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

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Chapter 4

1929-39
In conclusion, we exhort the co-operation of members in endeavouring to maintain the already high standards ... and make the union the power it has always been in the industry.

MBWSSEA Annual Report, 1934-5, in Minutes, 31 July 1935.

Introduction

At the start of 1929, Bill Macpherson and his sewer maintenance allies had ruled their union for 20 years. In that time they had consolidated their position within the NSW arbitration system, ingratiated themselves with the Water Board and explored avenues of influence within the NSW Labor Party. They had beaten off competing labourers' unions and kept craft unions at arms length. These were not separate achievements but based upon the thorough expectation of a network of relationships.

The state of the economy and the dual sources of the Board's finances had long conditioned divisions within the industry. In the decade from 1929, the general economic context and its impact on Board operations were to affect the maintenance and construction workforces in decisively different ways; reinforcing their respective labour market peculiarities, heightening existing contradictions within the union, encouraging new ones and, almost at the same time, fostering forces for the reproduction of stability. This chapter therefore begins with an overview of the Depression, and its ramifications within NSW politics and the labour movement. A later section also examines the process of recovery.

Previously, separate employment under the PWD and the Board had largely reflected the division between construction and maintenance. The patterns of unionisation had been a further source of fragmentation. By 1929 this appeared to have changed. The Board was the single public sector employer for both sections of the workforce. As well, almost all belonged to the Board's house union. Yet the effects of the Depression, and of recovery, were once again to bring construction workers into contact with outside organisations. Therefore discussion of the Board, its workforce and union also traces the continuing
tension between unions competing for metropolitan water and sewerage workers. For this reason too, and because of the house union’s own close political links, this chapter continues to treat the complex factional politics of the NSW Labor Party. All these elements combined to provide the most complex and unstable period the Macpherson group had faced. The result was a desperate battle to hold, and then restore, the union’s apparently timeless stability.

There were also new external influences at work. From its establishment in 1928, the Loan Council was to coordinate all Federal and State government borrowing. In practice it came under the control of the Federal Government. State governments had to submit their planned loan needs as requests and gradually lost control over their development programmes. After 1928 the Board had much greater financial autonomy from the NSW Government. At the same time, it became increasingly clear that Federal government policy was to play a larger role in the Board’s activity. The Board’s house union could no longer solely depend on its close relationships with the Board and the NSW ALP.

1. The Depression, 1929-34

Economic historians have in recent years engaged in spirited debate on the causes of the Great Depression in Australia. Widespread investment of borrowed funds in rural production and public works during the twenties added heavily to large war debts to Britain. Foreign investment also stimulated the growth of a small scale, high cost manufacturing sector. Exports of primary products were to pay for this development. By the middle of the decade poor agricultural productivity sounded a warning. Then, a weakening in international wheat prices and constant demands for imported industrial machinery put pressure on an already stretched balance of payments. As a result, by the end of the decade the Australian economy needed ever larger injections of overseas finance to maintain

existing levels of employment and meet the debt burden. Further weakening of Australia's trading position or ability to borrow threatened disaster. In early 1929 there was a drastic decline in prices of primary products. The Wall Street Crash in October caused the collapse of international lending. Together, these two events sent shock waves through a very vulnerable Australian economy.\(^3\)

From the end of 1929, massive dislocation in international finance made government sector borrowing high impossible. The downward spiral quickened, as income losses due to the failure of exports and borrowing multiplied throughout the economy. Employment, production and government revenues declined rapidly. With loan funds drying up and state revenues squeezed, construction jobs closed down. Labourers joined the rapidly growing army of the unemployed.\(^4\)

By late 1930 the Commonwealth Statistician estimated the NSW unemployed to be 51,307, or 26.3 per cent of the workforce.\(^5\) The worst point occurred during 1932, but even at the 1933 Census, more than 30 per cent of the workforce were out of a job. At 41.2 per cent, unemployment among the 'Total Industrial' category was much higher, and reflected the massive collapse in building and construction.\(^6\) The decline in Sydney house building had been swift and steep.\(^7\)

Traditional working class suburbs suffered the highest rates of unemployment. Building and construction industry workers suffered most and longest. As ever, economic crisis hit labourers harder than more skilled workers. Hunger constantly haunted their lives and there was never enough money for adequate clothes or bedding. Many sold their

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3 For discussion of this vulnerability, Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, op. cit., pp. 33-4, 103-5. Also Boehm, 'Australia's Economic Depression of the 1930s', pp. 609, 613-4.

