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

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Chapter 3

1920-9
So long as the organisation could depend upon its economic might in the sphere of production, so long could it maintain itself a rank and file controlled union.

- D.T. Duncan, Secretary, City Section, Railway Workers' Industry Branch, AWU.¹

... that the association submit a protest to the Water and Sewerage Board in the matter of reduction of wages and lengthening of hours.

- Resolution of General Meeting of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association.²

Introduction

The characteristics of Sydney's water and sewerage industry continued after 1920. So did the expansion of the system. Thus, much that was important to the industry's workers binds the story in the period 1920-9 to previous years. By 1929, Australia slipped out of its usual short term cycle to plummet into depression which had immediate and drastic effects on those employed on water and sewerage construction.

The industry remained divided between employers and unions. Construction workers largely remained separate from those maintaining the systems. By 1920, after more than a decade of OBU propaganda, the AWU officially spoke for the vast majority of metropolitan water supply and sewerage construction labourers. The ULPS still had a toehold among rockchoppers and was making some effort to 'get in' dam navvies as was the BLU. In reality, neither threatened the AWU which already dominated the industry in Melbourne and Brisbane. In eastern Australia, only one consistent group of workers in the industry stood out from the organisational embrace of the 'big Australian'.

The Water Board union remained untouched by the amalgamation drive. It clung to its unique position as a house union where it could count on employer cooperation in maintaining its monopoly. Water Board employment — specialised, constant and secure, at

¹ Labor Daily, 3 December 1927, p. 1.
² MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 August 1922.
the bottom of an established hierarchy — had set the dominant groups within the house union apart from labourers outside.

There continued to be competition between the officials of the construction unions. While their industrial methods became more similar — a mixture of arbitration and deputations — differences emerged in their support of opposing tendencies within a feuding Labor Party. At the base of the RWIB, the militant job control tendencies long evident among rockchoppers, sewer miners and groups of navvies continued to appear. They continued to erupt sporadically on a local basis in response to a deterioration of working conditions and in frustration with union's officials. This, in turn, was to feed a more thoroughgoing attempt to reshape the unionism of NSW construction labourers along militant lines. In this, metropolitan water and sewerage workers were to play a prominent part.

The Water Board union's isolation also appeared to have kept it impervious to the dramatic changes so close to its borders and in the world at large. The same officials controlled the union, with the support of key maintenance groups. All felt a strong allegiance to the Board which provided the benefits of permanent employment to the chosen few and a comfortable industrial career for those like Macpherson. Macpherson was also dependent on the arbitration system which had spawned the union and continued to provide concessions for its key groups. To maintain favourable conditions within the industry, the Board and the arbitration system, the Macpherson group came to rely heavily on the ALP. Internal party conflicts therefore threatened to carry over into a usually quiescent union.

The officials of the house union eschewed direct action. Promotion of some into the Board's supervisory ranks accentuated this. Direct action upset the Board and the arbitration courts, the two pedestals of Macpherson's industrial temple. Permanent maintenance workers did not strike. They had too much to lose and were content to receive pay increases and limitations to their hours through awards and to have the chance of internal promotion.

The position of those on the Board's construction work was different. Between 1925 and 1928 they became the unwitting pawns in a major re-ordering in the control of the industry. Construction labourers moved from the PWD to the Water Board and from the
construction unions into the house union. They brought with them a different industrial culture to the sewer maintenance. While they remained casual during times of high unemployment for labourers, Board work appeared similar to that under the PWD or the contractors. There seemed little reason to modify their militancy. The co-existence of two fundamentally different attitudes to the employer and to industrial relations also shaped divergent ideas of union aims, strategies and organisation. Conflicts arising from these differences were to become evident towards the end of the decade. Macpherson’s group had to resolve them to preserve the preferential treatment it received from the Board and the arbitration system.

1. The economy, politics and industrial relations
The war had interrupted an economic boom and slowed Sydney housebuilding. It had also stimulated manufacturing’s growing importance as investor and employer. This gave the relevant capitalists and unions political clout, including heavy federal government support of manufacturing. With the end of the war, there was a restoration of the previous trends of large scale capital inflow, immigration and public works spending.

During the twenties, the economy went through a short trade cycle with peaks at the end of 1920, 1924 and 1927, yet the quarterly average of unemployment among unionists between 1921 and 1928 was nearly nine percent, higher than before the war. Yet this underestimates unemployment among the unskilled and particularly among casual labourers. Although public investment in NSW continued to rise during the decade, it fluctuated greatly, and reinforced the general instability. Construction labourers as, ever, suffered heavily.

5 E.A. Boehm, ‘Australia’s Economic Depression of the 1930s’, pp. 613-4 and ‘Economic Development and Fluctuations in Australia in the 1920s: A Reply’, Economic Record, Vol. 51, No. 135, September 1975, p. 419; C. Foster, ‘Australian Unemployment, 1900-1940’, Economic Record, Vol. 41, No. 95, September, 1965, pp. 426, 449. NB Between 45 and 75 percent of the people registered as unemployed in NSW sought work as labourers. There were rarely jobs for half of them, e.g. NSWIGs, Vol. 24, 31 July 1923, pp. 52-3; Vol. 25, 29 February 1924, p. 548
Manufacturing continued to concentrate in urban areas. This and shortages of work in rural areas intensified the drift of population to the cities.\(^6\) Suburban growth regained its earlier momentum. The areas of greatest building activity continued the wartime trends.\(^7\) Most building occurred outside the inner suburban rings which had become densely populated prior to 1910. Canterbury and Bankstown, well to the City's southwest, continued to grow most strongly. Newer districts to the north such as Kurrinigai and Lane Cove also became more populous. This growth and spreading of population added to demands on existing headworks for water and sewerage but also stretched resources for reticulation.\(^8\) Thus, while national economic growth remained sluggish throughout the twenties, resurgent (sub)urban growth again called for greater financial commitment for the creation of water supply and sewerage works for Sydney.\(^9\)

Partially in response to metropolitan needs, and in part to further the old political preference for closer rural settlement, NSW water and sewerage works underwent a boom during the decade, the dominant part of a nationwide trend.\(^10\) Both PWD and Water Board expenditure on construction increased greatly. With railway construction under the control to the Railways Commissioners from 1917, water supply and sewerage together were the largest components of PWD spending and construction employment. In July 1923, for example, the five largest water and sewerage works accounted for 2,031 out of the the 3,860 workers the PWD employed on its construction works. More than 1,100 were working on the Avon, Cordeaux and NSOOS projects alone.\(^11\)

The Great War ended in 1919 and with it came a major re-ordering of international boundaries. A wave of revolution and working class rebellion appeared to usher war-torn Europe into a new, socialist epoque. In Australia too, the war had a major impact beyond the military casualties. For all the pompous postwar rhetoric of a national identity forged under fire on Gallipoli's shores, the most immediate impact of the war was one of

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\(^6\) H. Radi, '1920-29', in Crowley (ed), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 359.
\(^7\) P. Spearritt, \textit{Sydney Since the Twenties}, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1978, p. 1. cf MWSDB Reports, 1920-1 to 1927-8
\(^8\) Spearritt, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 33-46; MWSDB Reports.
\(^11\) NSWIG, Vol. 24, p. 53
division. 12 This was true in almost all the belligerent nations. Knowledge of this filtered into Australia, providing further stimulus to those involved on both sides of the social struggles. Local experience gave a local emphasis and flavour to the conflicts between classes, including the desperate struggle to possess the persuasive symbolism and support of the ex-military.13

Australian governments talked of a better post-war society to allay workers' resentment and any resulting bouts of industrial struggle. An increasingly well informed, politically educated and more militant labour movement had been slowly groping towards a reassessment of its place in the world and thus of its traditional aims, strategies and forms of organisation. It was not a linear process. Incessant hostile propaganda and state repression made sure of that. Perhaps more significantly, there were powerful, entrenched forces within the movement itself which clung tenaciously to the old ways of labourism.

During the early twenties, the pressures which had developed within the NSW labour movement continued to build. Among these, was the priority of closer unionism. There were a number of OBU blueprints and prototypes, none of them successful. Some of those involved, including Garden, were instrumental in the formation of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1920.14 The CPA was to become a force towards the end of the decade. In the meantime, the wartime strike wave receded after 1920 before building slowly again from 1925.15

As in the previous decade, the first Labor governments sadly disappointed their supporters. J. Storey led the party to power in 1920, strongly disassociating it from the growing, militant industrialist wing of the labour movement. For much of its period in office, the government's main internal opposition came from the AWU faction. This meant that unionists entered important industrial campaigns in the context of cynical manoeuvring within the parliamentary party. Two of the major industrial demands highlighting the

12 H. McQueen, 'Shoot the Bolshevik! Hang the Profiteer! Reconstructing Australian Capitalism 1918-21', in Wheelwright and Buckley, Political Economy, Vol. 2, pp. 185-95; Bedford, 'The One Big Union', p. 18.
13 This continued and even took the form of pitched battles. e.g. Labor News, 14 May 1921, p. 7.
14 Bedford, 'The One Big Union', pp. 30-6.
conflicts between the unions and the parliamentary party were over the question of wages and a long sought reduction of the working week.\textsuperscript{16}

The Board of Trade had substantially increased the minimum wage in 1919. However, in his 1920 judgement, G. Beeby, Labor's appointee as Board President, allowed for a reduction in real wage rates on the grounds that working class families could make up the difference above the £4.5.0 weekly minimum: 'by rearrangement of their expenditure ...(so as to) economise without lowering their standard of living.'\textsuperscript{17} A year later with prices falling, Beeby lowered it to £4.2.0. Storey's successor, J. Dooley, refused insistent union demands for legislation to restore the previous minimum, holding out against severe pressure from the AWU caucus faction and the Trades Hall 'reds'. The result of this and caucus infighting over other unrealised Labor policies was the resignation of the Labor ministry, its loss to Fuller's Nationalists at the March 1922 election and further mighty struggles for control of the Labor Party's machine and its parliamentary representatives.\textsuperscript{18} These were to continue to deeply involve the AWU, caused major eruptions among the navvies in the RWIB and eventually also the Water Board union.

Australian workers had been agitating for shorter hours during the final years of the war. It intensified into a core demand during the international wave of strikes and working class revolt of 1919-20.\textsuperscript{19} During 1920, NSW building and iron trades unionists engaged in a protracted campaign for the 44 hour, five day working week. Storey's government finally responded by establishing machinery which granted the reduction to 44 hours upon application by individual unions with the five day week to be settled by collective bargaining. It was a very tepid concession to heated demands. Instead of the expected sweeping and immediate legislative resolution, unionists had to await the gradual spread of

\textsuperscript{16} M. Dixson, 'Reformists and Revolutionaries in New South Wales 1920-1922,' \textit{Politics}, Vol. 1, No. 2, November, 1966, pp. 138-40; Grant, op. cit., pp. 185-6; For examples of internal party criticism of the government, see LN, e.g. 15 October 1921, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Dixson, op. cit., p. 142.

