 January 1902; 16 February 1911; Worker, 28 January 1909, p. 13; Navvy, 7 December 1914, p. 1.
75 ICT, op. cit., pp. 55-6, 66.
76 e.g. Navvy, 11 January 1915, p. 7.
The union's fortnightly paper, the *Navvy*, played an important part in this, especially in the isolated construction camps. Through its columns the far flung rank and file debated each other and their paid officials with a thoughtful eagerness and generally good spirited passion. Through the *Navvy*, they at first showed a largely skeptical attitude to the war itself.\(^{77}\) They quickly realised that war meant declining living standards for wage workers. The union's officials largely agreed.\(^{78}\) Both officials and rank and file were also highly critical of Holman's Labor government.\(^{79}\)

An indication of the importance of the paper and the involvement of the often nomadic membership was that more than three quarters of the nearly 6,000 votes cast in a 1914 referendum supported an increase in subscription rates to provide for the continuation of the *Navvy*. The same referendum defeated the central office's attempt to expand its role at the expense of district organisation.\(^{80}\) The local autonomy of large, isolated branches was to be a recurring feature of navvies' unionism.

Another factor in the union's remarkable expansion was the establishment of a large and solid City Branch which included PWD water and sewerage labourers and others working for Water Board contractors.\(^{81}\) This branch came under the influence of militants who combined their industrial socialism with a greater stress on the union's decentralisation.\(^{82}\)

This expansion into Sydney came at the expense of the ULPS. The two unions had entered into more open competition after a failed amalgamation attempt in 1912.\(^{83}\) Both memberships and particularly that of the RWGLA had voted solidly for amalgamation but, at the last moment, the increasingly self-serving ULPS officials reneged.\(^{84}\) Not long after, amalgamation again became a central question for the RWGLA. Seemingly the whole

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\(^{77}\) B. Beattie, 'Memoirs of the I.W.W.', *Labour History*, No. 13, November 1967, p. 7; Taylor, op. cit.\(^{85}\).

\(^{78}\) Nelson and Spann, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

\(^{79}\) See e.g Half-timer, 'Down with Half-time', *Navvy*, 14 June 1915, p. 3; Sheldon, 'The Dimming'.

\(^{80}\) *Navvy*, 6 July 1914, p. 2.

\(^{81}\) *Navvy*, e.g. 26 October 1914, p. 7; 11 January 1915, p. 7.

\(^{82}\) e.g. W. Rosser, editor of the *Navvy* and R. Byng; see e.g. *ibid.*, 6 July 1914, p. 2; 20 July 1914, p. 3; 17 August 1914, p. 2; I. Turner, *Industrial Labour*, p. 240, n. 4.

\(^{83}\) *SMH*, 22 November 1911.\(^{86}\)

\(^{84}\) *Navvy*, 14 September 1914, p. 3; TLC Exec. Minutes, 31 October 1911;.
membership, from the most revolutionary elements to the most conservative, took up strong positions over the question of closer unionism. As elsewhere, there were two main strategies: merging into an OBU or some form of federation of existing unions. Secretary O'Sullivan sponsored the idea of a one big union of labourers involving amalgamation with the ULPS, the RSMU, the Water Board union and sundry others. In reality this meant federation. On the other hand, organisers George C. Bodkin and Hogan staunchly championed amalgamation with the AWU. Their supporters pointed to the AWU's drive to become the OBU as well as stressing the affinities linking two bushworkers' unions — in contrast to the ULPS, a city union tied to a craft-dominated Labour Council.85

Opinion strongly favoured amalgamation, although for a mixture of motives. IWW activists saw a chance to join with militant shearers and take the union over from below. On the other hand, small farmers felt at home in the AWU and many already paid dues to both bodies as a result of casual employment between industries.86 At the 1915 Conference, a large majority of delegates voted for setting the amalgamation process in motion, but mindful that this ensure navvies retained their industrial and local autonomy within an enlarged AWU.87 Despite vigorous opposition from the strong minority of IWW supporters, the conference also made other decisions which fitted the ideas and practices reigning within the AWU. There was confirmation of the union's official industrial policy, then, after much argument, affiliation with the Labor Party.88

The AWU accepted the RWGLA proposals even though they cut across its geographic structure. The navvies were to have their own industrial branch and autonomy within the AWU. In April 1915, some 7,000 out of 18,000 RWGLA members voted by a

85 Navvy, 21 December, 1914, pp. 2-3, 5; re continuous use of this language, see Navvy 1914-5. Re the growing city-country rivalry within the NSW labour movement see N.B. Nairn, 'The 1916-17 Labor Party Crisis in New South Wales and the Advent of W.J. McKell', Labour History, No. 16, May 1969, p. 4.

86 This was common to other mass unions. See Navvy, 1914-5 for debates. Rural branches were keenest about the AWU proposal, ibid., 21 December 1914, pp. 2-3. NB re dual membership and the role of small farmers, ibid., 17 August 1914, p. 5.; 14 December 1915, p. 1. For the position of revolutionary syndicalists, Harry Metrose in ibid., 9 August 1915, p. 7; re IWW and the RWGLA see Childre, op. cit., p.130. Also, Direct Action, 3 January 1916, p. 1.

87 ibid., 11 January 1915, p. 8.

88 The aim here was to be part of the 'industrialist' bloc to control party conferences. ibid., 25 January 1915, p. 1; Turner, Industrial Labour , p. 94.
margin of more than three to one to accept the proposal.\textsuperscript{89} Within three months, Bodkin rode the amalgamation wave to defeat O'Sullivan for General Secretary and Hogan became Assistant Secretary.\textsuperscript{90} Claims of major ballot irregularities showed that the navvies were moving closer to the AWU experience.\textsuperscript{91}

Before the unions consummated their amalgamation, the RWGLA made a last, unsuccessful attempt to interest the ULPS officials.\textsuperscript{92} In the meantime, the RWGLA embarked upon a campaign to enforce membership among all gangers. Local branches took up the cause with gusto, refusing to start under non members. As a result, in June 1916, Heydon deregistered the union.\textsuperscript{93} By then, the RWGLA, with nearly 19,000 members the largest union in NSW, was ready to dissolve into the Railway Workers' Industry Branch of the AWU (RWIB/AWU).

With Bodkin's group in firm control of the new branch, the RWIB, alone among major railway unions, did not take part in the 1917 general strike. This was not for any lack of support for the strikers among the navvies. The strike caused many construction jobs to close down. The navvies affected became highly involved and gave uncompromising support to striking coal miners, among the last to go back to work. Navvies also put strong pressure on the AWU, the only large union not to strike, to do so. To avoid this possibility, the federal government legislated to deregister any union hindering the pastoral industry.\textsuperscript{94} Arbitration was the AWU machine's lifeblood and the officials successfully worked to keep the rank and file from involving the union as a whole.

Officials of other unions, for example, the ULPS, were less successful. After the splits during the previous decade, the union had developed into a very different body. This became even more marked as the BLU continued to whittle away at the older union's

\textsuperscript{89} Navvy, 3 May 1915, p.19; Nelson and Spann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 93.  
\textsuperscript{90} Navvy, 26 July 1915, p. 3.  
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{ibid.}, 9 August 1915, p. 4; 6 September 1915, p. 4. For the internal debate within the AWU over the amalgamation, AW, 27 January 1916, p. 19; 7 February 1916, p. 19.  
\textsuperscript{92} This time insisting that a condition of amalgamation was that only ex ULPS members have access to that union's benefit fund. Navvy, 28 March 1916, p. 3; 11 April 1916, p. 3; 25 April 1916, p. 3. re reciprocity agreements, \textit{ibid.}, 20 September 1915, p. 1; 30 November 1915, p. 5  
\textsuperscript{93} e.g. \textit{ibid.}, 5 April 1915, p. 7; 6 September 1915, p. 3; 20 June 1916, p. 1.  
\textsuperscript{94} Coward, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 58; SMH, 12 September 1917, p. 9.
coverage on building sites through the judicial fiat. This left the ULPS largely dependent on construction.95

The RWGLA’s growth in country areas caused the ULPS to concentrate on metropolitan construction and pockets of labouring in manufacturing. Within the former, water and sewerage was the largest potential field. The RSMU and the Water Board union had taken away large numbers of these workers. Yet, all was not lost for the ULPS. In 1911, in one of his very rare decisions in favour of the ULPS, Heydon reconfirmed the union’s coverage of all PWD labourers on sewerage construction: rockchoppers and sewer miners, ordinary labourers and pipelayers and caulkers.96

The union continued on its new path. Despite militant rhetoric it was clearly in the Labour Council mainstream and had lost much of its internal democracy.97 As well, its full time officials sought to play a larger role within the Labor Party.98,99 Ironically too, the losses suffered before Heydon, left it the weakest groups and therefore more dependent on arbitration.100 The 1908 and successive arbitration acts made it easier and quicker to gain awards and variations to awards. This was undoubtedly attractive to dispersed, badly placed and as yet un-unionised groups of workers. It meant that the union had to do less in the way of organising, worry less about its strength in the field. Comparison of the union’s rules for 1902 and 1912 shows a marked concentrating of initiative in the hands of paid head office staff. By 1912 too, the union had shed most of its craft vestiges.101 The ULPS was now a mass union of the unskilled.