4 Total public capital formation (constant prices) fell from £40,008,000 in 1929-30 to £29,071,000 the following year and to £21,313,000 in 1931-2. N.G. Butlin, Australian Domestic Product, p. 465.

5 Cited in SMH, 7 January 1931.


7 In 1931, the value of building completions was less than a third of the 1929 figure and, in 1932, less than one tenth. Figures cited in Spearritt, op. cit., p. 57.
furniture and other personal possessions. For years they scraped and struggled to survive. Sustained unemployment prior to any real welfare system meant tenants could no longer afford to pay rents. In Sydney a great many of the unemployed working class lost their accommodation, despite some stiff eviction fights. As a result large numbers of single unemployed men camped in the Sydney Domain. Others joined the family groups living in tent and shack camps or went 'on the track'. There was some government relief but it was almost always inadequate.

The question of relief work was tied to that of economic recovery. Proponents of rival strategies for recovery clashed in the 'Battle of the Plans'. In the end, the conservatives' slogan of 'sharing the burden' won the day and the main policy instrument became the 1931 Premiers' Plan. It was a contractionary economic programme which hindered recovery, and further undermined working class living standards. The Federal Arbitration Court matched this intent and action by cutting real wages.

Unions were unable to resist. From the end of 1928, employers, the Federal Government and the Federal Arbitration Court combined to attack the wages, conditions and powers of waterside and then the timberworkers. In bitter struggles, both went down beneath the iron heel. In a more than year-long fight to June 1930, the Northern NSW

8 ibid., p. 61; P. Spearritt, 'Depression Statistics', in Mackinolty (ed), op. cit., pp. 197-8, 206-7; D. Williams, 'Unemployed', in L. Fox (ed), Depression Down Under, L. Fox, Potts Point, NSW, 1977.
coalminers suffered the same fate. These major defeats, exacerbated by the ensuing long and bitter Depression, vanquished the union movement in NSW until the mid thirties.

They also precipitated renewed struggles within the labour movement. By 1927, Lang and his allies in Trades Hall and among mining union leaders had gained control of the ALP in NSW and had banned the Communists from joining. Under the new rules of the NSW Branch, the once all-powerful AWU too lay vanquished on the margins. Loss of office to T.R. Bavin's Nationalist-Country Party coalition later that year did not dent the growing hero worship Lang enjoyed among the party's rank and file. This pre-eminence also encouraged reconciliation with his former opponents on the left and relative tranquillity for the tumultuous NSW Branch.

Depression stimulated the resurgence of factionalism, with Lang at its centre. But his reforming record and increasingly strident populism brought the ALP victory in November 1930. Further reforms cemented his popularity among the rank and file but strife within the party did not abate. He renewed his battle against the AWU which had a strong hold over the Federal ALP. One avenue was his bitter but erratic opposition to Federal ALP economic policies during the 'Battle of the Plans' and, finally, the Premiers' Plan. This reinforced his left wing credentials, a vital necessity as new, left wing challenges had arisen within NSW, part of a growing interest in socialist solutions among a working class growing impatient and angry in their poverty.

Within the NSW ALP, sincere socialists and militant industrialists were building their challenge from below. Their Socialisation Units aimed to convert their party to the rapid socialisation of industry. Bitter opposition from Lang's group and from many union officials broke the socialisation movement in 1933.