\textsuperscript{18} Other areas of union discontent directly affecting water and sewerage workers were over the workers' compensation legislation, retention of preference to returned soldiers and sailors, retention of heavy fines (under arbitration legislation) against unions for striking. See Dixson, op. cit., pp. 142-3, 145-6; Grant, op. cit., pp. 191, 193.

reduced hours. There were virtually no reductions in days worked. In contrast, Fuller's
government, swiftly restored the 48 hours and removed public servants from arbitration. 20

J.T. Lang led Labor to back into office in 1925. In his rise to power, Lang developed
a complex and at times apparently contradictory group of allies. These include left-wing
industrialists and officials from the more labourist unions, including the United Laborers'.
At the same time, Lang became a bitter foe of J. Bailey and other officials of the Central
Branch of the AWU. Partly to retain his support base and to isolate the AWU within a
feuding party, he energetically legislated to satisfy the demands of unions and unionists —
the first NSW Labor premier to do so. There was the legislative re-introduction of the 44
hour week, the payment of child endowment and a major extension of workers' compensation. 21
Major changes to the arbitration framework included the establishment of
conciliation committees under an Industrial Commission. The relevant appointees to the
tribunals were union sympathisers. As well, public servants regained access to arbitration.
Finally, the arbitration amendments established absolute union preference. 22 Lang also
rewarded loyalty in traditional ways. There was the elevation of supporters to the
Legislative Council, the goal of many union secretaries during the 1920s. 23

Continued bitter internal conflict within the Labor Party brought Lang's government
undone. 24 T. Bavin's National-Country coalition won the October 1927 elections and
proceeded to undo many of the measures of its predecessors. One of the results, given the
repeated changes to the NSW arbitration system and uncertainties in the federal sphere, was
a continuing movement of unions and employers' associations between them. 25

20 Grant, op. cit., p. 186; Dixson, op. cit., p. 141.
21 This improved on the Workmen's Compensation (Silicosis) Act of 1920, which in terms of
compensation, had recognised the dust diseases of rockchoppers and rock miners for the first time.
It had been one of the few real industrial reforms under Storey's government. M. Perks, 'The Rise
to Leadership', in H. Radi and P. Spearritt (eds), Jack Lang, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney,
22 Grant, op. cit., pp. 252-73.
23 Young, op. cit., p. 198; H. Radi, 'Lang's Legislative Councillors', in Radi and Spearritt, op. cit.,
pp. 105-6.
25 Grant, op. cit., p. 298; S. Sheldon, op. cit..
2. Sydney’s water and sewerage industry

The Water Board had long had its plans and programmes frustrated by the PWD’s role as construction authority. Lack of financial autonomy from the NSW government compounded the problem. With the growth of Sydney and a greater acceptance of its sanitary needs, the Board’s complaints over these limitations gained greater sympathy. As well, suburban councils complained that the Board’s constitution gave the City of Sydney a disproportionate influence.\textsuperscript{26} In 1924, Fuller’s government reconstituted the Board.\textsuperscript{27} The new Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board had 17 elected members making it more decisively a creature of local government. The Government appointed the full time President.\textsuperscript{28} More important were changes to its autonomy and authority. First, the new Board became the first NSW public enterprise to gain financial autonomy from Treasury.\textsuperscript{29} Second, and even more significant for this thesis, the Board gained sole control of water and sewerage construction throughout an extended area of operations. The Act exempted certain large PWD works then underway which, if still uncompleted in September 1928, were to pass to Board control together with the employees involved.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, at the end of 1928, the Board was an administratively and financially autonomous statutory authority. It employed all public sector employees working to provide Sydney’s water supply and sewerage.\textsuperscript{31} Except for contract labour, these workers no longer appeared to be working in a divided industry.

The Board continued to reflect government preferences over the day labour question. Board engineers continued to urge day labour for difficult work even when anti-Labor ruled. This meant the retention of an experienced pool of construction workers for the Board to call on. Thus, although there were seven times as many contract as day labour sewerage jobs during 1923-4, there was a weekly average of 145 Board day labourers compared to 454


\textsuperscript{27} Act No. 50.

\textsuperscript{28} Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 219-20; Larcombe, \textit{Advancement}, pp. 314-5.


\textsuperscript{30} Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 217.

\textsuperscript{31} This also included the near south coast around Wollongong. For convenience, the thesis refers in general terms to Sydney or metropolitan activities.
working for contractors.\textsuperscript{32} To minimise costs and any industrial resistance on day labour jobs, both the Board and the engineers remained keen to maximise the introduction of excavating machinery. As well, there was the continued use of bonus schemes, increasingly popular among employers.\textsuperscript{33}

PWD workers did not finish Cordeaux Dam until 1926. The 1924 Act had finally given the Water Board full control over water supply operations for the rapidly industrialising and expanding Wollongong region. Coupled with the strong growth of demand in Sydney made the completion of Avon Dam even more urgent. The PWD pushed its workers hard so that they completed it in 1927.\textsuperscript{34} Dam works could be distinguished from other types of large scale public works construction as they were= stable, medium term projects. Major dam works encouraged family settlement in the dam townships.\textsuperscript{35} There were still large numbers of single men living in the barracks and a continuous drift of those who passed through but:

there was a hard core of those who stayed on to become permanent dam people. They moved on from one dam to the next, acquiring year by year skills and experience that made them the backbone of the work forces. Some spent almost their whole working lives on the dams. They grew up with the dams, met, courted and married wives at one dam, raised their families at another. And in many cases their children in turn grew up on the dams and went to work on them themselves.\textsuperscript{36}

At the same time, the dam townships shared the isolation and the occupational uniformity of the railway navvies' camps or townships. This differentiated them from the experience of other water and sewerage labourers as did the fact that some of the female members of the family could find work at the construction towns --- as waitresses at the staff mess, in the boarding houses or doing secretarial work. Overall, as work and community were closely linked, women were more evident in a very masculine industry and industrial culture. Family and longtime friendship ties reinforced the particular characteristics of dam life and work and promoted a greater social identification between workforces at the different dam

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{32} MWSDB Reports, 1920-1, p. 50; 1921-2, p. 4; 1922-3, pp. 4, 36; 1923-4, pp. 4, 36; 1926-7, p. 5.
\bibitem{33} Connell and Irving, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 218.
\bibitem{34} Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 28-9, 96; PWD Report, 1927-8, p.13.
\bibitem{35} Interviews with Bob Walker, Helensburgh, 6 June 1984; Ray Greentree (and John Palmer), Bargo, 1 April 1985.
\end{thebibliography}
sites. This could take the form of large scale, organised social visits and at times flowered into cooperation and solidarity in industrial struggle.  

Like many very enclosed company townships, the hierarchy of work clearly determined other aspects of daily life. One obvious area was housing. Cordeaux and Avon had similar township layout and facilities based on the Cataract experience. Thus there were: 'offices and quarters for staff, and buildings for the accommodation of workmen'. It was barracks accommodation for single employees, each block having a recreation room and a bath house. There were also large but rudimentary boarding houses providing accommodation and meals. The PWD claimed it supplied land so that married couples could build their own houses out of locally milled timber. This cloaked a quite different reality. On Cordeaux, the families of blue collar workers lived in huts they built from the bark of nearby stringybark trees and lined the internal walls with hessian. Many of these huts had an earthen floor. As one woman who grew up at Cordeaux remembered: 'To be a bit fancier, we pasted sheets of newspaper over the hessian. A few such layers and it set like plaster.' This was common at Avon too. Yet, there was also a large school and films and dances at the town's hall.

Like Sydney's other dams built after Cataract, both were the products of day labour. During the twenties they had similar sized workforces: ranging upwards from about 220 when work was slack, to about 600. Nevertheless, the workforces were quite different. Many of the workers at Cordeaux were from a similar background to those at Cataract. They were a mixture of locals — often sons of nearby orchardists on marginal farms, unemployed labourers from Sydney and itinerant navvies. The NSW Government had different plans for Avon. Returned servicemen had preference at the new dam site. Many

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37 ibid, pp. 2-3.  
38 Cf Cutler, op. cit., p. 29; Gollan, The Coalminers, pp. 32-3, 92-3; G. Blainey, Mines in the Spinifex, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1960, p. 158.  
40 Walker, op. cit.; Greentree, op. cit.  
41 Quoted in Mann, op. cit., p. 2. Also Walker, op. cit..  
42 Greentree, op. cit.; Walker, op. cit..  
43 NSWIGs; PWD Reports, 1920-1, pp. 22-3; 1921-2, pp. 26-7; 1924-5, p. 11.  
44 Mann, op. cit., p. 1; Walker, op. cit..
could or would not tolerate the work. With the need for particular skills, by 1923, workers from the nearby railway deviation were getting work there too.\textsuperscript{45}

Construction of a dam across the Nepean River was to commence on the completion of Avon. In 1925, PWD workers began the preparations.\textsuperscript{46} The PWD extended distinctions over housing by providing separate quarters for senior staff, junior staff and foremen. But there also improvements. After the rough, frontier housing at earlier dams, the PWD had proper cottages built for married couples. There were shops and a three room school house. Tennis, football and a debating society added diversity to the amusements previously available. Overall, those employed at Nepean Dam were living in the dam township which, till then, best provided the amenities of town life.\textsuperscript{47} By mid 1928, the PWD had 485 workers at Nepean.\textsuperscript{48} In September, along with others constructing PWD metropolitan water and sewerage works, they passed under Water Board control.

For its part, the Board had returned to high loan spending so as to extend reticulation for new housing. Again this posed challenges for the capacity and flexibility of its distribution system. The engineering response was to construct a number of major works boosting the delivery of water to areas of greatest demand. As a result, compared to the previous decade, by 1926 its construction workforce had doubled to more than 3,000, about three times the number working on maintenance.\textsuperscript{49}

New pumping stations at Waterloo and Ryde were of major importance. So was the construction of a second Centennial Park Reservoir (by contract) and the completion of Potts Hill No. 2 (by day labour). There was also the start of a dam across the Woronora. Initially a small project, it later became one of Sydney’s large dams and the first completely built by Water Board employees.\textsuperscript{50} However, the most important of the Board’s water distribution projects in the twenties was the large Pressure Tunnel from Potts Hill to Waterloo. When

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\textsuperscript{45} PWD Report, 1918-9, p. 8; Mann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5; Greentree, \textit{op. cit.}.
\textsuperscript{46} Henry, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{47} Mann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 3; PWD Reports, 1925-6, p. 10; 1926-7, p. 13; Greentree, \textit{op. cit.}.
\textsuperscript{48} PWD Report, 1927-8, p.13. The Nepean workforce was also somewhat different. Most had come from Nepean, Avon or Wangatt, site of a recently completed dam for Newcastle. Each group tended to stick together, developing a rather clannish outlook. Greentree (\textit{op. cit.}) spoke of each group referring to one another as ‘them Wangatt bastards, them Avon bastards’ etc.
\textsuperscript{49} NSWIG, \textit{e.g.} Vol. 13, June 1918, p. 652; Vol. 31, July 1927, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{50} Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 51, 60-1, 63, 70, 72-3, 81, 91; MWSDB Reports, 1922-3, pp. 3,33; 1925-6, p. 3; \textit{Labor News}, 18 August 1923, p. 3.
\end{flushright}
contract tenders proved too high, the first work began in 1922 with day labour. Ultimately, contract labour sank 11 of the 17 shafts. With the change of government in 1925, the Pressure Tunnel again became the province of day labour.51

Construction was similar to that for a large and deep sewer tunnel. Miners, working up to three shifts, sank a series of shafts to depths of over 100 metres. With the shafts completed in 1925 and with the failure of a large, expensive tunnelling machine, the Board had the miners drive the tunnels between shafts. The Board used a bonus system which it found to be: 'a great incentive to rapid work on the part of the miners; in some cases the set basic length has been doubled.'52

The miners worked in teams of four together with a similar number of boodlers. Mechanisation did not necessarily reduce the physical strain. Miners used pneumatic drills weighing 70 pounds, resting them on a bag on their shoulders to ‘bang and rattle away’ for six feet.53 Then they would place the explosives for getting through the hard rock but also rock that was: ‘rotten and fissured ... shaley and treacherous’.54 Teams could make a lot of money out of the bonus scheme at the expense of their health. Instead of the longstanding minimum absence of one hour after blasting, they often returned below after 20 minutes to find: ‘you couldn’t see your hand in front of you, you’d go back into the smoke and dust.’55 They completed the tunnel in 1927.

The introduction of a concrete gun for concrete lining proved more successful than the mechanical miner. It was up to five times faster than manual concrete packing. Board labour completed the lining during 1928. Mechanisation did not immediately threaten miners’ jobs but the new concrete gun indicated the path of machines replacing men in the construction of Sydney’s underground water and sewer works.56

Another major innovation, introduced in 1925, was in situ cement lining of water pipes. Specialised water maintenance gangs applied cement mortar to existing corroded iron...
or steel pipes. These were to become active in the house union. Water maintenance gangs working all hours continued to repair fractures to large mains and small. Even bad breaks rarely meant water shortages as they put in intense effort to make prompt repairs, 'generally', as even the Board admitted, 'under very adverse conditions.'

Construction of the NSOOS continued to dominate PWD sewerage activity for Sydney during the twenties. With the completion, by September 1928, of the eastern sections and branch mains and work to connect Parramatta and the far west well underway, Sydney was in the process of gaining head works capable of extension to most areas of denser settlement. Those working on the incomplete sections became Board employees.

The Board's own sewerage construction intensified with expenditure more than tripling over the decade. This reflected the increasing sphere of operations for Board employees as a result of the 1924 Act. In part, it was also due to the Board's determination to maximise reticulation and connections available as each section or branch of the NSOOS came into operation. This enabled the Board to recoup the largest possible revenue to pay off the major works and at the same time to service areas previously neglected because of the limited capacity of the old, local treatment works. Notwithstanding this expansion of the system, real expenditure on sewer maintenance remained relatively steady over the decade. Despite improvements, on the whole, the work remained intense. While the design of the SWSOOS for example minimised the need to remove silt from the tunnel, chokages elsewhere still remained a problem. Maintenance labourers removed nearly 8,000 of them during 1926-7 alone, and it was still nauseatingly filthy work.