95 ICT, Vol. 2/145: 11 April 1910, pp. 3, 5, 24; at p. 611; 29 June 1910, pp. 1, 2-4, 6, 14-5, 33; Vol
96 ibid., Vol. 2/161, at p. 44: 18 September 1911, p. 18; re ULPS and the Sydney Harbour Trust,
97 E.g TLC Minutes, 1 June 1911; 31 August 1911; 14 September 1911; 14 December 1911; 18
April 1912; 17 April 1913; 1 May 1913. In 1912, the International Socialist still considered it a
militant union for the solidarity shown to other unions in struggle. 8 February 1912, p. 1. It later
supported the Anti-Conscription League. Nelson and Spann, op. cit., p. 98.
98 See e.g. Burke and Vernon at 1911 NSW Labor Party Conference, Australian Worker, 3 and 9
February 1911.
99
100 The first award came in 1910. It had a mixture of advantages and disadvantages compared to
101 cf. ULPS, Amended Rules and Regulations, 1902 and 1912 (MI 331.88/U)
The 1912 Arbitration Act brought the ULPS together with other unions on wages boards. Almost all ULPS members doing water and sewerage work came under the Labourers' Group (No. 5 Board) where they gained from having the more forceful and wealthy RWGLA undertake much of the arbitration and wages board costs.\textsuperscript{102}

Thus, numerically, the ULPS recovered almost immediately from its defeats at judicial hands. By the end of 1912, total membership was 5,655, more than double that of twelve months previously. Membership continued to grow rapidly even without the benefit of a preference clause in the award.\textsuperscript{103} It reached 8,400 in 1913 and 9,005 — the highest ever — the following year. It was now the fourth largest union in NSW.\textsuperscript{104} In comparison, the BLU grew strongly only in direct proportion to the judicial support it received.\textsuperscript{105}

As a result of the 1917 general strike, judicial intervention again turned the tables between the two unions. ULPS members struck in a few manufacturing plants. Arthur Vernon, ever more conservative as the union's Secretary, joined the strike committee, claiming later that this was an attempt to restrain the course of events. Heydon, believing him, sermonised: 'a man cannot touch pitch without being defiled' and deregistered the union. The ULPS found itself excluded from arbitration along with other unions whose members had dared defy the state and threaten the sacred war effort.\textsuperscript{106}

As a result of special legislation, the ULPS, along with a number of other unions, re-entered the arbitration system in 1918.\textsuperscript{107} Nevertheless, membership plummeted during 1919 to 2,100. The BLU had again taken advantage of the ULPS's misfortune before Heydon by pushing into construction. At the same time, the RWIB moved ahead in areas previously shared with the ULPS. De-registration was not a problem for unions strong enough to use collective bargaining. However, ample funds helped and the ULPS, like

\textsuperscript{102} NB RWGLA complaints that ULPS officials refused to pay their union's share of the joint wages board costs yet took full credit for the results gained. Navvy, 25 April 1916, p.3.
\textsuperscript{103} E.g. NSWIG, Vol. 3 (1913), pp. 1503-7.
\textsuperscript{104} This was partly due to its amalgamating with the Harbours and Rivers Union of Employees during 1914. Only the AWU, RWGLA and ARTSA were larger. At the end of 1916, after the navvies union had merged into the AWU, the ULPS with 8,002 was the third largest. Reports of the Registrar of Friendly Societies, NSWPPs.
\textsuperscript{105} 1,750 at the end of 1912, 2,700 in 1914, 1,700 in 1917.
\textsuperscript{106} 'Report of the State Industrial Commissioner, 'New South Wales Strike Crisis, 1917', NSWPP, 1917-8, Vol. 2, p. 948; NSWIR, 1917, p. 481; AW, 9 May 1918, p. 20; 23 May, p. 5. General overviews of the strike once again ignore the ULPS.
\textsuperscript{107} Grant, op. cit., pp. 118-9; NSWGG, 1918, Vol. 3, No. 95, 2 August 1918.
many other unions, came out of the strike financially battered. Further, under the increasingly cautious, entrenched and centralised leadership of Vemon, Assistant Secretary George Waite and Organiser Michael (Mick) Burke, the union's scattered and often poorly placed members were unlikely to be able to mount major campaigns.\textsuperscript{108}

Sections of the membership could organise decisive action but they remained isolated. In 1912, 200 members on the SWSOOS had struck for five days for an extra 1/- per day. Yet, they had not even informed the union. Further, they held a mass meeting locally and organised their own deputations without any input from ULPS officials.\textsuperscript{109} There was also a spontaneous strike of ULPS sewer miners working for a contractor in 1913.\textsuperscript{110} The actions of other members during the 1917 general strike told a similar story of local autonomy and impatience with the union head office. The ULPS had become too tied to the arbitration system from which it was for a crucial time excluded. It looked as ever to the Labour Council which could not defend it and increasingly to the riven and vanquished Labor Party within which, by 1918, it could boast duee MLAs.\textsuperscript{111} The BLU on the other hand, began to grow again by competing on construction works. Here it encountered not only a battered ULPS but also an aggressively territorial and expansionist RWIB.

During 1916, the peak year for its amalgamation campaign, the AWU took giant strides to cover all water and sewerage workers in Australia. It already had those in Queensland. The RWIB brought in many of the metropolitan labourers as well as all those working on NSW country town water and sewer construction. In addition, maintenance men working for Melbourne's Metropolitan Board of Works dissolved their small union into the AWU's Victoria-Riverina Branch. Here they joined local sewer miners and other

\textsuperscript{108} Grant is correct about the fragmentation of the ULPS membership in 1918 and its consequent lack of power to engage in collective bargaining. What he misses here \textit{(op. cit., p. 28)} and elsewhere in his thesis is an understanding of the historical processes which brought this about.


\textsuperscript{110} \textit{NSWIG}, Vol. 3, 1913, p. 344.

\textsuperscript{111} J.M. Keegan, M. Burke, and J. P. Cochran. For examples of greater ULPS identification with the Labor Party, TLC Minutes, 6 February 1913. NB Burke's role in holding the ULPS to the ALP and against the Industrial Party in 1919, \textit{Labor News}, 19 July 1919, p. 10. A similar process had occurred in the (separate) 'one time fighting' United Labourers' Union in South Australia. \textit{International Socialist}, 8 February, 1912, p. 2.
construction labourers on water and sewerage works as the Victorian United Labourers' Union had entered the AWU the previous year.\textsuperscript{112}

The new RWIB ruling group readily took on many characteristics of the rest of the AWU. There was the very hierarchical control, the use of centrally based organisers, dependence on arbitration and the Labor Party, self glorification through the union and labour press and thirst for 'parliamentary honours'.\textsuperscript{113} It continued the RWGLA's anti-conscription campaign, melding it with traditional AWU rhetoric.\textsuperscript{114}

Opposition to the new regime came from the City Section which covered water supply and sewerage workers. Still one of the largest and best established sections, it carried on the strongly autonomous and class conscious identity it had had within the RWGLA. With regular meetings at Trades Hall, it was more closely in touch with the metropolitan unions than the rest of the far flung membership and less open to the influences of the mushrooming AWU.\textsuperscript{115} An immediate cause for complaint was the introduction of an inferior award. There were also rumblings about administration and the unconstitutional methods of filling official positions, 'not in accordance with autonomous government.'\textsuperscript{116} It was not a revolt, but it sounded a warning. Bodkin ignored it at his peril.