Depression also brought the fledgling CPA its first real successes. However party doctrine and strategy collided with the left-moving sectors of the ALP. In mid 1928, Stalin had decreed that international capitalism was entering a new economic crisis. With war and revolution on the agenda, social democratic and labour parties would sacrifice their working

15 *ibid*, pp. 188-9, 200-30; Young, *op. cit.*, p. 308;
class supporters on the altar of national capitalism. For Stalin they were 'social fascists', to be exposed and contested.17

The CPA leaders followed orders. The ALP and even Garden's Labour Council were 'social fascist', the latter the most dangerous of all — 'left social fascists'.18 CPA strategy was to foster mass 'front' organisations, to oppose the ALP and draw off a militant working class base for the CPA. The most relevant here were the Unemployed Workers' Movement (UWM) and the Militant Minority Movement (MMM), both established during 1929-30. The UWM was active and influential on many relief works as well as in eviction struggles. It brought the party a flood of unemployed recruits bitter at the lack of ALP and union interest in their fate.19

The MMM, the most important CPA front, aimed to undermine ALP control of the unions. In general terms, it propagated the overthrow of capitalism and the socialisation of industry. To get there, the MMM was to build an OBU. Key immediate demands included reduced hours of work. Spurning arbitration, the Militant Minority were to mobilise direct action in the direction of a general strike.20 Among workforces with militant traditions, particularly coal miners, there was widespread hostility towards defeatist union leaderships. So the MMM too brought the CPA many recruits who stressed rank and file control. The next step was winning low level positions, and then higher ones.21 The MMM's most important early gains were among carpenters and country dam construction

18 F. Farrell, 'Dealing with the Communists, 1923-36', Radi and Spearritt (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 60-1. In fact, while Garden had left the CPA in 1926, he remained the focus of Moscow's labour movement policies for NSW until 1930. CPA attacks on him from that year help explain his rapid conversion to Langism. F. Farrell, 'Explaining Communist History', *Labour History*, No. 32, May 1977, p. 9. This thesis also follows Farrell (ibid) and J.D. Blake, 'The Australian Communist Party and the Comintern in the Early 1930s', *ibid.*, No. 23, November 1972, over the continuity of CPA adherence to Moscow's bidding after 1926.
21 According to Davidson, *ibid.*, p. 58, by 1932, the MMM was well established in 33 unions in NSW. For the MMM and unions, Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, p. 31.
labourers. The MMM also had groups among ULU members, including water and sewerage workers outside Sydney.

ALP faction fighting further clouded the contours of unionism among labourers. Doyle’s successor as Secretary of the United Laborers, A.W. McNamara, sided strongly with Lang against the common AWU nemesis. Lang aided him by granting the ULU preference, ahead of the AWU, on conciliation committees. McNamara, fiery, independent and somewhat larrikin, was successful in luring members away from the RWIB. During 1932 he pushed the ULU into the pastoral industry, in direct competition with the AWU and the CPA. He also contested the AWU’s monopoly over certain labourers. In response, AWU officials had the Industrial Commission block the ULU’s rule changes, but they failed in their attempt to have the ULU deregistered. They weathered the storm but remained marginal to the main realignments with the NSW labour movement.

CPA violence on the Labour Council and, no doubt, the organisational threat from below, pushed left-labourist union leaders into an anti-communist coalition with their right wing counterparts. They lined up behind Lang. Garden too became a Lang supporter and re-entered the ALP. He proved useful, holding support among ‘industrialist’ union leaders and outflanking the socialisation units and the CPA. Legislative and administrative concessions to unions, unionists and their officials was one result. Another was the large number of ‘leftish’ union officials Lang nominated to the Legislative Council in November 1932.

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22 The NSW Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners affiliated with the MMM during 1931. It was the key union supporting the MMM’s paper Red Leader during 1931 and 1932. E.g. Red Leader, 21 August 1931, p. 4.

23 One of the most active was at the Wyangla Dam works in northern NSW. In June 1932, and against the wishes of the ULU officials, it won a four day strike over victimisation. Ibid., 24 September 1931, p. 4; 11 March 1932, p. 8; 22 April 1932, p. 8; 8 June 1932, p. 1. There was another MMM group on water and sewerage works at Maitland near Newcastle. Ibid., 30 October 1931, p. 3.