3. Unionism among construction workers

As before, changing developmental trends did not provide any measure of security for construction labourers. Thousands of navvies still tramped the backblocks of NSW, moving over state borders and drifting into cities, always in search of work. The better

57 Aird, op. cit., p. 121; MWSDB Reports, 1925-6, p. 37; 1926-7, p. 38; 1927-8, p. 48.
58 ibid, 1922-3, p. 30. It meant working wet all the time. Walker, op. cit.
59 PWD Reports, 1924-5, p. 5; 1925-6, p. 47; 1926-7, p. 51.
60 MWSDB Report, 1926-7, p. 52.
61 'The number of men camped in the local showground, in any time ... or under the bridge near the creek was a sure indication of the state of the economy in the labour market. Even the number on the roads ... .' Taylor, op. cit.
placed, often families, rode carts or sulkies while others moved on horseback or on bicycle. Many merely trudged the dusty roads, their swags, containing all their gear, on their backs. A difficult labour market tyrannised labourers in less direct ways. Brutal and vindictive overseers held sway. There was no smoke-oh and standing up straight in the trench to light a pipe or cigarette brought the sack. Talking on the job was forbidden. Overseers pushed them mercilessly, weeding them out on a whim only to brag at pubs later on about how random terror increased productivity. With jobs so scarce: ‘you didn’t give your boss much cheek.’ Nor were there many keen to become union delegates, especially among the married men. As one who worked on Avon Dam put it: ‘Anyone who wasn’t onside with the boss in those days was called an agitator. … Anyone who spoke out of turn and spoke his mind.’ Once kicked off the job, it was a question of ‘humpin’ bluey’ on the road in search of scarce work.

By 1920, after years of rapid expansion, the AWU covered the bulk of construction labourers in NSW. The previous tumultuous decade had ultimately been, a very successful one for AWU officials in their drive to control both the industrial movement and the Labor Party. However, they had been less successful in defending, not to mention advancing, the interests of AWU members. This had much to do with their industrial strategy. Their deep involvement in the compulsory arbitration system allowed them to block the registration of rival unions, and to encourage other unions to accept pressures to amalgamate. It also left their members’ interests open to the whims of judges such as Heydon. AWU official strategy also depended upon Labor governments being in power and passing favourable arbitration legislation.

In part, this explains why AWU officials combined their suspicious or predatory instincts towards other unions with a proprietary attitude to the Labor Party. Control of the party when Labor was in power also brought parliamentary and governmental careers for

62 Interviews with Don Hodgson, Consiton, 22 May 1984; Fred Wright, Wollongong, 13 June 1984; Taylor, op. cit.
63 ibid..
64 Interview with Eric Allsopp, Burwood, 27 March 1984.
66 Grant, op. cit., pp. 43, 53. NB There is little to support Grant’s assertion of their commitment to improving wages and conditions. ibid, p. 52.
ambitious AWU officials. For all these reasons the AWU acted much more like a political
than an industrial organisation.67

During the previous decade, navvies at Cordeaux, if they had been union members,
were in the RWIB/AWU. It had not been a positive experience. Among the sewer miners
and rockchoppers the situation was even worse. The wealthy AWU, with over 30,000
members, had, in a slow cumbersome campaign in the courts, managed to lose rates of
wages and hours which the rockchoppers' union, with 600 members had won a decade
earlier.

The dam navvies and the city rockchoppers and sewer miners, were the AWU's main
water and sewerage groupings on metropolitan works.68 Organisationally, they became
separate sections of a RWIB already in part structured along geographic lines and in part by
the type of work performed. The dam labourers had their own site sections or camp
committees, while in 1923 Carbines organised a Water and Sewer Workers' Section of the
RWIB among all those not working under the Water Board award. This included the
growing number of workers on contract works for the PWD and the Water Board as a result
of the election of the conservative coalition in 1922.69 A separate Rockchoppers and Sewer
Miners and Sewer Workers' Section followed. This was part of the officials' effort to
retrieve their position with trench and tunnel workers.

The first and obvious area was the NSOOS. In 1918, the RWIB had declared the
work black and, while some members had respected the embargo, the work had continued
pace with those who had not. Some of these had left the union in 1919. Realising the
futility of its position, the AWU's 1922 Annual Convention lifted the embargo on the 300 or
so men working there. Organising work began in early 1922 in response to fears from the
powerful City Railway Section that the bonus system operating on the NSOOS might
spread. RWIB officials therefore applied to the Court to ban bonus work in sandstone for
health reasons.70 They had little successs and tried again a year later. Despite everything,

67 I.E. Young, 'Conflict within the N.S.W. Labor Party 1919-32', unpublished M.A. Thesis,
Department of Government, University of Sydney, 1961, p. 57.
68 The dam works, in bushland distant from Sydney, were in reality country jobs but for the purposes
of this thesis are included as metropolitan jobs.
69 Carbines claimed that this form of organisation followed the example of the AWU in
Queensland. Sydney Sun , 22 March 1923, clipping in George Waite papers, MI Mss, 208, item 3.
70 AW, 8 March 1922.
Organiser J. Mahoney related how those he had contacted at the works were: 'very solid union men'. As they had been working under an award they: 'were justified in continuing at work there without their Trades Union principles being doubted.' This was a major turnaround. They had not been scabbing after all. Mahoney urged them to join up.

The appearance on the site of an official of the United Laborers' Union (ULU), the former ULPS was a further source of Mahoney's sudden activity. The ULU had never quite recovered from the battering suffered at the end of the previous decade. There had been a slow changeover of officials, the most significant being T.P. Doyle replacing Vernon as Secretary during 1920. Of greater importance was the influence of the increasingly erratic G. Waite as Assistant Secretary. Waite had undergone political transformation over the previous years, from an active radical causes to a hardline conservative in open conflict with the Trades Hall Reds. He was the architect of his union's desperate attempts to stay out of any OBU, to rebuff and challenge the AWU and to attempt to win back builders' labourers from the BLU.

In 1920, the ULPS sided with the AWU and a large body of craft and sectional unions in support of the ALP and against the industrialists. Waite's own conflict with Garden's group finally caused his expulsion from the Labour Council during 1921. The ULU disaffiliated in protest. Other conservative unions, such as the Water Board union, followed because they found the Council's revolutionary utterances increasingly unacceptable. Although the ULU still boasted about its direct democracy, it too had become the plaything of an entrenched oligarchy.

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71 ibid, 11 April 1923.
72 To illustrate Waite's changes, in 1919 he was involved with the Social Democratic League, a group to the left of the Labor Party, and chaired one of their Domain meetings protesting the deportation of the IWW Paul Freeman. LN, 7 June 1919, p. 9. Four years later, he was hailing Mussolini as: 'the Cromwell of Italy, who put down the Red Terrorists.' Ibid, 14 July 1923, p. 2. For replies to Waite, ibid, 21 July 1923, p. 4. For ULU position see leaflets in George Waite Papers, ML Mss 208, Item 3. e.g. United Laborers Union stands for Unity and Not Disruption, United Laborers' Protective Society: Why Workers Should Join, United Laborers' Society: Greater Benefits for a Lower Amount than any Other Union, n.d.
73 LN, 8 May 1920, p. 7; 15 May 1920, p. 5.
75 Neither the ULU officials nor those of many of the other disaffiliated unions would allow Labor Council officers to address their memberships on the subject of re-affiliation. Ibid; Young, op. cit., p. 70. N.B. Garden's attack on the ULU officials' behaviour and their trading on their past reputation in the union movement. Communist, 17 June 1921, p. 8.
ULU officials, in any case, had been steadily moving away from reliance on the Council and industrial solidarity to a greater dependence on and involvement within the Labor Party. Yet, without joining a powerful coalition, they could hardly hope to counteract the their two major antagonists who dominated the Party — the AWU machine and the Trades Hall reds. This alliance came later when they supported Lang. In the meantime, the ULU could only rely on industrial work. This meant hard organising in the face of the RWIB with its access to a weekly paper, legendary past and copious finances. The tired and entrenched ULU officials had little success and the rank and file, many of whom shared workplaces with members of competing unions, appear to have had little cohesion.

The ULU also argued against any preference to its larger rival which could flow from the AWU’s powerful position in the Storey Government. At the same time, it urged this and the successive conservative governments to find work for the unemployed through major developmental works, including Sydney sewer construction. In terms of practical union advances, ULU attempts to win back reduced hours and higher wages for rockchoppers laying sewer pipes on a branch of the NSOOS failed.

By late 1924, the RWIB had the majority of unionists on sewer construction work but the ULU was also entrenched. To simplify the situation, Sydney rockchoppers and miners held two mass meetings. They ultimately decided to form an autonomous section of the AWU as this was the larger and wealthier union: ‘and therefore the most powerful fighting weapon.’ There were continuing appeals to build an OBU though the AWU and for closer unity against capitalist attacks on living standards. ULU officials who had pledged to follow the will of the meetings, immediately changed their minds.

76 Young, op. cit., e.g. Appendix 1, pp. 421-5. NB Vernon appears to have been close to J. Catts. As the AWU’s Bailey finally defeated Catts and had him expelled in 1922, this could have further marginalised the ULU within the factional squabbles. For Vernon, see e.g. LN, 7 January 1922, p. 2.

77 See Waite’s appeals for membership, United Labourers’ Protective Society: Why Workers Should Join; Copy of press release to parliamentarians, 23 July 1920, George Waite Papers, ML Mss 208, Item 3. For examples of Waite’s political pamphleteering, A Labor Man’s Appeal to Labor, Unionism Degraded, ML Q331.88/W.

78 Copy of letter from ULPS to Premier Dooley, 27 October 1921, Waite papers, op. cit.; United Labourers’ Society: Greater Benefits for a Lower Amount than any other Union; Evening News, 27 October 1920, Waite Papers, op. cit...

79 DT, 27 July 1923.
80 AW, 25 February 1925.
81 ibid.
The election of Lang's government brought important changes. ULU officials received industrial concessions and more favourable consideration on public works in their battle against the AWU.82 On sewerage work they tried to make some impact by challenging the losses sustained over hours of work underground and bonus systems.83 Nevertheless, they failed.

So did their opponents. Mechanical tunnel work, better ventilation on some public works and the testing and research of the State Medical Officer for Industrial Hygiene improved conditions. Yet, the majority of rockchoppers and miners still worked under very poor conditions. There was the constant wet while dust remained a problem, particularly after firing. From the mid-1920s, the Industrial Court retained the longer hours for the increasing quantity of mechanised rock chopping and mining on the mistaken assumption of a large improvement in ventilation.84 Reasoned argument from the well paid AWU lawyers met with little success. The majority of the rockchoppers and miners, members of the RWIB, continued to suffer reduced wages, longer hours and official platitudes for risking their lives on works vital to public health. With other members of the RWIB, they shared a growing intolerance towards the slovenly and self-serving administration of their own branch and the tyrannical opportunism of the Central Executive of the AWU.85

There continued to be local AWU organisation at Cordeaux. Head office showed little interest and organisers rarely visited except in response to visits from organisers of the rival BLU or ULU. A similar pattern occurred at Avon.86 On both dams, navvies were pleased not to be effected by the increasing retrenchments on nearby railway construction.

82 The ULU's Doyle was also among those Lang nominated to the Legislative Council.
83 E.g. copy of letter from Under-Secretary of Works, 30 June 1930; Copy of letter from ULPS to Minister for Works, 25 August 1925, Waite papers, _op.cit._ NB The ULU successfully regained joint 'absolute preference' with the RWIB on Railway (Permanent Way) construction. _NSWIR_, 1927, p. 397.
84 _In re_, Government Railways and Tramways (Construction) Award, _NSWIR_, 1926, p. 94. See also _ibid_, 1924, p. 119; 1926, p. 92; 1928, p. 27.
85 The official lack of interest in their industrial affairs continued to manifest itself in the lack of news coverage of their branch in the _Australian Worker_, a weekly which often ran to 24 pages. Horse racing, cricket and boxing, tips on domestic science for wives of AWU members as well as the constant propaganda barrage on behalf of the Labor Party were ever present; the navvies' page and even that of the bushworkers, appeared irregularly and often after long absences.
86 There was continued competition from the BLU on dam jobs during the twenties. e.g. _AW_, 25 October 1922, p. 23; 18 February 1925, pp. 20, 22. Ray Greentree _op. cit._...
As a result, they tended to keep quite industrially. The strict, hierarchical control of dam life tended to reinforce this as did the local officers' complete power over hiring and firing.

Workers at Avon tended to be more active unionists and more interested in the Labor Party than those at Cordeaux. Visiting AWU organisers, who offered few practical benefits still found members financial and keen to attend special meetings. This was one expression of a strong social and political cohesion among those working and living at Avon. So was the successful operation of the dam's Cooperative Society store. The tone of the Society's Report for the second half of 1922 indicates a high degree of participation, earnestness and trust among its members.