When Cordeaux Dam work started, the competing labourers' unions were quick to make their move. RWIB Organiser T.P. Gearing held a meeting which appointed a camp committee and delegates for each gang. To the United Laborers there, he pointed out that the ULPS had not paid its share of the costs of getting their award and challenged the ULPS to send up an organiser to debate the matter. In doing this, he demonstrated the well tested


\textsuperscript{113} NB The front page portrait and biography of Bodkin in one of the final issues of the \textit{Navvy} (24 October 1916), and claims that he established and organised the RWGLA, \textit{Labor News}, 13 March 1920, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{114} The typical argument was no longer internationalist, but contained the following elements: a navvy, as an unskilled labourer could not claim exemptions. He also stood to lose more of his family in the fighting as: 'his are large families that have gone towards budding Australia'. Finally, with so many overseas, a local labour shortage would threaten the White Australia Policy. Evidence of this threat were the almost 900 Maltese navvying on NSW railway lines at the end of 1916, almost all of them AWU members! \textit{AW}, 19 October 1916, p. 21; 2 November 1916, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{115} In the 1915 RWGLA elections, the votes of this section had swung around wildly. They went heavily against Bodkin and Hogan (neither strangers in town), but to some of Bodkin's supporters obviously considered capable organisers. \textit{Navvy}, 9 August 1915, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{AW}, 9 November 1916, p. 19; 14 December 1916, p. 21.

103
ability of AWU officials to unveil militant language so as to push the AWU as the OBU. It also revealed something of the political tenor of the dam construction workforce. 'It is not', said Gearing, 'awards or cash we are after, it is solidarity and class organisation, and if it is not to be obtained on a navvy job, what possible chance is there of bringing about the O.B.U.?'

But it was not only the building of an organisation to crush wage slavery which concerned these navvies. Working in thick bushland and isolated many miles from other settlements, they had more immediate needs. The temporary camp had no store, boarding house or other source of provisions. Gearing's response was to warn those intending to tramp up to Cordeaux to take a good supply of food. RWIB officials lobbied an unwilling PWD for improvements and the problems remained acute, especially of food. Gearing, once back in Sydney, could afford to take the long view: 'time will adjust most matters, but it's rough at present.'

The long awaited debate occurred in February 1917. At a well attended meeting, Burke argued that the ULPS was ready for amalgamation on the basis of full local autonomy for the older union, its own office and officials. Gearing attacked such 'craft' unionism. The meeting then voted in favour of another amalgamation conference. Yet, for all the officials' agitation in favour of the AWU as OBU, there was still no meat or bread available for the navvies of Cordeaux. Nor was the RWIB record on behalf of Cordeaux members better on other matters. For example, the PWD refused to reduce the 1/- per week rent on tents, a real imposition for the many navvies who kept their families elsewhere.

Bodkin repeatedly but unsuccessfully invited a ULPS merger. The story was different with the RSMU which had entered the new decade continuing its practice of job control. Hostile to the 1908 Act, it did not at first register although the contractors'
organisation desperately sought a separate wages board as a way to tame the adversary or at
least regulate the conflicts between them. The union at first boycotted the wages board but,
in mid 1910, the employers and Heydon finally induced union representation. 123

This initial boycott told against the RSMU when Heydon granted all the Board’s
rockchoppers and sewer miners to the house union. With the Board opting for day labour,
this meant heavy membership losses for the RSMU. 124 More importantly for the union’s job
control, it lost its exclusive control over sewer construction. In times of greater militancy on
contract jobs, the Board could take them over, aware that its compliant house union would
dampen any conflict. This probably explains the union’s final decision to come to terms
with the framework of state arbitration and its moving closer to the Labour Council. 125

The union’s first award formalised unique gains won through industrial action, some
of which had spread to workers doing similar work under different awards. 126 All sewer
miners and rockchoppers on Water Board sewer contracts were to work a 36 hour week. For
water supply, there was a 36 hour week for trenches more than four feet deep and 48 hours
for the shallower ones. Wages were higher than in comparable awards and the union was
came the wages pacesetter. With pick and shovel workers mainly on 1/- per hour (8/- per
day), sewer miners and most sewer rockchoppers were to get a minimum 1/11 per hour
(11/6), those cutting the deeper water supply trenches 1/9 (10/6) and the shallow water
supply trenches 1/31/2 (10/4 ). 127 Reflecting the union’s strong stand, there were a series of
provisions regulating safe working and making employers supply amenities on the job. On
the other hand, the required forms of ventilation still fell well short of the proposals from the
1902 Inquiry. Finally, clauses flowing from the wages board system rationalised terms of
employment throughout the industry. These were comparable or slightly better than those
under similar awards. 128

123 ICT, 2/138, Vol 85, 16 November 1910, pp. 2-9; 26 November 1910, p. 1; NSWGG, (No. 54,
124 Membership of had mainly been around the 500 mark up to 1911. It then hovered around 300
despite a massive increase in Water Board sewerage reticulation. The two unions came to an
agreement for membership transfer where members changed employers. MBWSSEA Minutes, 27
July 1911.
125 TLC Minutes, 18 August 1910; 15 November 1910.
127 Cf ULP5 award, 1910, op. cit., p. 2621.
Nevertheless, the union took advantage of the shortage of skilled labour to demand higher wages, especially for work in sandstone. It was able to win in the field and before the wages board during 1911 and 1912. The internal workings of the union suggest the maintenance of job control. If we take the Lithgow Branch's rules as indicative, they reinforced the strong areas of the award such as maximum hours, minimum wages and safe working in tunnel and trench. As well, the codes of internal conduct, the provisions for quarterly election of officers and the prohibition on working with non-unionists suggest an active and motivated membership. It is clear from cases before the Industrial Court that members, both individually and collectively, continued to agitate and mobilise on the job.

The union used both the state arbitration system and direct action to try and widen its coverage among sewerage construction labourers. This had been a question of solidarity, of trying to consolidate workplaces around militant tactics. There were now other imperatives. The gradual mechanisation of trench cutting after 1912 resulted in a deskilling and easing of the labour market. The Board and the contractors saw mechanisation as a means of rolling back the union's gains. Organising all sewer construction workers into the union thus became an urgent defensive task but employers held out and Heydon continually rebuffed the union. The RSMU began to have problems and the Board sought to take advantage.

The RSMU award in September 1913 was a sign of difficult times ahead. The 44 hour week for machine drilling and cutting had been the first incursion into the 36 hour week. The new award stipulated a longer working week for sewer miners in the larger drives, those over 30 feet in superficial area. In early 1914, the contractors used...
mechanisation as an excuse to cut wages and increase hours on a job at Manly. The resulting strike spread to a number of contract jobs in other suburbs the following month.\textsuperscript{135}

The threat came into the open in 1917. A favourable award ratified the 36 hour week and higher wages. There was no mention of large as against small drives.\textsuperscript{136} The PWD refused to abide by the new award claiming that improved working conditions no longer justified the shorter hours. PWD officers sought to increase hours and decrease wage rates, flouting the award even after the RWIB had had it reaffirmed in court. By now too, the Water Board had joined the fray. A deputation from the RSMU, the house union and Labour Council appealed to the Attorney-General who supported their case before the PWD. The PWD returned to court.

Heydon agreed with the PWD engineers as to the difference between large and small drives, increased the hours of work for sewer miners on larger drives under both awards to 44 and cut the wage rate.\textsuperscript{137} It was futile for the unions to point out that large drives only meant more miners at the face and the same dust problems. Heydon not only pegged RSMU members back to house union hours and wages, but the arguments by which they had recently held their special conditions were rapidly losing their hold. There had been some improvement in working conditions but by no means of the order asserted. Yet, the members remained remarkably quiet.

They had always taken a close interest in the wider union movement even when excluded from Labour Council.\textsuperscript{138} This continued after the union's affiliation in May 1912 when it sought Council's aid.\textsuperscript{139} With the election of W. Carbines as union Secretary, the union seemed to change orientation. Although Carbines took his place on Council and used

\textsuperscript{135} NSWIG, Vol. 5 (1914), pp. 163, 392, 398.