24 Lang also made McNamara an MLC. For McNamara, see Cameron, op. cit., p. 80; Radi, ‘Lang’s Legislative Councillors’, p. 114; Interviews with Joe Weir, Sydney, 7 December 1984; Colin Colbourne, Allawah, 20 November 1984.

25 The CPA-inspired Pastoral Workers’Industrial Union had already made major inroads into the AWU’s hold among pastoral workers. To control and redirect this leakage, McNamara set up a pastoral section of the ULU. Cameron, op. cit., p. 79; Red Leader, 3 August 1932, p. 4.

26 NSWIRs, 1932, p. 371; 1933, p. 199.
1929–39

1931. The only new MLC from an obviously conservative union was R.E. Savage from the Water Board union.27

CPA sectarianism caused the MMM and the UMW to suffer setbacks during 1932–33. After 1933, changing policies in Moscow allowed for a modification of philosophy and strategy in NSW. The ‘social fascist’ period was over. The Labor Party and particularly its left wing were again CPA allies — in a ‘united front’ against fascism.28 The MMM gained from backing traditional union demands with its industrial toughness. As the Depression eased, it became easier to win sectional victories and, as a result, to mobilise industrial support. CPA activists began defeating demoralised labourists for leading positions in many unions. The takeovers soon began, starting with the coalminers.29 On the other hand, a slowly improving economy spelt eventual doom for the previously successful UMW.

By this time the Labor Party was, once more, out of office in NSW. Internal dissension had again dogged Lang’s premiership. In addition, Lang had sharpened his conflict with the Federal ALP over economic policy. As a result, the NSW party split in 1931. The Federal ALP sponsored a NSW branch in opposition to the Lang Labor Party. Competition between the two labor parties was acrimonious but uneven. Lang held the allegiance of the party rank and file and the most important unions, apart from the AWU. Nevertheless, the split contributed to Lang’s electoral demise.30 In the aftermath of defeat in June 1932, Lang began to attack his left-wing opposition. This helped it grow, particularly as the larger unions under CPA control became increasingly disaffected.31

B.R. Stevens had replaced Bavin as leader of the main anti-Labor party, now called the United Australia Party (UAP). In coalition with the Country Party, it ruled NSW for the rest of the decade. Stevens generally left social services intact.32 Wages and hours of work

29 Davidson, op. cit., pp. 59-60.
31 Naim, The ’Big Fella’, p. 270.
were a different matter. Bavin’s government had reduced hourly rates by increasing the working week from 44 to 48 hours in mid-1930. On his return to power, Lang restored the 44 hours. Soon after its election, the Stevens Government changed the methods of minimum wage determination. The Industrial Arbitration Commission was to decide standard hours and the Living Wage, the latter at half yearly intervals and according to price movements.33 The first declaration, in August 1932, was 70/-, a reduction of some 15 per cent. Still, it was above the Federal minimum. Until then, those in full time jobs under State awards had seen their real wages rise. Subsequent declarations brought the Living Wage close to the Federal minimum, from which it deviated little.34

Initially, governments avoided acknowledging the extent of unemployment and poverty. In NSW, early relief took the form of food and sustenance ('susso') payments and food vouchers. During 1930, Bavin's government created the Unemployment Relief Council (URC) to organise the selection of relief works to provide employment. Funds came from a three pence in the pound tax on incomes which employers deducted from wages.35 When Lang returned to power, he at first let the scheme run down before raising the tax to 1/-.