However, it was from those building Nepean Dam that the major industrial challenges came. Rather than resistance to the employer, it was a rebellion internal to the RWIB. This was not an isolated event but rather part of a wider revolt against Bodkin's rule. By 1922 there was an upheaval which resulted in the disqualification of Bodkin and two of his supporters from office. Carbines became President and E.J. Stein the new Secretary. However, Bodkin, ever a great survivor, was soon back in the saddle. His performance did not improve. There were a number of areas of complaint: scarce success in defending and advancing members' interests and financial maladministration. Much of the turmoil came from conflicts within the RWIB bureaucracy over politics and different attitudes to the ALP.

87 For unionism, AW, 8 March 1922; 12 July 1922.; 25 October 1922.; 18 February 1925; Greentree, op. cit.. For involvement in ALP, cf. LN, 13 September, 1919.; 8 December 1923; Labor Daily, 6 January 1926.
88 LN, 17 February 1923.
89 AW, 15 March 1922.
90 During 1924, his opponents published information showing Bodkin had overpaid himself more than £100 above his official £400 annual salary. On top of this were his travelling costs of £148. At that time, the better paid PWD labourers earned around 2/- per hour, less than £250 per annum on the basis of working a full 48 hour week and every week of the year. Of course, almost all suffered heavy unpaid short time working and lay days because of wet weather and the construction cycle. AW, 7 January 1925, p. 19; Award in NSWIG, Vol. 24, 31 August 1923, p. 312.
91 This included charges of having used his large family as a bloc vote at party conferences. His wife, Ellen had organised white collar unions in a voluntary capacity and was one of the most prominent and active women in the Labor Party. See Labor News, e.g. 11 December 1920, p. 310 February 1923, p. 4. Son Joe became a railway construction navvy around Sydney. He was first a delegate and then and organiser for the navvies' branch of the AWU. AW, 26 July 1922, p. 23, 18 February 1925, p. 24; Labor Daily, 15 January 1926, p. 6. At least two of George Bodkin's daughters, Etta and Maggie, were also very active and the whole family became increasingly
Bodkin’s main antagonist was J.J. Lynch who had left the Labor Party with the industrialists in 1919 to return a short time later. Throughout the very intense and even struggle between the two factions during 1924-6, it was Lynch who expressed the resolutions of the Water and Sewerage Workers’ section of the Branch. Many of these resolutions were hostile towards the RWIB’s traditional methods, including its dependence on arbitration. Bodkin eventually survived this challenge.

Impatience continued to build among the rank and file. There was strong evidence of major irregularities in the 1926-7 branch ballot and the 1927 Annual General Meeting overwhelmingly supported a thorough investigation. The Executive refused to comply. There was great dissatisfaction as to the inactivity of the paid officials when it came to industrial matters, bitterness over their cooperation with public works officials in getting rid of job militants and their condoning of ‘organised scabbery’. Among many members too, there was hostility to the role the AWU played within the Labor Party. As a more substantial and organised opposition emerged, Lynch, R. Sainsbury and the other dissident officials joined forces with Bodkin’s group for their mutual protection.

The industrial inadequacies of the RWIB officials were exemplified during a long struggle by sewer miners on the Ryde section of the NSOOS. The PWD had dismissed a number of workers for alleged incompetence and loafing and the RWIB officials, after failing to have them reinstated, told the men they could do no more. The miners stayed out and, with Labour Council support, secured the re-employment of most involved. They also won payment of wages to job delegates for days lost through special deputations. As Garden noted: ‘The fight was won mainly because of the persistency of the men concerned and the men engaged in the shafts affected.’

Identified with and entrenched within Sydney’s inner south-western ALP branches LN, 4 October 1919, pp. 2, 4. NB George Bodkin unsuccessfully stood a number of times for parliament.

92 LN, 12 July 1919, pp. 8, 10; 18 October 1919, p. 6. For a time, Lynch retained an enthusiasm for socialisation under workers’ control as opposed to nationalisation but this implied a to risk his career he was unwilling to face. See e.g. ibid 17 June 1922, p. 4.

93 AW, e.g. 7 January 1925, p. 19; 18 February 1925, pp. 21, 22, 24.

94 Rank and File Conference, Railway Workers and General Laborers’ Branch, Australian Workers’ Union, Official Report, Sydney, October 1927, pp. 3-5, 8-9. (ML 331.8806/ A)

As opposition grew, the RWIB’s City Section finally organised a conference of rank and file delegates for October 1927.96 Workers throughout NSW sent 70 delegates to Sydney. There was one delegate, L. Morgan, from the Ryde section of the NSOOS and two from Nepean Dam, George Blundell and camp secretary M.B. (Barney) Quinn. The conference met initially at Trades Hall. One of Garden’s strategies was to foster a major influence among and, if necessary, a sympathetic alternative out of, rank and file opposition to the AWU oligarchs.97 Resolutions calling for full AWU affiliation to Labor Council, strict industrial unionism and greater autonomy for RWIB sections also fitted the position of the young CPA, an even warmer supporter of the rank and file initiative.98 In fact, since 1924, under the influence of the Trades Hall reds, the CPA had been organising rank and file cells in many unions. CPA members, although in a minority, played an influential role at the conference.99

Delegates elected a Provisional Executive (including Nepean’s Quinn) and went back to their jobs intent on building the opposition and from it the militant alternative. Neither Bodkin’s group nor PWD officials were prepared to let the new organisation prosper. At the same time, militants had to come to terms with the unevenness of their support. In December, the PWD, with the aid of Bodkin supporters allowed the victimisation of two prominent conference delegates. Again the trouble arose on the Ryde section of the PWD’s NSOOS works where some 560 men were now working. The two victimised were rockchoppers, John (or Jack) Williams and Tommy Cavanagh. Williams, a CPA member and job delegate had stood up for fellow workers complaining of being underpaid. Cavanagh was Vice President on the Provisional Executive and a militant who added personal abrasiveness to his conflicts with the boss. The dispute grew as the works engineer sacked both the men for refusing transfers to lower paid jobs. The rest of the workers on the

96 Labor Daily (LD), 7 October 1927, p. 5; Rank and File Conference, op. cit.
97 F. Farrell, ‘Dealing with the Communists, 1923-36’, in Radi and Spearritt, op. cit., p. 54; N.B. Opposition groups within the RWIB had already supported the Labour Council in its bitter fight with AWU officials regarding the 1927 Labor Party Conference and the introduction of the ‘Red Rules’ which were to weaken the AWU. Young, op. cit., pp. 249, 264.
98 Rank and File Conference, op. cit., pp. 5-6, 8-9.
job then refused to work. Support collapsed when Bodkin managed to convince the job committee to cooperate with the PWD.100

This and similar problems confronted the 50 delegates at the Second Rank and File Conference at the end of December. There was evidence of consistent organising work at Nepean Dam. Here a meeting of RWIB members had unanimously pledged themselves to support the Provisional Executive of the Rank and File Movement: 'both financially and morally'.101 Unlike some of the larger construction jobs in Sydney, there was virtually no CPA presence at the dam. Nor did the navvies have the same grievances as those on sewer construction.102 Rather, there was a revulsion at the methods and priorities of the Bodkin group.103

Conference re-elected Cavanagh as vice president, Williams joined the Central Council as did J. Ryan from Nepean Dam. The conference led to a strengthening of ties with the CPA and the Trades Hall reds. The CPA’s *Workers’ Weekly* became the official organ of the movement and Labour Council, in the face of heated RWIB Executive objections, overwhelmingly declared the movement: 'a legitimate organisation of the rank and file ... in the interest of the working class.'104 The RWIB officials withdrew their union’s affiliation and stepped up their campaign against the internal opposition.

There were slanders against prominent members of the new organisation and continued victimisation of militants on the job. Ryan got sent to away from the main construction area at the same time as 20 extra men sent up by the RWIB organiser started work at Nepean. Elsewhere, RWIB officials had militants ‘tramped’ and then blacklisted.105 They had also suspended a number of delegates including Nepean’s Quinn. Less resolute sections intended to appeal to the full AWU Convention but the Nepean rank

100 For opposing views of the strike, *Workers’ Weekly*, 2 December 1927, p. 4; *LD*, 7 December 1927.
101 *ibid* 9 December 1927,.
102 Greentree, *op. cit*.
103 A well-attended Sunday meeting of Nepean members had participated in a four hour debate between representatives of the RWIB Executive and the Rank and File Provisional Executive. At the end, they voted to collect money for the new movement and to send three delegates to the second conference. *LD*, 23 December 1927.
104 *ibid* 6 January 1928, p. 5; *Workers’ Weekly*, 13 January 1928, p. 1.
105 *ibid*, 20 January 1928, pp. 1,6.
and file: 'had taken the matter in hand, and insisted that they alone were masters of the situation.'

In the face of increasing resistance, Bodkin's group turned to more widespread ballot rigging at the December 1927 Branch elections. Yet, the pressures appear to have induced another disintegration of the group. Bodkin received overwhelming confirmation but Mahoney, Sainsbury and Organiser J. Walsh missed out. They immediately publicised the fraud. Having caught Bodkin, and while still members of the outgoing Executive, they removed him from his post. Walsh became the new Secretary and Sainsbury, President. As McCowley, speaking for the Rank and File Movement noted, it was a palace revolution within the ruling group. Bodkin's expulsion was an attempt to cover other misdeeds before rank and file pressure. The new movement was not interested in changing executives but the whole constitution of the AWU which corrupted even good militants once they attained power.

The struggle between the contending factions came before the AWU's Annual Convention later that month. The five elected RWIB delegates included Bodkin and his son Joe as well as Lynch. Against Bodkin were charges of ballot irregularities, which was not a sin for the AWU bureaucracy, and support of the Lang Government which was. Convention suspended Bodkin and the rest of the RWIB Executive and made Lynch President. Nevertheless, the task of the rank and file activists was by no means over. They had to face the ruthless Bailey.

The CPA now saw the potential flowering of years of building a Closer Unity Movement, its front within the rank and file oppositions. The party not only fostered ties between these movements through its militants, it also published a series of 'Fighting

107 N.B. Bodkin's daughter Maggie, working in the union office, appears to have been a central figure in the ballot rigging. LD, 14 January 1928, p. 5
108 ibid, 16 January 1928, p. 4
109 ibid, 4 February 1928, p. 5; WW, 30 March 1928, p. 1
110 A similar process was well under way among the pastoral workers in NSW and Queensland. Re rank and file pastoral workers within the AWU and their later secession, see C.R. Cameron, 'The Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union of Australia and the Shearing Strikes of the 'Thirties', (mimeo), Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Sydney, n.d., p. 4; A. Moore, 'The Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union, 1930-1937', Labour History, No. 49, November 1985, pp. 62-5.
Programs' for the main groups affected. The most relevant here was that for rockchoppers and sewer miners, perhaps the group the RWIB had most let down. There were 12 planks to the programme. Some aimed at improving the wages, conditions, hours. Others had the purpose of removing: 'the officialdom which refuses to work for them, of making the rank and file masters of their own affairs, and of all the time pushing forward vigorously the fight against the boss.'

CPA activism brought a reaction within the new movement. There was a greater caution and conservatism among many of the 93 delegates at the Third Conference in September 1928. The movement had almost stagnated for half the period since the previous conference. Part of the problem was consistent victimisation of militants, part was bad faith or political confusion. The left rallied, re-affirming its large presence among the movement's office bearers including Cavanagh as Vice President, Williams and Nepean's Blundell on the Committee. By far the most important decision taken, and only after exhaustive and heated debate, was to leave the AWU en masse and set up a competing organisation. In this they received warm support from the Labour Council and the CPA.

That month, the Water Board took over all construction work for metropolitan water and sewerage. As a result, all the labourers on the PWD jobs, whether sympathetic to the RWIB/AWU, to the rank and file movement or the to ULU, came under the official coverage of the Water Board union. Tensions seething among construction labourers now combined with those existing within the house union. Aside from the very few craft unionists, the only manual workers to remain outside were those employed by contractors. For many years small in number, they remained fragmented among competing labourers' unions. From this point on therefore, this thesis concentrates on those in public employment, that is those in the Water Board union.