\textsuperscript{136} NSWGG, (No. 18, 9 February 1917) 1917, pp. 967-8.

\textsuperscript{137} N.B. The PWD held that for the larger drives, there was no difference in the work between sewer mining and tunnelling for railways, and therefore no justification for the special consideration as to shorter hours and higher wage rates. Interim Report re Miners' Phthisis, op.cit. Letter from Under Secretary, Department of Attorney General to the Attorney General, 19 June 1917, ibid., pp. 432-3; SMH, 26 February 1918, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{138} Due to Council rules excluding unions competing for coverage with an existing affiliate, in this case the ULPS. RSMU officials also took socialist and anti-politician positions at Labor Party conferences. E.g. re 1911 Conference, AW, 3 February 1911; Political Labor League of NSW, Annual Conference, 1911, ML.

\textsuperscript{139} TLC Minutes, 2 May 1912; 19 September 1912; TLC Executive Minutes, 23 February 1915.
it for deputations, he began to steer the union towards the AWU. The first major alliance was within the industrialist faction of the Labor Party in 1916.140 By the end of 1917, the Rockchoppers and Sewer Miners' Union of NSW had dissolved itself into the RWIB/AWU. Unlike the case of the RWGLA, this brought virtually no comment in the Australian Worker or the rest of the press. As the rockchoppers' union had no paper of its own, it is impossible to find out the internal debates and mechanisms for this decision. All that remains is conjecture.

Mechanisation weakened these workers' labour market and served to bring them and their conditions closer to the experience of other sewer construction labourers.141 If it was harder to win on the job, it meant heavier reliance on an arbitration system which sought greater downwards uniformity between labouring categories. The RSMU had also lost much of its membership and positional strength to the house union. It was also impoverished financially; not a vital consideration when using direct action in a seller's labour market, but hopeless for a union becoming dependent upon arbitration. The AWU on the other hand, boasted that its great wealth was a huge advantage for arbitration work. The AWU's persuasive OBU rhetoric knitted these negative factors together into a good argument for amalgamation.

If 1917 had been a bad year for Sydney's rockchoppers and sewer miners, 1918 was no less significant. In February, the PWD tried to impose the new conditions on the Manly end of the NSOOS and about 40 rockchoppers there stopped work. A deputation from the RWIB Executive was unsuccessful in having the previous terms of employment restored. The strikers, unwilling to risk their lives under these conditions, sought out surface work instead.142 The RWIB, unable to mobilise in defence of hard won and vital gains, placed a black ban on the works. As a result, the worker restarted with non union labour.

141 The machines were similar to those in ore or coal mining and it was not uncommon for such miners to move between Sydney sewer works and rural mines such as that at Cobar. Taylor, op. cit..
142 SMH, 26 February 1918 some returned to Cobar where mining operations were restarting., Taylor, op. cit.
An exhaustive Board of Trade inquiry later that year confirmed that rockchoppers and sewer miners working in sandstone still ran a terrible risk of early death from silicosis. It trenchantly criticised the negligence and hostility of PWD and Board officials to the occupational health of their employees.\textsuperscript{143} These workers were not to see real improvement nor a return to shorter hours before the end of the decade. In the meantime, as part of the RWIB, they were about to become embroiled in the seething cauldron of NSW labour politics.

Among Garden's plans for moving the labour movement to the left was the weaning of the RWIB and the Miners' Section of the AWU away from the 'big Australian'. These were both compact sections with recent traditions of industrial activism.\textsuperscript{144} With more than 20,000 members, they were important steps on any road to controlling the labour movement. Garden's project continued into the following decade.

4. The MBWSSEA — the Board's house union

From the beginning, the union took on a decided character, was run by and for a limited and clearly defined group of members and made certain sorts of demands. Shared political orientation and job location largely determined the composition of the ruling group. Permanent sewer maintenance workers had established the union and they kept control. There was a sprinkling from among water maintenance and ventshaftsmen and the odd temporary labourer, but they counted for very little. The much greater number of casual construction labourers went unheeded. Their working lives made involvement within such a union very difficult. Intermittent unemployment forced them to work for the PWD, contractors or outside the industry altogether. The fragmentation of the industry and its unions therefore made their membership unpredictable. They moved between competing unions — the house union, the ULPS, the RSMU and the RWGLA (later the RWIB). Only the Water Board union limited membership to workers under one employer and it was the only one with a solid and permanent core of members who had the union in hand. The

\textsuperscript{144} I.E. Young, 'Conflict within the N.S.W. Labor Party 1919-1932', unpublished M.A. Thesis, Department of Government, University of Sydney, 1961, p. 22.
construction labourers were outsiders irrespective of their numerical strength and the officials' half-hearted activity on their behalf.

There were also fundamental changes underway in the relative size of different sections within the Board's permanent workforce. The sewer maintenance staff no longer outnumbered those working on water maintenance. In particular, due to the expansion of water reticulation, the meter branch was the fastest growing section of the Board's operations. Yet, with 81 workers in 1911 and 142 in 1920, high level sewer maintenance men — the single largest group of blue collar, permanent employees — dominated the union. More than their number, it was their cohesion, their combined seniority and tradition of conservative agitation and finally organising which counted.

Most of those responsible for the union's birth stayed at the helm. It is difficult to trace what happened between 1913 and 1920 as the union's records for that period have not survived. Since it was a small and insignificant union, it rarely made news in either the labour or capitalist press. Nevertheless, fragments remain and not much seemed to have changed. In 1911 for example, the President, at least one of the two Vice Presidents, the Secretary, the Treasurer and at least 10 of the 16 members of the Committee were from sewerage maintenance (including low levels and pumping). In 1913, the two new Vice Presidents were both sewer maintenance men. There appear to have been at least another eight from sewer maintenance on the Committee.

Although there appears to have been something of a changeover around 1916, by 1919 the sewer maintenance men were solidly back in charge. But who were these men? Bill Macpherson, a large, bluff and bulky redhead, was the foundation General Secretary, a position he kept for nearly half a century. Born in rural Monaro in 1875, he had a succession of jobs before working as a sewer miner for contractors on the Western Sewer

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145 In 1911, it had 60 permanent employees below salaried staff level and, by 1916, there were 120.
146 Not all were classed as maintenance men due to promotions to leading hand. The large number of family ties and common names among Board employees makes it difficult at times to accurately determine where particular officials worked.
147 Among the others, there was a turncock, a water maintenance leading hand, a ventshaftsman, a fireman from water supply pumping and, significantly, a construction inspector.
148 Signatures for 1916 in the (very incomplete) Committee Attendance Book, WSEU Archives
Outfall Extension. He later worked as a contract drainer before stiff competition forced him to seek paid employment as a Water Board trench labourer.149

With little formal education, Macpherson was a great reader and, judging by his turgid prose, greatly in awe of the legal profession. One of the few non Catholics in an industry and union awash with Irish names, he was also a Mason. If religion meant little to him, politics did.150 Allegedly a fabian, his active involvement in the Labor Party was largely a function of his role within the union. Rather than the municipal socialism of the Webbs, Macpherson seems to have been part of the current of ‘municipal labourism’ which dominated his union. This sought intervention through the party in favour of day labour, heavy public spending, improved arbitration and Board concessions to the union, particularly over issues promising some co-management.

Industrially he was equally mild.151 His obituary has him cycling between isolated jobs, ‘his swag thrown over his shoulder’ and sleeping by the side of the track, ‘to continue his work the following morning.’152 This may have been true for the first year or two but, after that, highly unlikely. While membership grew strongly, only a small part would have come from extensive country organising.

Toohey, Treasurer for the two decades after the union’s foundation, had joined the Board in 1898 at the age of 41. Initially a carter on sewer maintenance, he later became a motor lorry driver. These were useful jobs for an active unionist as they allowed constant contact with dispersed groups of workers at a time when the union had no real delegate organisation and few full time officials. Toohey distinguished himself as a union representative on the 1910 wages board by confronting the very daunting Smail.153 He was a quiet, conservative supporter of Macpherson.