From 1930-1, NSW governments increased spending on 'ordinary relief works' — traditional public works modified for a situation of massive unemployment.36 As the funding did not address the vastness or urgency of the problem, heavy rationing rotated the unemployed through relief jobs at great speed. Many only ever received one or two days

35 For the first time, large numbers of wage earners had to pay income tax, and not a progressive one either. Further, amounts paid did not reflect the effects on annual earnings of great stretches of broken time, the lot of a large proportion of the workforce and, in particular, construction workers.
37 This scheme merely provided funding for the traditional public employers. Under the much larger emergency relief programme, the state government supplied and paid for unemployed workers for mainly municipal authorities. G.D. Snooks, Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: Australian Unemployment Relief in the Thirties, Working Papers in Economic History, No. 41, RSSS, Australian National University, Canberra, August 1985, pp. 7-8, 11-2; F.A. Bland, 'Unemployment Relief in Australia', in J. Roe (ed), Social Policy in Australia, Cassell Australia, Stanmore 1976, pp. 181-2.
paid work per week. Yet, at the same time, the government cut spending on its own public works. The result was that governments transferred construction workers from full time to part time relief employment, often on the same works. Thus, as G.D. Snooks points out, governments used relief works programmes as a 'conjuror's trick'. They heavily cut spending on public works and used a part of the savings to finance unemployment relief through part time public works employment. Even after a gradual switch from emergency relief and 'sussos' to ordinary relief works, in the mid thirties there were many more unemployed workers receiving a pitiful dole than working on relief works.

The introduction in April 1932, of Federal relief work loan funds directed spending towards labour intensive, permanent, 'reproductive' works — those which could pay for themselves in minimum time. As a result, water supply and in particular sewerage attracted the highest levels of relief work spending. There was a rapid extension of sewerage in all capital cities, strengthening the national trend from the late 1920s. Greater activity during the thirties meant water supply and sewerage almost equaled urban railways as the most important area of public construction. As in earlier decades, the special nature of water supply and sewerage construction aided the industry to better survive the downturn.

2. The Water Board, its workforce and union 1929-34
The story of Water Board spending and employment therefore differed somewhat from the general trends in NSW. It also more closely tied the Board, its workforce and union. In 1929 there were again problems with loan finance, but with its newly enlarged authority the Board was keen to undertake a major construction programme. In the meantime, there was a major upheaval within the union.

39 In NSW during 1933, a single male on the dole received 6/6 per week in food or money. A married man receiving the maximum dole allowance for a large family and money from emergency relief work could earn up to 40/6. In May 1933, the federal basic wage for Sydney, after the 1931 cuts, was 67/10 and the NSW living wage 68/6. Snooks, op. cit., pp. 8, 10, 29; Sheldon, "Wages and the Depression", p. 116; Keating, op. cit., p. 200. Also Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, op. cit., p. 106; Schedvin, op. cit., p. 340.
41 *The Labor Daily* spoke approvingly of the Board as: 'one of the few public bodies which is standing up to its job'. *LD*, 6 August, 1929.
The key to this change were the large numbers of navvies working and living at the dam sites. Work and discipline remained tough and the navvies retained their militancy. Nepean Dam’s active RWIB rank and file group, upon their transfer to Board control, did not want to join the house union. Macpherson made the Committee’s position clear: ‘that when the Water Board takes over the said works it will be necessary for the workers to become members of this Association.’\textsuperscript{42} Jack Williams, obviously foreseeing a strengthening of the militancy within the union, supported this. Officials were on hand for the inauguration of the union’s new Nepean Dam branch at the end of 1928.\textsuperscript{43}

Woronora had begun under Board control. After months of hard, hot work, the 60 or so men who built the access road could look forward to better living conditions at the new dam township. They had had to put up with tents without flooring (for which they paid rent!), a canvas water bag hanging from a tree as their sole water supply and no camp steward or cook. A much larger group now gathered at the new dam town. Some had come from Nepean, others all the way from Hume Weir on the Victorian border. Probably most were from nearby Sutherland district. The dam town soon offered them many of the amenities and services of a country town. Work hierarchy and marital status once again determined the allocation of housing. As Woronora was closer to Sydney, many workers crammed into the little private bus or onto trucks on Friday afternoons so as to spend weekends at their other homes.\textsuperscript{44}