111 WW, 10 February 1928, p. 4.
112 ibid, 7 September 1928, pp. 2, 4. It is not clear if this was the result of an attempt by Lang or other forces to seek to control the new movement. It also coincided with a growing rigidity in the CPA and hostility to the Labor Party prior to the full impact of Moscow's Third Period policies. see e.g. Farrell, op. cit., pp. 70, 72.
113 ibid, pp.8-10.
114 WW, 7 September 1928, p. 4; 21 September 1928, p. 3.
4. The Water Board union

The restructuring of the industry during the mid-twenties had a favourable impact on the union's membership figures and finances. (Table 4A) Membership totals include both Wages and Salaried Officers' Divisions. The latter contributed about a third of the membership, and its portion remained more stable. All members were male, in a masculine industry. Membership figures initially fluctuated strongly before beginning a persistent climb. The steep decline during 1922 was due to Fuller's reintroduction of contract work and the dismissals of large groups. The increases from 1925, and particularly from 1928, reflected the Board's control of PWD jobs and its workforce as well as a stronger preference clause in the union's award. Nevertheless, these increases were slower than those occurring elsewhere; the house union remained a small-medium body within the NSW movement. The financial figures reflect the impact of the greater membership, the union's avoidance of benefit payments, the preference clause and its restricted activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3A[^115]</th>
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<tr>
<td>Members and Funds balance (£)</td>
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<td>Please see print copy for image</td>
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</table>

[^115]: 'Reports of the Registrar for Friendly Societies, Trade Unions, Building Societies, and Cooperative Societies', in *NSWPP*.
Except for changes caused by death or retirement, the Executive and Committee of the union varied little during these years. Of the seven who had signed the union's original rule book in 1909, four remained prominent throughout the twenties. The most important were Macpherson as General Secretary for life, Toohey as Treasurer and Potter as President. Others on the Committee at various times were O'Mara, W. Brown, Dean and Mort. Among those who rose to prominence during the war, Vice President Charles McGregor, Trustee Herb Woodhill, Percy Wainwright and Arthur Gilbert retained their positions for all or almost all the 1920s. Of those who gained election during the first two years of the new decade, George Champion (as the other Trustee), John Goninan and Arthur Hayes were still there in 1929. Thus, nine of the 17 honorary officials at the end of of 1921 were in similar positions at the end of 1928, while three others had stood unsuccessfully at the previous election.116

More impressive was the lasting hold of sewer maintenance workers on official positions. Their dominance is apparent from the figures in Table 4B.117 Even this does not tell the full story. All the salaried officers listed — mainly overseers and assistant inspectors — had come from the ranks of sewer maintenance. The most notable were Potter and Toohey. The age and service profiles of the officials were also fairly homogenous as can be seen from Tables 4C and 4D.

116 There was also a strong pattern in areas of residence, most living in traditional working class inner suburbs and close to the maintenance depots. At the end of 1920, four members of the Committee of Management lived in Leichhardt, two in Marrickville and two in Darlinghurst. Committee of Management Attendance Book, WSEU Archs.
117 The years 1920, 1924 and 1928 are the beginning midpoint and end of the period this chapter covers. 1921 is useful as it, rather than 1920, was the more important break with the election patterns of the previous decade. Overall, these years clearly represent the pattern during the rest of the decade. The officials’ names come from the MBWSSEA Minutes of General Meetings and information about them from those announcements and especially from the Water Board’s ‘Returns of Staff and Employees’ for the years in question. The total in each case is 17.
### TABLE 4B

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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Depot keepers/storemen</td>
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<td>Motor lorry drivers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chauffeurs</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Construction</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaried Officers (Various)</td>
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### TABLE 3C

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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{118}\) I include only those officials who did not hold full time positions in the union. The Assistant Secretary also faced regular elections. However, closeness to Macpherson appears to have been the single most important common attribute.

\(^{119}\) There was always a couple of officials who did not appear in the Water Board’s ‘Returns of Officers and Employees’. This was probably due to them having been only temporary or even casual employees and thus generally excluded from the ‘Returns’. Others had entries with incomplete biographical detail.
The broad categories disguise a certain, if limited, turnover within the same groups but the tables show the domination of a certain group of workers, and their static age and service compositions. A gradually aging group from sewer maintenance dominated the union for most of the decade. The majority of those who began working for the Board during the second decade of the century did so prior to 1915. Thus, it is also clear that by 1929, many of the officials were men who had spent much of their working lives as maintenance workers in the Board’s employment.

Their hold did not reflect the patterns of growth in Water Board employment. Not only was the rapidly growing water service branch greatly underrepresented, there was no-one from the large meter branch, nor from among the ranks of the 80 ‘B’ Class chainmen. Even more telling, there was only one, S. Edmonds, from the enlarged ranks of the construction workers.

Their heavy turnover together with their isolation from the union office made it difficult for construction labourers to sustain active participation in the union. It also meant they probably did not join in the same numbers. Aside from the very few in craft unions, most maintenance workers would have been members especially given the strong employer preference. Yet, available total membership figures during the twenties show levels well below potential. We can thus surmise that it was the casual construction workers who stayed out.
The age and service patterns among the elected officials were not as unrepresentative of the potential membership at least among the maintenance workers. Yet here too changes were underway. While, by 1928, some sections of the workforce such as pumping station staff on both water and sewerage systems, the carpenters' shop and those maintaining the Wollongong water supply system were older and had longer service, others such as the meter workshop, the chainmen, northern sewerage division maintenance and sewer ventilation workers had large numbers in their thirties who had begun working for the Board after 1915.

The promotion of many of the Committee into the ranks of the salaried officers was the most serious problem. While they may have joined the Salaried Officers' Division of the union, they retained their membership of and domination over the Wages Division. Their greater income, status and power within the Board's chain of command now divided them from the bulk of Water Board labourers — permanent, temporary or casual. In 1928, officials like Woodhill and Tom Rosewell, both second grade construction overseers, were in positions of great power relative to the bulk of the membership. They had also risen well above them in earnings. Woodhill earned about a third more than his former workmates on maintenance; John Potter a half. Nearly half the union's Committee had risen away from the reality of the daily working lives and standards of living of most of the membership.

Sentimental attachment to an organisation some of them had helped found and nurture is only a partial explanation of their continuing involvement. The close social and personal contacts through years of working together on sewer maintenance — dirty, thankless work which required great cooperation and trust — is also not sufficient by itself. Another factor was important. These were men accustomed to being active, influential unionists — even if it was within a largely passive union. The alternative, the Salaried Officers' Division was less inviting. Prominent in its birth, previously promoted maintenance workers had lost out to the the professionals and clericals beside whom they suffered in status. Further, within their own new General Division, former maintenance men were on the lowest rungs, below

120 It is extremely difficult to get a profile of casual construction workers except through fragmentary oral evidence.
some of the supervisors who had tyrannised them for decades. Instead they chose the comfort and prestige of official positions within their old union.

There were few opposing election tickets and, when they did occur prior to 1929, the same groups and occupations appear. Aside from the periodic eruptions of miners and rockchoppers, much of the sectional activity or contrasts came from water service and sewer maintenance men. The second group in particular seemed to have supplied not only the bulk of the elected officials but also of the electoral challengers. Some moved between what appears to have been ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups while others were obviously victims of fluctuating popularity. The most prominent was Rosewell who, when in office, was one of the most active participants on the Committee. Another was Joseph Fern.

Sewer maintenance men had seen their wages shrink relative to other Board workers. With the 1924 award, they finally regained that small margin over the ordinary labourers which they had traditionally held. This was obviously not enough as a younger group challenged the ruling group towards the end of the decade. They were probably responding to the lack of interest in wages (as compared to conditions and grievance structures) among the better placed Committee members whose own earnings no longer depended upon the activities of the Wages Division of the union.

Other individuals challenged with varying degrees of continuity, strength and success. Some such as Robert Byng, a water maintenance man but once very active in the RWGLA, supported the more militant construction workers or the more socialist section of the Labor Party. More common were those who represented, in some capacity, emerging groups with particular grievances. One of these was E.B. (Ted) Brogden a motor

121 Turncocks, in particular, were active early during the twenties, even holding their own, officially authorised meetings. MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 March 1921; 13 April 1921 (C); 28 September 1921.
122 On a number of occasions, when his prominent supporters lost their positions at the annual elections, Macpherson had them reappointed to fill casual vacancies on the Committee. ibid, 9 March 1921; 13 April 1921; 14 December 1921; 8 November 1922.
123 At the 1928 election at least 8 of the 19 beaten candidates were from sewer maintenance. ibid, 23 July 1928.
124 For his activity in the RWGLA, see, Navvy. MBWSSEA Minutes, 31 March 1926; 28 July 1926. Byng’s employment says much about the casual nature of construction compared to maintenance. Until he joined maintenance in 1925, he had been repeatedly on and off Board jobs since 1910. MWSDB Personnel Files.
lorry driver. Another was F. (Frank) Mannix, a fireman at Marrickville Pumping Station. Then there was George Butterfield from among the chainmen. However, the most important was L. L. (Les) Kirkwood.

Kirkwood was a water maintenance man. Born in Tasmania around 1890, he began working for the Board as a labourer sometime during World War One. Like Macpherson, Rosewell and so many of the (ex) labourers among the officials, he was a very big, bluff man. Settled in Surry Hills, he immediately became a leading figure within the important and at times turbulent Labor Party branch. By 1920, he was its Secretary and was building his mainstream labourist presence within the party's inner city organisation. His activism in the party initially took priority over involvement in the union. It also taught him valuable lessons in ballots.

He first appears in the union's minutes during 1921, significantly to propose the alphabetical listing of candidates' names together with an indication of their occupations. This was important in clarifying who controlled the union. His involvement remained sporadic until 1923 when he actively challenged the ruling group and opposed an increase in their salaries. His next major foray came in 1926 when he unsuccessfully supported a group of disgruntled rock miners and had himself elected to the crucial positon of scrutineer for the subsequent union elections. Macpherson declared Kirkwood unfinancial and had the Committee remove him as scrutineer and replaced with a trusted supporter. By the end of 1928, Kirkwood had become an influential rank and file speaker at general meetings, often teaming with the dissident sewer maintenance man C.H. (Charlie) Roe. Unlike many

125 e.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 March 1923.
126 e.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 October 1925.
127 He had been on the Committee of Management in 1911 but, along with most of the chainmen, suffered stretches of broken employment. MWSDB Personnel Files.
128 The Water Board's 'Returns of Officers and Employees' and the 1919 'Water Service Listing' give conflicting information as to his age and length of service. See also Water and Sewerage Gazette, Vol. 20, Nos. 7 and 8, July-August, 1959, p. 1.
129 LN, 27 February 1920, p. 7; 16 April 1921; 27 October 1923, p. 2. Kirkwood was also a important element in investigations concerning the 1923 'sliding ballot box' scandal which rocked the ALP. See ALP, NSW Branch, Executive Report for 1923; Federal A.L.P. Committee of Inquiry into the Alleged Fake Ballot Boxes, Complete Report, pp. 22, 29, 88-91, 148, 160.
130 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 May 1921.
131 Ibid, 27 June 1923.
132 Re dismissal of James from Pressure Tunnel see below and ibid, 24 February 1926. Re election as scrutineer, ibid, 26 May 1926, 9 June 1926 (C). Cf. the position of W. Mort, often unfinancial but still at times on the Committee.
of the others who at times opposed the ruling group prior to 1929, Kirkwood never challenged them in a ballot. His training in the hard school of Labor Party infighting served him well. He was awaiting the right moment. In the meantime, Macpherson's group easily survived all challenges, even if a few individual members fell by the wayside. 133

Macpherson was deeply involved in maintaining this stability. His position had been permanent since 1912, a situation formalised in the union's rules. Providing there were no proven cases of incapacity, neglect or misdemeanour, the General Secretary, once elected, never had to face a ballot again. Even in such cases, the union's rules guarded against any real threat as a two thirds vote of financial members was necessary for his removal. To further consolidate the defence, the union's rules made it likely that the General Secretary would be the Returning Officer or would have a major hand in choosing the Returning Officer for any such ballot. Further, he controlled the membership books and, as Kirkwood's case demonstrated, could manipulate them to advantage in a crisis. 134

As a matter of fact, the decade opened with calls for Macpherson's head. There were accusations of his having carried out contracts and of not acting on instructions to gain a flow on from the living wage rise. Following a requisition containing 50 signatures largely from members at Potts Hill and Lidcombe, the Committee called a Special General Meeting at Trades Hall to deal with the charges. The minutes record no discussion or voting. Other than the confirmation of the minutes, the only motion was: 'That this association had every confidence in the Secretary, Mr Macpherson.' 135 It is impossible to know whether the challenge collapsed for lack of proof or through inadequate martalling of votes. Nevertheless, Macpherson survived which, curiously, is more than can be said for the Minute Book(s) for the preceding period. 136

133 Often the leading office bearers were re-elected unopposed and, if there were any challenges, the incumbent normally won by a margin of three or four to one. The margins for the Committee were much narrower but still very secure. See e.g. LD, 13 July 1927; MBWSSEA Minutes, 23 July 1928.

134 See e.g. Rules of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association, 1925, Sydney, Rules 15, 17, 21,

135 MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 January 1920; see also 13 January 1920 (C); 20 January 1920 (C).