149 Water and Sewerage Gazette, Vol 17, Nos. 1-2, January-February, 1956, p. 1. Unfortunately this potted biography is otherwise almost totally unreliable; Interview with Macpherson’s grandson, Neville Grace, Sydney, 5 March 1986.
150 Grace op. cit.
151 ibid; Government Employees Group, No. 1 Board, Transcript of Hearing, 5 November 1912, p. 56.
152 Water and Sewerage Gazette, September and October 1967, p. 1. Much of the rest of the obituary and similar articles on other union officials, are similarly unlikely.
The two Presidents during the decade were quite different. Compared to the other officials, Ring was a man of strong unionism and an even more burning interest in the Labor Party. Although not religious, he had suffered for his Irish Catholic background. This helped make him a staunch opponent of sectarianism. Fair and enthusiastic, he saw it as healthy that meetings upheld dissent from his ruling.

Potter, President from 1915, was also an active Labor Party member. An ex coal lumper from the Rocks, he had begun working for the Board in 1891 at the age of 25. Like many others, he had relatives — a brother and son — working for the Board. Unlike most on the Committee, he did not always support Macpherson. By 1916, he was an Inspector of Roof Water Drainage.

A number of other sewer maintenance men were constant members of the Committee. In particular, Edward Dean, O'Mara, Thomas Rosman, E. McCabe, William Brown and James Dwyer were prominent. Linkenbagh left the Board to become a contractor. Others such as William Dwyer, left office after climbing into the salaried ranks.

Carey, while not on permanent maintenance, nevertheless became a key member of the ruling group. The son of an Irish labouring family, he was active in the inner city Labor Party. More literate than many, he had a keen political mind and looked beyond the municipal and Water Board politics which absorbed much of the union's attention. A conservative labourist, he hitched his star to the AWU, a masterstroke for a minor official from an insignificant union. In 1919, the NSW party, now firmly under the control of the 'big Australian', recognised his loyalty, efficiency and capacity for hard work by appointing him its Secretary.

Finally, there was Clara, former country town shopkeeper, commercial traveller, single term Labor MLA and, finally, Water Board toolsharpener. Once ensconced in the city he threw himself into local Labor Party politics. The union's arbitration advocate, he

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154 Interview with his son, W.H. Ring, Parramatta, 28 January 1986
155 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 April 1912. As well, the Water Board's representatives on the 1910 wages board found his testimony more reliable than most and rarely questioned his account.
156 Labor Daily, 22 July 1931.
157 MWSDB Minutes, 6 March 1918.
158 Labor News, 1 November 1919; 26 June 1920, p. 7; Labor Daily, 23 January 1928.
159 MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 November 1912.
soon clashed with Macpherson.\textsuperscript{160} By early 1911 the ruling group had marginalised Clara.\textsuperscript{161} His subsequent challenge to the Macpherson group included criticism of Board supervisors playing a prominent role on the Committee.\textsuperscript{162} Outmanoeuvred, he resigned from the Committee. In the election for a full time assistant secretary in 1913, he lost massively to Carey and died two years later.\textsuperscript{163}

From 240 at the end of 1909 membership grew to 506 the following year and finally 800 in 1911. Heydon's extension of the union's coverage to include casual workers, the growth of day labour and, finally and most importantly, the 1911 preference clause were decisively important. By the end of 1912, these elements had combined to increase membership to 1,400, placing it in size among the middle ranking NSW unions.

While membership remained reasonably steady during the early years of the war, subsequent heavy cuts in the Board's loan funding had a drastic impact. The Board reacted by savagely cutting down its construction workforce. The effects on the union were devastating. Whereas at the end of 1916, there had been 1,600 members, there were only 932 a year later. The following year, as funds continued to be tight, the Board sacked a number of salaried officers among the survey staff. It then put off an even larger number of chainmen, among a total of 252 union members.\textsuperscript{164} Membership only partially recovered by the end of the decade.

In 1910, with the first round of competition for coverage of Sydney's water supply and sewerage workers at an end, the Water Board union sought to press the claims for those groupings it had won. During a period of sustained prosperity and rising prices it was not difficult to make out a case for wage increases. Yet, the Water Board was used to complete control in this area. It saw no reason to change even though wage rates for permanent workers had not changed in 20 years. After all they had 'privileges'.\textsuperscript{165} It attempted to challenge wage board proceedings as in conflict with the Board's own legislation. This

\textsuperscript{160} ibid., 26 September 1910; 9 November 1911 (C).
\textsuperscript{161} ibid., 8 February 1912.
\textsuperscript{162} ibid., 29 August 1912.
\textsuperscript{163} ibid., 26 September 1912; 30 January 1913.
\textsuperscript{164} Report of the Royal Commission re Retrenchment of Officers in the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage, NSWPP, 1918, Vol. 6, p. 520.
\textsuperscript{165} MWSDB Minutes, 5 January 1910.
failed and the Water Board could not contest the fact of inflation. The wages board agreed to much of what the union asked. The overall result left Water Board wages no longer lagging behind those in other areas of private or public employment. Pay rates in the 1910 award added to security and conditions made temporary and especially permanent employment even more attractive.

Superficially, the award was in line with the Board's entrenched employment practices. For wage rates, it clearly distinguished between 'weekly hands' — the permanent and temporary manual workers — and 'casual hands' employed by the hour. Some classifications, those to do with maintenance and normal operations, were only weekly. Who fell where was of course a management prerogative and neither the wages board nor a union in the hands of sewer maintenance men was about to interfere. Casuals benefitted from the same 10 paid public holidays, travel allowances and overtime rates as the permanent employees. The Board could no longer insist that the permanent workers' many 'privileges' justified their lower wage rates compared to those outside. The award was silent on another important area dividing the permanents from the casuals. The Board had for a few years paid six days annual leave to permanent maintenance workers. The union wanted this doubled but the wages board decided to leave this up to the 'generosity' of the Board. Casuals continued to miss out completely.

The Water Board union's first award had many things in common with other awards: methods of resolving disputes; a 'slow workers' provision for below award wages and travelling expenses. There were also differences of both kind and degree. Subsequent variations tended to reduce some of these differences. The most important gains water and sewerage workers had achieved over the previous decade had been reduced hours.

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166 Metropolitan Water and Sewerage (General Labourers) Board, Transcript of Hearings, 3 February 1910, pp. 111, 115; 5 April 1910, pp. 378-9; 3 June 1910, pp. 903-5.
168 MBWSSEA Wages Board Hearing 1910, pp. 912, 918.
169 This was at least two more than similar awards allowed.
170 MBWSSEA Wages Board Hearing 1910, p. 22.
171 I have used the following principal awards for comparison to the Water Board's first award and classified them according to their respective unions: Sydney Municipal Council Employees' Union Award, NSWGG, No. 89, 1 July 1909; BLU Award, ibid., No. 148, 24 November 1909, ULPS Award, ibid., No. 81, 18 May 1910; RSMU Award, ibid., No. 128, 17 August 1910; Bricklayers' Award, ibid., No. 151, 28 September 1910.
award continued the 36 hour week for first grade rockchoppers and sewer miners. First grade miners were those who worked in tunnels with a superficial area of less than 30 feet. There was no such restriction in the RSMU award. The house award wages were also lower. Perhaps due to a tight labour market, an award variation reduced the wage disparities.\textsuperscript{172}

The award also formalised the 36 hour week for sewer maintenance workers on night shift and those working in small tunnels. Almost all the rest of the Board's workforce were to work 48 hours divided between a standard five shifts and a short shift on Saturday. This was a great advance for the turncocks and others on maintenance who had previously worked apparently unlimited hours. Linked to this was provision for the payment of overtime rates for any work outside standard hours.

Then, there was the question of wages and here it is important to remember the shorter hours for some groups. As in other awards covering construction and public authorities, the heaviness or expertise of labouring and maintenance brought special recognition in the shape of margins. These 'unskilled' rates were equal to or significantly above Heydons' 'living wage' of 7/- per day, which took into account rising national prosperity. Board labourers, in common with those under construction awards, did relatively well compared to the unskilled in manufacturing and, surprisingly, to base rates for labourers on the railways. This was to be the pattern for the decade.\textsuperscript{173}

Most of the Water Board's lowest paid groups — the general labourers, chainmen, sewerage farm hands, second grade messengers and chauffeurs — received 8/- weekly under the new award. This was 3/- per week or nearly seven per cent above the rate which Macarthy claims became a standard minimum in contemporary awards as rising prosperity encouraged heavy wages board bargaining.\textsuperscript{174} Other labourers working for the Water Board received extra margins for skill or the heaviness of their work. Concrete turners, monier plate lining setters, the lower grade of timbermen and tool fettlers at Prospect received 9/-.