The work remained hard and the Board’s discipline cruel.\textsuperscript{45} An early strike over an overseer’s bullying disintegrated when union officials refused to come to the dam. Those workers at the heart of the strike stayed out and lost their jobs. Supervisors branded anyone who complained an ‘agitator’; with so many desperate for work, those in jobs mostly kept their heads down.\textsuperscript{46} This quietness influenced the late formation of a branch in September

\textsuperscript{42} MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 August 1928. J. Henry, was Secretary of the AWU Rank and File Movement at the Dam.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{ibid.}, 28 November 1928. Pembroke Potts was the first delegate.
\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Wally Edwards, Loftus, 30 August 1984. ‘MWSDB Water Construction Woronora Dam’, Typewritten Report, February 1930, MWSDB Archs.
\textsuperscript{45} One worker broke his leg but had little more than three weeks off before the Board put him on ‘light duties’—wielding pick and shovel on road building! Wally Edwards, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{46} The tendency for many workers to stay away from the dam on weekends probably was another factor reducing the cohesion and solidarity often found in navvy townships. \textit{ibid.}
1929 and its industrial posture. There were soon problems with its accounts and the remittance of dues to the union's head office. Always wary of the branches, the union's officials were only ready to take charge of the branch's books and funds.

A large and much closer group, rockchoppers and sewer miners on the major NSOOS and the Canterbury mains, demanded action from their new union within two months of joining. At the end of November 1928, the union's Vice President McGregor chaired a meeting of 34 of their reps, amongst whom was Joe Bodkin. The meeting formalised and widened the form of union participation which Board rockchoppers and miners had already developed: protection of their job organisation together with the tactical use of the union's resources.

At one level, the union's contacts with the rest of the union movement continued as before. Discussions with parallel unions in Newcastle and Western Australia over amalgamation and federal registration came to nothing. At another level, more difficult questions arose as Macpherson again tried to isolate the Board's workforce from large disputes outside, in this case the timberworkers' and northern miners' struggles. It was easier than in 1917, as the union officials controlling labour's moves in both disputes attempted to stop the conflicts spreading. With the disputes confined, officials of the house union could continue to guarantee constant Board activity without the risk of resentment and revolt from below.

In mid February, the union's Committee of Management levied members to assist the timberworkers. They also instructed Macpherson to: 'approach the Board with the object of preventing men being asked to perform work which may have the effect of embroiling this Union in the ... upheaval.' Given the continued operation of many Sydney timber mills and of the building industry, the Board saw no reason to acquiesce. This meant ensuring

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47 MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 August 1929, 11 September 1929 (C).
48 ibid., 8 January 1930 (C); 12 March 1930 (C); 9 April 1930 (C). There was no branch but only a local secretary for those working and living along the route for the pipeline. Instead, union officials visited on pay days. ibid., 12 February 1930 (C).
49 The members of the first committee were Bodkin, E. Standen, D. Maher, A.H. Weeks, W. Thistlewaite, F.J. Bell. MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 November 1928 (Reps); 28 November 1928.
50 MBWSSEA Minutes, 12 September 1928 (C); 10 October 1928 (C), 12 October 1928 (SC).
52 MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 February 1929 (C).
working contact remained outside the 'contained' areas of the dispute. A General Meeting therefore directed Macpherson to contact the Disputes Committee: 'to obtain a permit to enable the Board's lorry drivers to cart timber from yards to jobs.' In May, the Committee postponed consideration of an appeal for financial aid from the much more geographically isolated miners' union.

Official attitudes towards class conflict were about to change within a general takeover of official positions. A Macpherson supporter had complained about the lack of interest during the 1927-8 union elections. A year later, others became particularly upset for the opposite reasons. In June 1929, the Labor Daily carried their protests against a concerted campaign to unseat the ruling group. One centre of this challenge, which had been gathering since at least April, was among the sewerage construction workers on the NSOOS. 'Pence Card 1444', complained that they were not: 'life-long members of the organisation' but 'Johnny Come Latelys'. Further, they were obviously: 'a group of would-be-wreckers' as the union 'has done much good for its members, ... due in large measure to the clear sightedness and able administration of the officials who have been at the helm.' The following day, 'Financial, Drummoyne' wrote along the same lines. Also clear was their disquiet at the very open mobilisation of votes under way. This broke with the traditional ethos of union elections.