136 There is no trace of the union's minute book(s) for the period March 1913- January 1920. Missing minute books have been, at times, an indication of a union secretary's desire to hide previous wrong doing. See e.g. Bray and Rimmer, Delivering, p. 74. For examples of fraud among officials, Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, p. 128; Cutler, op. cit., p. 112.
There were no more direct attacks prior to 1929. In the meantime, he came to enjoy the growing fruits of office. Long gone were the days of part-time union work, of organising on a bicycle. The union now had an organiser/organising secretary to do the leg work and the purchase of a motor cycle in 1920 and a car in 1926 made this a lot less arduous.\textsuperscript{137} Macpherson’s job much was more secure than those of almost all the members and his work was less taxing than it had been. There was no comparison to what construction workers had to face in the trenches and tunnels or what sewerage maintenance workers had to deal with as a matter of routine. Nevertheless, his salary rose at a dizzying rate.

In 1912, it had already been similar to some of the best paid supervisory field staff. In early 1920 he received £5.10.0 per week, which represented a substantial relative decline compared to those salaried ranks. Macpherson’s supporters soon made amends. His salary went to £8.10.0 the following year and to £10 for the year 1923-4. This £520 per annum took him to the second highest rung of the professional and administrative officers within the Board’s major sections. Perhaps the most telling comparison was that it was a only little less than double what maintenance men received for going down manholes into the sewers. His £572 at the end of 1928, was now double maintenance men’s wages and nearly double that of turncocks.\textsuperscript{138} His conditions of employment were also generous. Little wonder that photographs show him looking increasingly prosperous, generous of girth and at home among the Water Board members and their distinguished guests at the annual picnics.

Macpherson headed a small union, with less than a handful of full time staff. Award work was relatively straightforward as it involved only one employer and often followed outside awards. By 1926, his salary alone constituted more than 20 per cent of the union’s outgoings. Under a capitalist ‘logic’ which explains income inequalities in terms of qualifications, effort, responsibility or scarce market skills, there was no particular circumstance warranting such a lucrative salary. In the context of the labour movement’s concerns with equity if not always with equality, it was scandalous.

The other full time union officers also earned well and their appointments hinged largely on Macpherson’s good graces. In 1920, the Committee chose J.H. (Jack) Ilsley, at

\textsuperscript{137} MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 September 1920; 14 April 1926 (C).
\textsuperscript{138} For officials’ wages, \textit{ibid}, 28 April 1920; 25 May 1921; 30 May 1923; 28 May 1924; 25 May 1927.
the time a member of the Committee, to replace Bill Carey as Organising Secretary. Until
then, Ilsley was a temporary employee, presumably on maintenance. Much less prominent
than Carey, he appears to have been a solid if unspectacular official of the 'moderate type'
who spent much of his work time travelling around Board jobs collecting dues. Like
many of the other house union officials he was a keen member of the Labor Party and,
Secretary-Treasurer of its Enmore Branch. Ilsley died during 1928. In his place,
Macpherson promoted the union's office clerk, R.E. (Bob) Savage.

The son of an Irish seaman, Savage had begun as the union's clerk during 1915, aged
20. Small and of very indifferent health and physique, he could still summon up
considerable tenacity. Another inner suburban Labor Party activist, this time at Balmain, he
also shared Carey's deep devotion to the Catholic Church. In common with Rosewell, he
had a long administrative involvement in rugby league circles. This mixture of Labor,
Catholicism and rugby league were pivotal to much of Sydney's working class culture at
that time. It helped him overcome the fact that he was the union's first official with no
direct experience as a Board employee or, apparently, in manual work. A clever
administrator and backroom political operator on the conservative, Catholic wing of the
movement, he was nevertheless an unlikely organiser of construction workers.

Mirroring the interests of the group which dominated the union, the major demands
fell consistently into two categories. One included the traditional trade union defence of
working class interests under capitalism — wages hours and conditions. In this case, it
extended to demands which determined the union's municipal labourism. The need to
defend employment within the industry at a time of high unemployment among the
unskilled encouraged the demand for increased government funding for water and sewerage
construction. Awareness of the public health implications of this work and its potential for
repaying the debts incurred aided the union's case. The same argument held before the
majority of Board who, at times, preferred to minimise rates at the expense of reticulation

139 Allsopp, op. cit.; LN, 22 September 1923, p. 2; MBWSSEA Minutes 14 April 1920 (C); 26 May
1920; 30 May 1923; 12 July 1928. Ilsley left no trace in the Board's 'Returns of Staff and
Employees' and was thus obviously not an 'A' Class employee.
2632.
work. The next stage in the argument was to see that the money spent went to day labour, not contractors.

The next group of demands related to the union’s position as a house union within a statutory authority. Here the question was one of joint control or at least structured input into the fabric of rules and regulations and their operation within a large and very hierarchical bureaucracy. Given the stability of most of the maintenance workforce and the progression of some of them through the ranks, it was not surprising that they attempted to jointly regulate industrial relations. The aim was to minimise friction and the resulting costs in time, money and energy. Union preference and, from 1927, compulsory house unionism for the vast majority were major steps in this direction. While increasing the union officials’ dependence on the Board’s good graces, they did not provide the degree of co-management desired.

To achieve this, they unsuccessfully waged two major campaigns prior to the depression. The first was for an employee representative on the Water Board. The second concerned the union’s desire for an independent, internal appeals board to settle grievances and disputes. These two reforms dealt with the normal run of industrial complaints and helped overcome the sporadic victimisation of union delegates, reinforcing the union’s position. As well, they offered a relatively effortless avenue for union officials to participate in decisions concerning promotion, staff selection, discipline and dismissals — questions which arose from the complex system of rules and attitudes of a public bureaucracy.

Importantly too, both schemes were to operate directly through them. The employee representative was to be a union official and all appeals were to go via the union’s General Secretary to the head of the proposed appeals board. The officials obviously saw the dangers of grievance structures parallel to but outside the union. On the other hand, their

142 See e.g. LN, 17 July 1920, p. 3; 27 May 1922, p. 3; AW, 15 February 1922, p. 18.
143 See 1927 award in NSWIG, Vol. 32, p. 1308.
144 During this period, the NSW teachers’ union also wanted an appeals board. B. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 87. A similar demand on the railways had led to some reform in 1916. Patmore, op. cit., p. 319.
145 There were frequent grievances arising out of the Board’s appointments procedures. E.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 11 August 1920 (C); 27 September 1922; 28 May 1924; 11 June 1924 (C); 8 April 1925 (C); 31 March 1926.
146 ibid, e.g 24 November 1920; 13 June 1923 (C). The NSW Public School Teachers’ Federation had long term plans for co-management structures for the industry. B. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 129.
proposals would lock them and the union they headed into the Board's internal workings. They would offer complete recognition by the employer of the union officials' role within the industry's existing industrial relations and personnel decision making. They also signified the union's acceptance of its members' subordinate position within the industry, the Board's hierarchy and the interests which elected and made up the Board and its senior staff. The suggested reforms arose within the context of the Board's growing acceptance of the house union officials' role in organising employees and pushing claims from outside the traditional paternalistic employer structures.

In the early years, while still unsure of themselves, the union's officials had used prominent Labor contacts to introduce deputations to the Board's President and Chief Engineer. From 1910, successes through arbitration greatly eroded the traditional paternalism. Employees no longer had to rely on the Board's good graces for concessions. In retribution, the Board had removed 'privileges'. With the formalising of negotiation through the arbitration framework, the initiative on many industrial matters passed from the Chief Engineer into the hands of the Board's solicitor and, to a lesser extent, to the more recently appointed Industrial Officer. The Board's industrial responses no longer recognised the daily functioning of its workforce. Rather, the priority was to limit the spread of industrial improvements between groups within the Board's workforce and, especially, improvements from outside awards. Thus, although the Board never really countenanced the greater evil of allowing outside unions to cut into the house union's monopoly, it nevertheless remained quite resistant to direct approaches from the union and for many years made the union struggle through the arbitration tribunals.

By the end of the war, the presence of Labor municipal representatives and the Labor government appointees on the Board allowed the union to better press its case within Board

147 The rise of the industrial relations specialist was, like on the railways, probably a management response to involvement in arbitration. Small and his successor Purvis continued to be most influential for 'A' Class appointments. MWSDB Minutes, e.g. 8 April 1925; 16 February 1927; 16 March 1927.
148 The Board majority was always more sensitive to the criticism of ratepayers over rising rates than over the question of low wages for its employees. NB The Board's somewhat rueful disclosure that previous arbitration awards raising wages and salaries had greatly contributed to heavily increase the cost of operations during 1920-1. MWSDB Report, 1920-1, pp. 5-6.
149 Again, there were close parallels on the railways. Patmore, op. cit., p. 240.
meetings.\textsuperscript{150} This helped further legitimise the union before the employer. By the early
1920s, the union was sufficiently established to go directly to the Board or top officials.
This was especially the case from 1925, when Macpherson seemed to have had easier access
to the new President, T. B. Cooper.

Sympathetic Board members placed the union's ordinary industrial claims,
particularly for 'A' Class employees, at the heart of the Board's decision making.\textsuperscript{151} They,
and particularly the union's Labor contacts also seemed to hold great promise for the union
officials' municipal labourist aims. Both could urge the NSW government and the Water
Board to fund greater construction activity. Equally, they could press for the use of day
labour and the exclusion of contractors.\textsuperscript{152} The tardiness of the 1920-2 governments in
implementing policy in this area caused a great deal of anger among the party's union
supporters. Finally, from the officials' point of view, it was logical to appeal to
sympathisers among Board members and within the party leadership to secure the appeals
board and Board representation.

The appeals board could come through legislative intervention or through the Board's
own initiative. To this end, the union's officials undertook high level deputations and
submissions and constantly placed the matter on the Agenda Paper for each NSW Labor
Party Annual Conference.\textsuperscript{153} The question of direct union representation on the Board was
more complex. The easiest method was for a Labor Government to appoint a Water Board
unionist as its official representative. The shortcomings were obvious. A more complete
and permanent way was to amend the Board's Act to provide for the new representative.

\textsuperscript{150} Alds. Jones and Griffin had long supported the union's claims. Ald. W.P. Fitzgerald, ex ULPS
member and, more importantly, an honorary trustee of the Water Board union during its
foundation years, was a City Member on the Board between 1918 and 1922. He became Lord
Mayor of Sydney in 1920. \textit{LN}, 20 March 1920, p. 3. Labor appointees as Official Member were J.
J.R. English and F. Green from the City of Sydney pushed hardest on union demands, gaining
varying degrees of support from Suburban Alds. T. Cheetham N.M. Smith, R.C. Forsyth and E.S.
Sautelle. MWSDB Minutes.

\textsuperscript{151} E.g. Bryant and his successful urging that 'A' Class employees get the same employment
conditions as salaried officers and employees under the Public Service Board. \textit{ibid}, 28 April 1920;
26 May 1920; 2 June 1920. Also Alds. Green and English's campaign against the appointment of
returned servicemen from outside the Board's workforce. \textit{ibid}, 26 August 1925.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{LN}, 17 July 1920, p. 3. MWSDB Minutes, 1 July 1925; 18 November 1925.

\textsuperscript{153} E.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 October 1920 (C); 11 May 1921; 28 December 1921; 11 October
1922; 26 March 1924; 27 October 1926; 9 February 1927 (C); 9 March 1927.
This meant lobbying ministers and Labor Conferences. With the Board’s reconstitution in 1925, the officials saw their hopes again dashed.154

Carey, as General Secretary of the NSW Labor Party from 1919 and MLC from 1925, was the perfect intermediary in the union’s search for access to the highest levels of the party. Through him, the union hoped to achieve its major goals, both of which were already party policy. This of course depended on Labor holding power. The union spared no efforts or achieve this.155 Carey worked hard on behalf of the union, particularly during the early 1920s. Critical news of the Board featured more prominently in the Labor News. He took part in the deputations to Premiers and Ministers, raised the questions as a union delegate to party conferences and reported back to the union’s general meetings, suggesting the next moves.156 Towards the end of 1921, Carey, Macpherson and the Salaried Division’s J. Concannon orchestrated a campaign to press these issues within the party.157 As with many other issues, the Storey-Dooley Governments disappointed the union. Pressures from the engrossing factional struggles gripping the Party and the unions no doubt played a part in Carey reducing his involvement. With Concannon on the Central Executive from 1923 and an MLC from 1925, the union did no better.