\textsuperscript{174} Macarthy, "Wages for Unskilled Work" p. 199.
Closer to the union leadership's heart was the fate of the permanent men. Chapter One illustrated how it was difficult to compare theirs to outside work but we can make some general comparisons to less specialised labourers. An overview of what happened to the typical and central Water Board job classifications also gives some idea of changes under the award. Outside of upgradings through reclassification, most gained increases of around 15 per cent. General labourers at the base of the wages pyramid gained a one shilling increase to 8/-; maintenance men went from 7/6 to 8/8; turncocks from 9/7- to 11/-, a wage between that for first and second class gangers on construction. Station attendants (or 'oilers') in the low level pumping stations received increases from 8/- or 8/6 to 9/8. In the growing Ventilation Shaft Branch the largest group, the plumbers' assistants on 7/6, became 'ventshaftsmen' on 8/8.

Overall, in recognition of their specialised skills and their knowledge of the intricacies of the Water Board's system, these distinct groups of labourers received award wages somewhere between the base rates for general labourers and those for tradesmen. With the changes to hours and overtime, their situation had definitely improved. The question for tradesmen was not so fortunate. Here, the rate for bricklayers and plasterers of 11/- was one shilling below outside awards.

The new award appeared to have placed many of the Water Board's employees in a relatively fortunate position. The acclamation with which union members greeted Clara and their two wages board representatives suggest this. The Board's response was also indicative. It immediately sought to take away 'privileges', whether by removing holiday entitlements for workers now paid for Sunday overtime or the reclassification of others to avoid wage rises. At times this meant sacking workers and reappointing them to a lower position. This was possible as an award variation made all promotions dependent upon the Engineer-in-Chief's recommendation.

175 MBWSSEA Minutes, 24 June 1910. The union organised a smoke concert to celebrate the occasion and presented mementos to Macpherson, his wife and Clara. Macpherson received a gold chain and pendant and his wife a gold brooch. ibid (C), 5 August 1910.
176 MWSDB Minutes, 24 August, 1910; 1 March 1911;27 March 1911.
177 NSWGG, (No. 185, 7 December 1910) 1910, Vol. 4, p. 6620. NB the union unsuccessfully challenged this and other clauses of the variation which extended the areas of management prerogative beyond the limits agreed upon for the original award. MBWSSEA Minutes, Special Summons Meeting, 13 October 1910.
A further variation in 1911 formalised another typical Water Board industrial practice, the use of 'handymen' and 'improvers' in place of traditionally trained tradesmen or certificated operatives. Most of the Board’s manual workers were labourers of one type or another but the Board needed a range of more skilled workers: a small permanent core doing general repairs and maintenance and a larger group for temporary or casual work on reticulation. Some of these did the work of the building trades, for example carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers and painters. Others were from the engineering trades such as fitters and turners, boilermakers and electrical fitters. Then there were engine drivers. In the building or engineering industries the fineness of much of their work, their numerical and strategic importance within production meant that traditional craftsmen could control entry qualifications for many processes through their job organisation and unions.\textsuperscript{178}

The Water Board, like other large construction employers, provided a quite different situation. Craft work was often of a rougher nature and those who did it worked as islands within a sea of labourers. Therefore, instead of using craftsmen who had come through apprenticeships, there was greater use of handymen — often labourers who had picked up a range of skills through experience. Then there were the improvers or 'probationers', youths taken on at 16 and employed for six years at very low wages learning particular types of work within the Board’s operations. They gained virtually none of the advantages of traditional apprentices. The award variation in 1911 only spelt this out more clearly by defining certain skilled tradesmen by what they did rather than by their formal qualifications.\textsuperscript{179}

Thus the Board took advantage of the various informal skills available within its workforce and encouraged upward mobility from within the ranks of its labourers. This permitted it to avoid dealing with the more troublesome tradesmen’s unions and the higher award wages they had won outside. Further, with the constantly changing nature and momentum of so much of the Board’s construction, this system allowed the employer much

\textsuperscript{178} This was not always through blind opposition to deskilling processes but, in the case of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, took the form of controlling the new practices through enrolling the semi-skilled. See Sheridan, \textit{Mindful Militants}, pp. 17-21, 58-61.

\textsuperscript{179} NSWGG, (No. 156, 8 November 1911).
greater flexibility. It could appoint workers to 'act up' in better paid jobs and it could and
did easily 'regress' them when it suited.

The skills and experience gained were often quite specific to water and sewerage
work. Therefore, during these decades of constantly high unemployment for labourers, this
reinforced the dependence and identification of such employees with the Board and their
separateness from the industrial world outside. An award variation granting preference to
the Water Board union provided further reinforcement. This preference was not the same as
elsewhere as the union's rules limited membership to Board employees. Rather than seeking
to guarantee their members filled job vacancies, the house union's officials used the clause
to try to enforce compulsory membership on those already employed. Here they came into
conflict with those craft unions whose members were among the Board's employees.180

The Board's conservative majority, hostile to unionism among its employees had, in
the past, been even more antagonistic towards union incursions from outside.181 Its
traditional paternalism was one response, the use of unqualified workers for skilled work
was another. Together, these two approaches justified the third — the payment of lower
craftsmen's rates than prevailed outside. Tying all this together was the house union, both a
reaction to and product of the Board's paternalism. It had no axe to grind for the qualified
skilled worker but spoke for the labourer whose practical intelligence and flexibility had
gained the security and higher wages which came to those on specialised maintenance work
or who breached the formal skill barriers.182

The 1912 Arbitration Act changed all this. Beyond the general changes, Section 26
had major repercussions as Board employees now had to receive wage rates no lower than
those paid for similar work outside. The wording shows that the government intended to
end practices such as those of the Board which mixed discrimination and paternalism.183

180 Government Employees' Group, No. 1 Board, Transcript of Hearing 6 March 1913, pp. 8, 10, 11-
2, 14. WSEU Archs.
181 Cf. the NSW railways where, after wage increases in 1910, the AEU had problems with
management: 'which acted as old style autocrats preferring to deal directly with their employees
rather than trade unions.' Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, p. 197.
182 E.g claim for tradesmen's union wage rates for Board employees while doing skilled work.
MBWSSEA Minutes, 23 April 1909 (C).
183 NB 'the fact that employment is permanent, or that additional privileges are allowed ... shall not
of itself be regarded as a circumstance of dissimilarity.'
The Board would no longer be able to claim that the different conditions it bestowed on its permanent and temporary workforce warranted lower salaries than those paid elsewhere.

The Board reacted in two ways. One was to try to deny the similarity by pointing to the lack of qualifications among its employees doing the work of craftsmen. When this failed and the Board had to bring wages up to the level of outside awards, its other tactic was to suddenly discover the worth of outside unions when it came to supplying 'good men'. Notable among these was the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association (FEDFA) which had been attempting to expand its foothold among pumping station employees. It now saw the chance to contest the house union's preference clause. This proved unsuccessful. The Board and house union remained inextricably bound.

Strong craft unions gained a rush of increased margins during early 1914. Like other public sector labouring unions, the timing of its award and the war blocked any flow-on to the house union. In July 1916, the union's officials agreed with the Board to postpone a new award until early the following year. As a result, in spite of rapidly rising prices, there was virtually no changes to the wages of Water Board employees between the 1913 and 1917 awards.

These awards included much more detail than ever before. First, there was an enormous increase in the number of job categories described. This was the result of the growth and increasing complexity of the Board's operations, the introduction of new mechanised technologies and a recognition of the union's claims for separate rates for the great variety of labouring processes. Then there was a tendency to formalise as 'industrial' matters questions such as the supply of work clothes, the provision of first aid equipment and travelling time which had previously been the sole prerogative of the Board. The major areas still outstanding remained annual and long service leave.

184 Government Employees' Group, No. 1 Board, Transcript of Hearings, 6 March 1913, pp. 1-2, 18; 16 December 1913, pp. 34-6. E.g. Smail: 'Very often a man graduates to a blacksmith from a striker without having served one year's apprenticeship.' (p. 36) WSEU Archs.
185 See e.g. ibid., 30 September 1912, p. 7; NB also Mitchell v. Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage, NSWIR, 1912, pp. 33-5;
186 Grant, op. cit., pp. 24-5; 34
There continued to be an increasing differentiation among rock miners and rockchoppers. Those doing work now defined outside the stricter definitions faced a reduction in pay and lengthening of hours. While truckers-out in the longer drives now had a 36 hour week, a 44 or 48 hour week was becoming a fact of life for an increasing number of those who cut and blasted in tunnel and trench. There were also gains but these tended to follow what was happening to the RSMU award. Thus they and the rest of the Water Board field workers were to have change sheds, pure drinking water, and boiling water at meal times and washing facilities for very dirty work. Still, many were not to see these improvements for decades. Another shift, reflecting perhaps the changing forces within the union by 1917, was the increasing number of provisions dealing with water supply work.

In 1917 too, there was a more fundamental distinction between 'A', 'B' and 'C' Class Board employees. The first were those: 'appointed for the maintenance, upkeep, and operation of permanent works, except those temporarily employed in such service.'188 — the permanent workers. The second were the old temporary employees; those with at least a year's unbroken employment with the Board. The last was the mass of casuals. While the distinction between temporary and casual had appeared in previous awards, this award linked permanent status formally and directly to maintenance work for the first time. It entrenched the historic division of the Board's workforce between maintenance and construction, between those with or without permanent employment.

Finally, there was the question of wage rates. The 1917 award was a good example of the effects of Heydon's attack on real wages and of his strong influence towards wage uniformity. Heydon had declared a weekly living wage of 55/6 in 1916. This corresponded to less than 6/- per day in 1907 prices — below the miserable absolute minimum he had set in that year.189 The new Water Board award had male cleaners on the 1916 minimum. Above that rate, Heydon's squeezing of margins took effect. Base rate labourers who received 9/9 in 1913, got 10/6 per day (63/- per week) in 1917. This reversed the previous favourable position they had had compared to the price adjusted Harvester equivalent (66/3)

188 Clause 18, in Award, op. cit., p. 420.
and, even more so, to the wages of labourers in coal mines. Of even greater significance, there was now no margin between maintenance men and the lowest paid labourers. There was a general compression of other margins as well. Turncocks and carpenters, for example, with 12/6, had only gained 1/6 per day since 1911. While there were more generous rates for working in wet places, for dirty work and ventshaft work, the overall result was a heavy reduction in living standards. Nor, prior to the new decade, were Board employees to gain from the 1918 changes to arbitration.

Once the original award and the more urgent variations were in place, the union's officials settled down to a sheltered existence on the margins of the union movement. The preference clause made this even easier as organising became almost unnecessary. Although much of the workforce remained at some distance, the officials worked out of the City. The union's structure further centralised control. With its office and meetings in Sydney, it was geographically inaccessible to workers who worked or lived out of town. The lack of a union paper, district organisation or a real organising network reinforced this isolation.

As major award determinations only came up every few years, the day-to-day focus of the union's activities became members' individual grievances — whether over unfair promotion, harsh treatment or award anomalies. The officials pursued these concerns in two ways, the second often following on the failure of the first. They continued the practice of deputations to Smail. The supportive Meagher continued to introduce deputations until he left the Board in 1910. That year, the election of McGowen's government opened another apparently fruitful avenue. Deputations now went directly to the minister or other party notables to put lateral pressure on the Board over a range of issues.

The second method was a heavy reliance on legal avenues, whether using an outside solicitor or the union's own advocate. Institutional recognition made this possible. The

190 I have used the 1916 figures for comparison as the new award was the outcome of 1916 claims and hearings. P.G. Macarthy, 'Wages for Unskilled Work', pp. 146, 151.
191 e.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 March 1911
192 For expressions of the union's regret, MBWSSEA Minutes, 24 March 1910.
193 Among those representing the union were those most prominent in Labor affairs such as Clara, Ring and Carey. ibid (C), 20 January 1911. NB the union's officials also acted through P.J. Minahan, prominent party official and MLA. ibid., 14 December 1911 (C).
194 E.g. ibid., 28 May 1909; 29 October 1909; 30 September 1910
union also began to look towards third and fourth avenues. An independent appeals board within the Board would reduce the union's reliance on outside lawyers, broaden the scope of grievances it could pursue, offer better results and still keep the union tied closely to its employer.\(^\text{195}\) The possibility of an elected union representative on the Board was equally inviting. To achieve these reforms, the union actively pressured the Labor Party to reconstitute the Board.\(^\text{196}\)

The emphasis on individual grievances and the way the union handled them encouraged a very strong centralisation of activity in the hands of a few officials, especially Macpherson. This was no accident born of inexperience. Within three months of the union's foundation, a general meeting resolved that all grievances go to the Secretary in writing prior to Executive consideration. There was to be no local initiative. Delegates were merely dues collectors. Ballots at district level were originally to elect collectors but, from 1912, the union secretary had the power to appoint them: 'where he thinks it necessary.'\(^\text{197}\) Theirs was, however, a very important role. Like many other unions nurtured through Heydon's fiat, the house union ran up large legal bills and, from a very early date, paid its part time officials for undertaking the constant business. Therefore one of the officials' greatest concerns was keeping members financial, particularly once part time gave way to full time positions.\(^\text{198}\)

Macpherson's position was emblematic. By February 1911, previous suggestions for the appointment of a permanent Secretary had gathered momentum and a special meeting elected Macpherson unopposed. It was the last election he had to face. His initial salary was £182 per annum or 11/8 per day calculated on a six day week.\(^\text{199}\) This was a big step up for a maintenance worker on 8/8. Bricklayers, turncocks and assistant foremen all received 11/-. Second grade overseers earned only 11/4. The following year, supporters on the Committee substantially boosted his weekly salary to £4.10.0 or 15/- per day. As

\(^{195}\) ibid., 13 May 1910; 24 May 1910
\(^{196}\) ibid., 20 January 1911; 25 January 1912. Australian Labor Party, State of New South Wales, \emph{Rules}, 1927, (General Platform, Plank 24 as to desired changes to the Board.
\(^{197}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 June 1912. Cf Rule 18 in the union's 1909 Rules, op cit.
\(^{198}\) ibid., 30 July 1909; 3 November 1909 (C); 28 January 1910; 4 March 1910; 28 May 1910. To encourage collectors, they could keep five percent of the dues they collected. ibid., 23 February 1911.
\(^{199}\) ibid., 8 July 1910; 20 January 1911; 23 February 1911.
well, there was payment for expenses incurred. Annual leave followed existing Board conditions.200 This brought Macpherson into line with First Grade Inspectors on sewer construction, Assistant Foundry Inspectors and other senior general staff and well above his union's membership.

Along with the high salary went a more central role in arbitration work. In June 1911, he won control of the conduct of cases from Clara. In addition, he was to have: 'discretionary powers regarding any matter in which he is in doubt.'201 The following year, with the growing amount of office work, he prevailed on the union to appoint Carey as Assistant Secretary on 60/- per week.202 With Carey organising, Macpherson concentrated on wages board and court work. To avoid solicitors' heavy fees, the Committee entrusted him with the union's prosecutions.203

The founders of the Water Board union had conceived of it as a 'house' union, jealous of its territory but not covetous of that of others. Although they had originally identified with their employer rather than the formal bodies of organised labour or the working class as a whole, the Board's continued resistance to reform appears to have induced a change of heart. Yet, as much as this was a singular union, its members had and felt certain things in common with others. Like other unions, it held smoke concerts for fundraising and social purposes, and like many of them, made a point of inviting its employer.204 Similarly, it raised funds for the dependents of sick or deceased members either through circulating (subscription) 'lists' or through benefit concerts.