There was also the constant stream of more narrowly industrial grievances. These were individual or sectional rather than general complaints as a rule and concerned the Board’s non-observance of the award, award anomalies and the like. Typical of important but nagging grievances was the Board’s failure to supply the required change sheds.158 Other complaints often arose from the Board’s methods of working sewer maintenance

154 e.g. ibid, 24 November 1920; 8 February 1922; 11 June 1924 (C); 24 February 1926; 9 February 1927 (C).
155 For its size, the union was a very large contributor to party funds. e.g. LN, 24 November 1924.
156 MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 October 1920; 28 December 1921; 8 February 1922;
157 Macpherson would request party branches in which supporters of the union were active to pass motions supporting the union’s claims. The branches were then to send the resolutions to the General Secretary for the attention of the Central Executive. This brought these questions to the attention of the party’s rank and file and used their interest as a means of convincing the Central Executive to lean more heavily on the Labor Government. Carey then ensured publication of the original requests in the section of the Labor News dedicated to branch news as well as his official acknowledgement of having received the resolutions. Each resolution therefore appeared twice. Thus, what were really rather uninspiring demands from a largely insignificant union seemed to have become the talking point of the party branches. e.g. LN, 5 November 1921; 12 November 1921; 26 November 1921.; 10 December 1921.
158 MBWSSEA Minutes, 12 January 1921 (C); 28 July 1926; 12 January 1927 (C).
men. The officials hoped an appeals board and representation on the Water Board would eventually resolve these problems. In the meantime, union meetings usually left these matters for the paid officials to take up with the Board, either directly or through the industrial board or conciliation committee.

The union's officials had some success with these negotiations. When unsuccessful, union meetings often directed the Secretary to prosecute the Board in court for cases of award breaches. The officials were also busy in the courts on individual compensation matters. They only took on cases they felt had some chance of success and were deferential over what a union could ask. This reliance on legal avenues had a number of consequences. First, it removed grievances from those directly involved, making them passive spectators of procedures over which they had no control. It also absolved the officials of responsibility from real campaigning and allowed them to keep grievances at an individual or small group level. They took decisive action through their industrial advocates. If that failed, what more could they do?

Finally, it meant that a very large slice of union funds went into the coffers of legal firms. This was all the harder to bear as this remained a very cheap union. In 1925, the entrance fee was still the one shilling it had been in 1909 while the weekly contributions had risen from three to six pence. Nevertheless, union minutes show amounts of between a third and a half of the more substantial monthly account expenditures going to private solicitors. By the middle of the decade, the financial haemorrhage had reached such proportions that the union's Committee proposed to levy members 3/- each to pay outstanding legal debts. Uncharacteristically, the membership declined. The Committee finally replaced these firms with a freelance industrial advocate.

A picture emerges of a very cautious, conciliatory and hierarchical union which worked doggedly at righting certain individual grievances by negotiation and litigation.

159 ibid, 11 August 1920; 28 September 1921; 12 September 1923.
160 E.g. ibid, 30 August 1922; 11 October 1922; 18 August 1923 (C); 12 September 1923 (C); 28 August 1926.
161 Rules, op.cit, Rule 4.
162 Re legal costs, e.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 May 1920; 30 October 1923; 30 January 1924; 24 October 1924. Re the levy and firms, ibid, 26 February 1925; 10 June 1925 (C). Other unions such as the Amalgamated Engineers and the also found arbitration enormously costly. Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, pp. 173, 246; The advocate was M.J. Connington, former Secretary of the Trolley, Draymen and Carters' Union. Bray and Rimmer, Delivering., chs. 2 and 3.
Otherwise, the concerns continued to be those of a workforce in steady and secure employment at a time of high unemployment among the unskilled. Permanency also brought those 'conditions' which only the salaried staff had previously enjoyed — paid holiday, sick and long service leave. These workers treasured their permanent jobs and saw the Board as a sheltered, if demanding employer.

This fitted the officials' strategy of not pursuing general improvements to wages, hours and conditions beyond those coming through arbitration. They could point to the Board of Trade's more generous treatment which, notwithstanding the 1920 reduction, kept the living wage minimum above Heydon's pre war standard. During the first half of the twenties, NSW unions grew through the state tribunals' maintenance of real award wages. In their total reliance on arbitration, the officials of the Water Board union behaved little differently to those of many of these other unions. Even Fuller's 1922 amendments did not shake this faith but stimulated the use of joint registration in the federal and NSW systems to minimise the damage. This was impossible for the house union until a 1920 High Court decision granted employees in state instrumentalities access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Although it was one of the first unions to suffer from the reintroduction of the 48 hour week, moves by the Committee in the direction of federal registration came to nothing.

It was not only on the question of living wages that the union's officials could point to some success from devotion to compulsory arbitration. Each of the three principal awards of the decade — in 1921, 1924 and 1927 — showed a gains for Water Board workers. With the exception of gains for a couple of job categories such as turncocks and chainmen, the Water Board's wages pyramid rested almost immobile above the state living wage.

163 MWSDB Report, 1920-1, p. 9. NB Campaigns for changing the computing of service for long service leave for 'A' class employees. 27 October 1926.
164 Interviews with Allsopp, op. cit.
165 Through the use of a price series which allowed for adjustments according to the cost of living. Macarthy, 'Wage Determination', op. cit., p. 302. For the role of Heydon's first successor Edmonds J., see Grant, op. cit., pp. 169-71.
166 Grant, op. cit., p. 236.
167 ibid, p. 210; Sheridan, Mindful Militants., p. 67; MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 December 1922 (C); 10 January 1923 (C).
168 Water Board employees went back on the 48 hour week in December 1922.
Even the miserably paid male cleaners at Head Office rose a penny per day above the 13/7 per day minimum in 1924. Ordinary labourers got 15/5, maintenance men 16/-, pipelayers 16/8 and turncocks 18/4.

Maintenance workers gained further recognition through overtime rates for the time they spent travelling, waiting or standing by at home. Those rostered to work Sundays and public holidays received an extra two weeks annual leave. There were increases in dirt money. Otherwise the major change was the removal of the classification of 'C' Class employees. Water Board workers were now either permanent ('A' Class) or they were not ('B' Class). Board rockchoppers and miners had the same wages and hours as under the RWIB/ULU rock tunnel workers award, but inferior safety regulations.170

The 1927 award abolished the divisions between first and second class among rock miners, rockchoppers, timbermen and pipelayers. Those previously working 36 hours per week in sandstone tunnels now did 35, and those on 44 worked 42.171 While there was still no mention of the safety bans which appeared in the rockchoppers' award, there was now a prohibition against using pneumatic picks in sandstone tunnels or drives. There was also extra money for special work, such as on vent shafts.

The award placed further restrictions on the Water Board's traditional feudal powers over the lives of its permanent employees. Maintenance men gained from a clear definition of the 'exigencies' under which the Board could change their starting and finishing times, from extra minimum overtime loadings for being called out from home in emergencies and extra pay for night shift. Finally, there was a major change to the preference clause. Apart from financial members of craft unions, all employees had to apply for membership of the house union within 14 days of their engagement. The Water Board was becoming a closed shop. The union's officials had done well out of their devotion to arbitration.172

170 Cf. e.g. *ibid.*, Vol. 24, p. 312. On the other hand, Board employees had decidedly better wages, hours and conditions compared to many of the similar categories under the RWIB/ULU award for general construction.
171 The differences depended on the area of the tunnel face, the depth of shafts and whether or not it was sandstone.
172 Cf. The victimisation of the more rebellious engineering unionists during the early 1920s and the great difficulties the Federated Ironworkers had in gaining a foothold at the steelworks in Newcastle and Lithgow. Sheridan, op. cit., p. 75; Murray and White, pp. 54-60. Even within the Federal public sector, the postal unions had great problems with non-unionists in the absence of a preference clause. Waters, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
Outside of arbitration, apart from trying to work through the Labor Party, there was only lobbying the Water Board. True to tradition, the union’s officials did not seek to take advantage of situations which would have challenged the award outside the tribunals. They stressed that the union had always stood by conciliation and arbitration. What they meant was that these were the only industrial methods they were willing to use. They refused to acknowledge that other unions used conciliation and arbitration in conjunction with strikes and bans and that such action or at least the threat of such action was often a prerequisite to success before the courts or in direct negotiation. They also neglected that award rates mostly represented minimum levels. The extent to which this strategy allowed some award rates to lag outside earnings in a tight market can be seen from the Board’s hiring of a bricklayer in 1920. The Board award had a daily rate of 17/10 but Smail noted that they would have to pay at least 22/6 plus travelling expenses.

5. The maintenance of control

The union’s rules reinforced this perspective. The sycophantic preface to the original rules no longer existed and the various stated aims now made the union appear closer to the NSW mainstream. However, the new rule 24 included a clause according to which:

Neither the Union nor any of its members shall at any time take part in a strike, nor refrain from handling or dealing with any commodity nor do any act or thing to induce or compel any person to refrain from handling or dealing with any article or commodity during the currency of any strike.

While more akin to a bans clause in an award or industrial regulation than a union rule, there was little the union officials could do to make it stick. Rather, they sought to combine constant surveillance and control of the membership with dues collecting.

Here the officials’ behaviour meshed with the union’s centralised structure. Districts, sections and individual jobs were to elect their local representatives (reps) who were to collect money and: ‘keep a sharp look-out for breaches of the award, and on matters affecting the interests of the Association generally.’ They had no role in grievance

173 In 1927, after nearly one year of such lobbying, the Board finally agreed to its employees working their 44 hour week over five days. MBWSSEA Minutes, 8 September 1926 (C); 8 December 1926; 12 January 1927 (C); 11 May 1927 (C); 10 August 1927 (C).
174 MWSDB, Minutes 15 June 1920.
175 Water Board union Rules, 1925, op. cit., R. 24 (g).
settlement, in local organising or agitation. The Committee had the power to suspend or remove any of these representatives. It could then appoint a replacement, subject to the endorsement, not of the local job or section, but of a General Meeting of the union as a whole. It could also appoint collectors whose only duty was the collection of dues. The 1925 Rules also provided for the constitution of branches modelled on the rest of the union, but with very limited autonomy.

Union reps always had problems with anti-union field supervisors. As well, some at times made off with the dues collected. This was a problem common to other unions, particularly those covering itinerant workers where delegates suddenly disappeared from the district. The officials of the house union reacted in a number of ways. At first they did away with virtually all the collectors, whether elected or appointed and had the Organising Secretary follow the Board’s pay car the round of job sites and depots to collect dues. He had very little time to stop and talk but it allowed him to hear the various sectional grievances. Yet union finances were the priority rather than examination of the contexts of the grievances. It was for potential problems relating to the first rather than the second that the union had him supplied with a gun.

The union then gradually appointed collectors at the more stable workplaces such as the pumping stations. To encourage members to both volunteer for this role and to pay over the money, the Committee granted a seven and a half per cent commission on collections to cover costs or lost time. For some reps this amounted to sizable sums. Given the Board’s increasingly friendly disposition towards the union and compulsory membership from 1927, collectors had fewer problems convincing non-unionists. Those constantly in arrears faced Macpherson prosecuting them before the courts.

177 MBWSSEA Minutes, 10 February 1920 (C).
178 ibid., 12 May 1920 (C); 10 October 1923 (C) 12 December 1923 (C)
179 ibid, 14 July 1920 (C);
180 ibid, 11 August 1920 (C)
181 ibid, 14 July 1926 (C); 8 February 1928 (C). ARU reps received 10 per cent on the railways and many ‘ten-percenters’ neglected their other union duties. S.G. Finch, ‘The Effect of Political Involvement on Union Activities and Local Organisation. A Study of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Railways Union, 1920-60’, unpublished B. Ec. (Hons) Thesis, Department of Industrial Relations, University of Sydney, 1977, p. 58.
Weak local organisation simplified the way Macpherson’s group functioned. Tied to a highly bureaucratic employer and a legalistic, centralised arbitration system, they needed to be able to control the various conflicts arising from the membership and to mediate or reformulate demands in ways which were acceptable to the institutional framework. One way of maintaining control was to refuse endorsement and finance to rebellious groups or their representatives. While they paid lost time and expenses to reps who were only glorified tax collectors, they refused any support to elected representatives from groups involved, for example, in local unofficial strikes.182

A centralised, vertical structure, the isolation of many jobs and the Board’s cooperation helped the union’s officials to enforce discipline on the very few occasions when work groups took independent industrial action. It was mainly rockchoppers and rock miners who pushed their demands at job level under the Water Board. Less than satisfied with the union’s officials and structure, they mixed the tradition of directly controlling their disputes which had characterised much of their history in other unions with the tactical use of the Water Board union’s own resources and position. The decade had hardly begun, when they took on the employer which had done most to break their market position, wages and conditions over the previous decade.

In April 1920, claiming the higher rates for chopping rock, those working on a sewer extension job to the south of Sydney went on strike. They faced immediate opposition from the union Executive which resolved:

that the Executive repudiates the action taken by men employed under Ganger Reardon at Bexley in discontinuing work and directs that they resume without further delay. Failing which, the Executive shall take drastic action.183

The following day, a General Meeting of the union endorsed this resolution and directed Macpherson to prosecute the Board for an award breach.184 The matter appears to have been settled through negotiation.185

182 *ibid*, 10 February 1920 (C)
183 *ibid*, 27 April 1920 (E).
184 *ibid*, 28 April 1920.
185 MWSDB Minutes, 5 May 1920; 12 May 1920. NB The union withdrew its prosecution. MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 May 1920.
Direct action remained at best sporadic during the first half of the decade. It was the construction of the Pressure Tunnel, bringing together large groups of rock miners, which provided the next testing ground of the relationship between militant tunnel workers, the union officials and the Board. The work was hard and dangerous and a number of miners died in accidents on the job. As a result, there was an immediate and constant involvement of Tunnel workers as a group in the union's activities. Unlike other groups of Board employees, they did not just ask for help but used the union and its resources while refusing to hand over control of their disputes.

A major dispute erupted early in 1926 when a leading hand sacked John Williams at No. 3 Shaft at Bankstown for alleged incompetence. Miners and truckers from his shaft immediately walked off. The strike then spread right along the line of the tunnel until all the miners and truckers had come out. Those on the concrete guns stayed put. The Labor Daily spoke of 1,000 strikers but certainly there were not that many. While the strikers met at Trades Hall, the Water Board cancelled all good conduct leave money to which they were entitled. Yet, the resoluteness of the tunnel workers had a rapid effect. The leading hand resigned virtually overnight notwithstanding the Board's full support. Then the Board's senior officers agreed to confer with the strikers' representatives paving the way for a quick resumption which including Williams' return.

The complete exclusion of the union's officials and its formal mechanisms from the conduct of the dispute was most apparent. Rank and file tunnel workers had taken direct action, moved solidly as a group, forced the Board to deal directly with them and to agree to a favourable compromise. Yet, they were more likely to walk out in support of a victimised workmate than to win improved wages and conditions. This was probably a recognition of the state of play. The union officials were slow and ineffectual in defending industrial
militants and the court resistant to intervening in what it saw as a managerial prerogatives. It was the sort of dispute where the workers could best win their demands through quick and firm action. On the other hand, the Water Board was much more resistant to claims which involved large and potentially spreading claims on its finances. Here tunnel workers were prepared to try for marginal concessions through the arbitration tribunals. Direct action, appeals to Lang’s government or both were to counter any tardiness from the court.191

Immediately after the ‘Williams’ dispute, a subsequent mass meeting of the the union elected a deputation to the Board to push more general demands on behalf of the tunnel workers. These combined their longer term and recent grievances. The first complaint was over the longer 44 hour week due to superficial area of the tunnel face being over 40 feet. They wanted this reduced to 40. Then, there was the hated and dangerous bonus system. As well, they claimed a restoration of the leave forfeited during the ‘Williams’ strike.192 While the Board mulled over these questions, another strike broke out over an unfair dismissal of a miner called James again on No. 3 Shaft.

Perhaps because the dispute did not spread to all the other shafts, the members involved tried to take the matter through the union itself. The union’s officers responded by attempting to isolate the strikers. At the same time, they hit out at attempts at job control and independent action, declaring:

that the requisition for a stop-work meeting signed by 58 signators be not acceded to, and in the event of a stop work meeting being held ... the officials of the union are to take no part ... for the reason that any such meeting is not in accordance with the rules ... (and) that ... when officers of the Board go to any job for the purpose of investigating disputes, an officer of the ... Union to be notified and be in attendance.193

In the meantime, the Board’s President and the new Chief Engineer Purvis had agreed to partially meet the union’s combined strike and general claims. James was to return to work and the tunnel workers were to get a 40 hour week but lose their existing entitlement to payment for travel time. The union’s Committee refused due to the conditions attached. The strikers were to have their good conduct leave returned on the understanding that any

191 LD, 15 January 1926.
192 MWSDB Minutes, 10 February 1926.
193 MBWSSEA Minutes, 19 February 1926 (Sp C). See also 10 February 1926 (C).
future strikes would mean the automatic forfeiting of all ‘privileges’. Finally, the Board agreed to review but not abandon the bonus system.194

Rank and file activity on the No. 3 Shaft continued, forcing the union’s officials to insist that members not act to win improvements even when this was possible. They could not have stated their position more clearly than in these unanimous resolutions:

That the Committee disagree with the actions of the members working No. 3 Pressure Tunnel in ceasing work, because the Board refused to concede their demands of an increase in pay which we consider cannot be sustained under the terms of the award, and that the officials of this union take no part in the dispute other than to prevent if possible the trouble extending to other shafts...

That the General Secretary ... notify members of No. 2 Shaft that this Committee ... instructs members of our organisation to continue and return to work and that the General Secretary and officials be definitely instructed not to attend any stop work meeting.195

The officials went further. Using their powers under the Rules, they appointed collectors for the shafts. There were therefore to be no official, elected reps. Of the eight appointed, five were engine drivers, two were bracemen on the scaffolding above the shaft and only one was a miner. This was William McCaUion from the intensely active No. 3 shaft, for whom it was undoubtedly necessary to choose a tunnel worker. His appointment was probably to stave off the shaft opting for Williams. These appointments effectively disenfranchised the mass of tunnel workers as a group and made it much harder for them to make specific claims on the union’s finances and official position. While there were no more major disputes on the tunnel work, there continued to be friction between No. 3 Shaft and the union’s officials.196

Why did the union’s officials try so desperately to control the more rebellious sections? First, Macpherson’s group were obviously very conservative unionists who wished for a quiet and orderly administration. In common with officials of many other unions, they were loathe to risk ‘their’ union’s position, and their well-paid, secure jobs, in the face of recurrent legislation penalising strikes.197 In that sense, the union’s rule

194 MWSDB Minutes, 10 February 1926; MBWSSEA Minutes, 19 February 1926 (Sp. C). NB The union took the hours question through arbitration and managed only a 42 hour week. MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 October 1926.
195 ibid, 22 July 1926.
196 ibid, 26 May 1926; 28 July 1926; 25 August 1926.
197 Grant, op. cit., pp. 98, 102,
banning strikes or secondary boycotts simply internalised the institutional framework which, at the one time, repressed direct action and yet left room for certain, permissible forms of conflict resolution.

The officials' fear of strikes was also undoubtedly related to their concern to maintain a favoured relationship with the Board. This, they felt, was the basis of their successful resolution of the many individual grievances of the maintenance workers who provided their base within the union. Lifetimes spent working for the Board, the extensive employment of family members and a strong and conscientious sense of the public utility of maintaining water supply and sewerage also disinclined maintenance workers from the risks of industrial action. There was also the Board's promotion path connecting, at least in theory, the Board's labourers with senior inspectors. This blurring of differences within the 'service' promoted different visions of class relationships. The growing number of salaried officers among the Wage's Division Committee was but one indication. Finally, whereas many on construction would have had experience in more militant unions such as the ULPS, the RSMU, the RWGLA or the RWIB, this would have been much less common for those on maintenance.

6. Involvement in the labour movement

The officials' abhorrence of industrial action helps explain their ambivalence towards inter-union solidarity and especially to Labor Council affiliation. The union financially contributed to joint union campaigns for basic demands such as minimum wage cases. Otherwise, in its own terms, the house union remained industrially self-sufficient. As a cooperative house union it used its good standing with the employer to redress commonplace grievances and, as a registered union, it used its lawyers and representatives in the courts, wages boards and then conciliation committees to apply for general concessions and improvements.

198 After what seems to have been a great deal of debate, by a margin of four to one the union voted to disaffiliate in 1921 over the Waite affair. A subsequent referendum defeated a proposal to re-affiliate by a narrower but still wide margin. MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 July 1921; 30 July 1924.
199 ibid, 9 August 1922 (C); 13 August 1924 (C).
As a union which developed in response to favourable arbitration legislation and was run by men with little interest in unionism as a broad social movement, it had a particular vision of the interrelationships within the labour movement and its place within them. For example, while the the ULU, with its long history of solidarity and Labor Council activism traditionally approached the Labor Party through the Council, the Water Board union went straight to the party machine.

Events within the NSW ALP therefore bore heavily on the union. The leadership of the house union, dependent on its Labor contacts, inevitably became embroiled in the faction fighting. It is difficult to distinguish where the union officials' changing positions reflected their own sympathies or to what extent they had placed the union's advancement within a political current over which they had no control and which, over time, destroyed itself completely together with its network of union support.

Carey's fate was the key to the officials' turning from the parliamentary to the industrial sphere of the labour movement for help. As party faction fighting intensified during the 1920s, electoral success became more difficult and a close relationship with Carey carried with it more complex and sinister aspects. Nevertheless, the union's officials followed their champion's fortunes until the 1927 split where Carey again allied himself to the AWU through its Conroy-Carey Executive against the Seale Executive of the Labor Council, the Miners' Federation and Lang.

This faction fight caused a great upheaval within the union. The union's delegates to the 1926 ALP Conference had instructions to support Premier Lang, by then immensely popular with NSW unionists. The following year, Lang's feud with the AWU oligarchs made the union's allegiance to Carey increasingly precarious. In fact, the union was one of the very few which paid over its affiliation fees to the Conroy Executive. Macpherson's ambiguous wording of a ballot to decide which executive to support created a furore among the membership. A subsequent ballot affirmed allegiance to the Seale Executive and removed Carey as ALP conference delegate. By then, Macpherson had clearly realised

200 E.g. The union endorsed the ALP's expulsion of J. H. Catts, loser in a feud with the AWU's Bailey. ibids, 10 May 1922.
201 ALP, NSW Branch, Executive Report for 1927–28, pp. 2, 9; LD, 23 June 1927; 30 June 1927; 13 July 1927; MBWSSEA Minutes 29 June 1927. Fern was prominent in the initial rout of Macpherson.
the error of linking with the AWU and had switched support to Lang. He gained the highest vote for delegate to conference. The Lang forces finally defeated their opponents and then expelled them, including Carey, from the Labor Party. Carey himself, had behaved as a loyal functionary and attracted surprisingly little bitterness. He died prematurely not long after.202

This loss of Carey's enormous influence within the party began an, at times, contradictory movement away from the union's almost total reliance on parliamentary labour. In the meantime, with the start up of Woronora and the transfer of Nepean Dam and the NSOOS works to the Board, union meetings suddenly began to hear a great deal more from the large groups of far-flung navvies and suburban tunnel workers who poured into the union.

Conclusion

By 1929, one source of fragmentation within the industry and its unions was at an end. The combining of maintenance and construction workers under one employer, the Water Board, and within a single house union brought together quite different groups of workers with distinct experiences of work, working conditions and unionism. These differences derived from the persistence of the most fundamental division — separate sources of funding, either revenue or loans. This continued to shape employer policy, the size and stability of the two workforces and the reality of working life for those involved. This merely reinforced the priorities and methods of the unions' officials.

One was an intensification of its close involvement with the Board as industry and employer. The Board's preferences for a compliant house union was a help. So was the jurisdictional monopoly the arbitration system had accorded and subsequently reinforced through compulsory preference. Where this no longer sufficed in answering their supporters' grievances, the officials sought formal avenues of co-management — an appeals board and a union representative on the Board. Both would increase their role within the industry and identification with employer. In this and in other important areas concerning the industry,

202 LD, 23 January 1928.
their employer and the arbitration system, they came to rely more heavily on the NSW Branch of the ALP.

Both also offered most to those whose working lives were inextricably bound to secure employment within a bureaucratic public authority rather than to the ebbs and flows of a wider labour market for labourers. Their very permanence and ready access to the union's centralised operations gave maintenance workers continued control of the union. Macpherson, Secretary for life, ensured they remained the focus of its activities. Enjoying permanent employment, they were generally content with improvements from arbitration or the officials' close working relationship with the Board. The result was a conservative, introverted and largely complacent union.

As the decade came to a close, two factors increasingly disrupted Macpherson's otherwise quiet fiefdom. The first was a by-product of the officials' heavy involvement in the ALP. The party's continued internal ructions threatened to weaken the consensus the officials enjoyed with the membership. Bill Carey, long the union's champion was a victim. His friend, Macpherson, much less compromised in the fight against Lang, easily survived.

The second source of conflict intensified the first. It came from the large number of construction labourers the house union absorbed as a result of the restructuring of the industry. These workers were much more outward looking — to the working class movement as a whole, nationally and internationally. They owed nothing to the Board nor to the union with which it cooperated. Rather, many carried a long tradition of rank and file militancy which, during 1927-8 re-flowered in an impressive mobilisation against the RWIB officials. They brought these perspectives and experiences into the house union. They showed growing confidence at Nepean, on the Pressure Tunnel and the NSOOS. Yet, geographical isolation and labour turnover kept them unconnected. The union's operations and structures would help reinforce this. The question was, would they suffice to protect Macpherson and his group from a major challenge for the union itself?