Although not generous, it contributed to some appeals from other unions.205 In particular, the union developed a closer relationship with the RSMU. As many workers moved between the unions, it amended its rules to allow an exchange of membership for those in either union working in the other's sphere. The house union also began to provide more generous financial support and cooperated on joint relief of distressed members.206

200 ibid., 14 December 1911 (C); 28 March 1912. Cf. the weekly pay of the Secretary of a a similar sized union, the Operative Bakers, in 1918 was £3.10. Grant, op. cit., p. 49.
201 ibid., 29 June 1911.
202 ibid., 29 August 1912.
203 ibid., 13 June 1912 (C). See e.g. NSWIR, 1917, pp. 80-2.
204 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1909; 7 September 1909.
205 ibid., 25 May 1911.
206 ibid s, 13 July 1911 (C); 27 July 1911; 28 November 1912.
The relationship with other unions covering similar workers was more uneven: amalgamation proposals from the ULPS found their way directly to the waste paper basket.207

The union's founders also showed very little initial enthusiasm for 'closing up the ranks of labour' by affiliation with the Labour Council. Nevertheless, by 1912 the union had contradicted Clara's ringing words about keeping out of Labour Council and therefore of industrial strife.208 Although a general meeting of the union agreed, a rearguard action by some of the Committee stalled the process.209 Labour Council at first rejected the union's application due to opposition from tradesmen's unions who considered the house union covered underpaid workers who should have, by rights, come under previously affiliated craft unions. With Section 26 ensuring parity between Board wages and those outside and given the small numbers involved, the Labour Council Executive recommended acceptance of the application. Finally, in June 1914, Council voted to accept house union affiliation.210 The union's delegates attended Council but rarely sought its aid.

From its earliest meetings, the union sympathised with and contributed more strongly to the parliamentary side of the labour movement.211 This was not only a question of political sentiment, but a recognition of the possibilities given the mixed municipal-State Government composition of their employer. The example of Meagher from local government and the potential for public employment, sympathetic legislation and appointments to the Board under a NSW Labor Government were strong incentives for supporting Labor's electoral fortunes.

During the war, Water Board house unionists experienced the disappointments due to the Heydon's arbitration system. The dedication to the system of their union's officials

207 ibid., 30 March 1911; 16 January 1912 (C). There was, however, a certain enthusiasm among the membership for amalgamation with the recently formed union covering employees of the Hunter District Water Board. This came to nought. ibid., (C) 4 November 1910; 25 November 1910.

208 In fact it was Clara himself who moved the resolution that the union affiliate. ibid., 25 January 1912; 8 February 1912 (C); 14 March 1912 (C).

209 ibid., 25 January 1912; 8 February 1912 (C); 14 March 1912 (C).

210 TLC (Exec) Minutes, 26 March 1912; 12 May 1914; 26 May 1914; NB the craft unions voted against while the ULPS supported the Water Board union's affiliation. TLC Minutes, 4 June 1914.

211 MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 August 1909; 24 March 1910; 30 September 1910. NB especially the strong support for the establishment of the much mooted Labor Daily. A General Meeting voted to levy the membership six pence per week to raise the £500 for 10 shares. MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 April 1912.
helped keep it in an industrial backwater during turbulent times. It is not clear what position the union took on conscription, but subsequently, Macpherson attempted to paint himself as part of the 'industrialist' coalition. This, like much of the union's official view of itself, does not stand up to scrutiny.\textsuperscript{212}

The political upheavals during 1916 and 1917 seem to have had less of an impact on the union than economic difficulties. This is remarkable as the Board played a major role on behalf of the committee coordinating strikebreaking activities during the general strike. On behalf of the committee, the Board's motor manager controlled the motor vehicles the government had commandeered and the Board supplied its fleet of large lorries to help break the strikers' shutdown of transport.\textsuperscript{213}

Not surprisingly, this caused a growing anger among Board employees. At two works at least, they refused to use cement handled by non-union labour. The same was true at pumping stations for blackleg coal. By mid-August, two weeks into their strike, it looked like some groups of workers were going to extend the strike throughout the Board. Macpherson, who had tried to isolate the union's workforce from events outside, could only plead helplessness.\textsuperscript{214} A union meeting decided to only handle 'white' coal and the steam appears to have gone out of the protest.\textsuperscript{215}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In the years between 1910 and 1920, unionism among Sydney's water and sewerage workers continued to display the same complexities and changes as had been evident during the previous decade. The tendency to sectionalism continued with bitter competition among unions covering construction workers. The ULPS continued to expand onto navvy works where it clashed first with the newer and more powerful RWGLA and later with a

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Labor Daily Year Book}, Sydney, 1933, p. 172. Subsequent officials took up this theme. e.g. \textit{Water and Sewerage Gazette}, Vol. 17, Nos. 1-2, January-February, 1956, pp. 1-2. In fact, he was not on the NSW Party Executive at all. There was however an A.J (Andy) MacPherson on the Executive, an official of the Letter Carriers' Union and a Trades Hall red, he had been a one time IWW. (Childe, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 166)

\textsuperscript{213} MWSDB Report, 1917-8, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{214} \textit{DT}, 18 August 1917

\textsuperscript{215} \textit{ibid.}, 20 August 1917. There is no mention of them having struck in any of the official reports of the strike nor in the \textit{DT} or \textit{SMH} of the time.
continually opportunistic BLU. The merging of the RWGLA and the RSMU into the RWIB/AWU suggested a renewed tendency to recomposition.

More than a question of numbers though, the RWIB represented a change of direction. The RSMU had continued its strategy of job control and direct action until mechanisation and deskiUing destroyed the market power of its rank and file. The RWGLA, while less militant, was not afraid to strike and had a tradition of internal debate and local activity, which at times conflicted with its centralised administration. Members of both these unions showed evidence that water and sewerage construction workers could and would organise themselves and take direct action where needed. Some displayed militant class consciousness, whether at an international or job level. The RWIB under Bodkin attempted to smother both these traditions under that which pervaded the AWU. Here where the full time officials ruled, there was centralisation, total industrial reliance on arbitration, conservative control of fractious and motivated sections of its rank and file, a careerist involvement in the NSW Labor Party and more than a hint of corruption. The ULPS was moving in a similar direction, if in an idiosyncratic and less cynical way. This reflected the changing focus of the union's organising as a result of Heydon's repeated interventions and the consequent changes within the unions' workings. Some of these tendencies were also apparent in the house union, if for different reasons. The result was to make the industry's unionism appear more homogenous in character than it had during the previous decade. Conservative labourism not only survived the war, the IWW and the Russian Revolution, it appeared to have prospered.

During the decade, Macpherson's group consolidated their control of the new union. The divisions within the industry and among union coverage of the metropolitan water and sewerage workforce was one source of their power. The majority of workers in the industry were casuals who moved between employers and union jurisdictions. It was difficult to for them to gain a foothold in the Water Board union long enough to effect changes. Their vulnerability to dismissal in an unfavourable labour market and the arbitrary and brutal power of overseers did not encourage workplace activism. During the war years in particular, the effects of the great volatility of loans spending was much in evidence.
On the other hand, permanent maintenance men were largely sheltered from changes in the economy and industry. This gave them the vital continuity necessary to keep hold of the union. Their employers' preference and that which Heydon granted through the arbitration system only consolidated their position and their ability to control their organisation and remove it from unwelcome outside influences. Their structuring of the union removed the threat from within. Centralisation of operations and decision making, both in a personal and geographic sense, removed much of the danger that dissident construction workers may have posed. The election of Macpherson as a highly paid Secretary for life was a sign of the completeness of this control and was also to become an important way of maintaining it. The house union became his fiefdom.

Their complete control allowed Macpherson and the union's other officials liberty to operate in their preferred manner. First there was the arbitration system through which it could win what the Board would not concede respectful union deputations. In this arena it had reasonable success for a union which would not countenance direct action. Awards nevertheless reinforced the major divisions and inequalities within the workforce and membership: between the permanent maintenance workers and the casuals doing reticulation. This suited the Board's desire for labour force flexibility. The union's leadership, made up almost entirely of sewer maintenance men, had no intention of challenging it.

Another avenue was pressure on the Labor Party to favourably remould the very parameters within which the Board and the union operated — levels of spending, day labour, arbitration legislation and, increasingly areas of co-management such as the proposed appeals board and union representation on the Board. There was also the expectation that the Labor Party could condition the membership of the Board in the union's favour. This promised the union's officials great advantages over the everyday administration of the Board's industrial relations as well as greater power and prestige. To gain maximum hold for their municipal labourism, the union's officials began a successful and prominent involvement within the party's machine. In this, Carey was to be particularly important.