One of the opposition’s major planks was an end to overseers and other supervisors dominating the Committee of Management. Discussion of this issue demonstrated how far the ruling group was out of touch with casual construction labourers. Pence Card not only defended the situation but went on to point out its merits. If the opposition won, an overseer

53 ibid., 27 February 1929.
54 ibid., 8 May 1929.
55 ibid., 27 July 1927.
56 LD, 21 June 1929.
57 ibid. According to Pence Card, even the oppositionists benefitted from better conditions than they had previously had as members of the RWIB. This was of course nonsense. See Ch. 4, p. 61.
58 The NSOOS men were running a ticket and, had even levied supporters to pay an organiser to campaign around jobs. As well, many delegates on major sewerage projects were very actively ensuring that members were financial, and their ticket known. LD, 21 June 1929; 22 June 1929.
59 See accounts tabled at meetings, MBWSSEA Minutes, January-June 1929. e.g. 27 March 1929, 24 April 1929, 26 June 1929.
60 The opposition group made clear how important location was by successfully insisting that ballot papers include each candidate's position and branch. ibids, 29 May 1929.
would no longer be able to: 'help with his advice and experience the organisation which he has helped to build up ...'\(^{61}\)

To ‘A’ Class workers, having their union in the hands of salaried officers was not a great problem. After a lifetime working together within a small workforce, they knew their supervisors well and even liked and respected some of them. Further, those promoted usually went to areas outside of their original maintenance locations. As well, some groups, for example the sewerage maintenance men, suffered little constant supervision. Industrially, there was little immediate danger from supervisors. Most maintenance workers had security of employment. They were members of a union which had their sectional interests at heart and had some influence with the Board in matters of discipline. Also, they could themselves aspire to promotion in a number of different areas of the Board’s activities.

The situation was very different for the more than 1,000 construction labourers recently transferred from the PWD, and for those already working for the Board. Overseers stalked them on the job, ruling their lives — at times with violence and brutality. This was not by chance. Construction workers led a hard life and were strong, tough men. Employers had often brutal overseers to ensure they squeezed out the most work. One retired Board worker recalled, with only slight exaggeration, that: ‘If you could fight, that’s the way they made overseers. The best fighter in the gang became overseer.’\(^{62}\) Overseers used their power to hire and fire ruthlessly. A former overseer and inspector remembered his days as a construction labourer when: ‘You couldn’t stand up, you had to keep your back bent all the time.’\(^{63}\) At any sign of stretching or slowing, the overseer would throw a two shilling coin into the trench next to the man in question. The job had ended for that worker. He went to draw his time. Some overseers refused to let them sit down at the unofficial but customary morning tea break.\(^{64}\) Overseers were the most immediate symbol of construction workers’ lack of security and of how little they counted as human beings in the world of work.

\(^{61}\) LD, 21 June 1929, p. 5. In fact, there had always been promotions from the ranks of the maintenance men.

\(^{62}\) Interview with Ron McIntosh, Beverly Hills, 29 September 1985.

\(^{63}\) Interview with Eric Allsopp, Burwood, 13 March 1984.

The opposition ticket did not simply come from the casuals on construction. Logistically this would have been very difficult. Instead, it was a coalition of the newly enrolled construction workers and long time antagonists of Macpherson's group from within maintenance. Other grievances included the domination of sewerage at the expense of water maintenance within the union and factors related to the convoluted ALP politics of the time. Both of these were important to Les Kirkwood, a water service worker and active ALP opponent of the Lang machine. Macpherson — architect of the union's structure, aims and strategy — was the key to the problem, but he held his job for life. To stop him sabotaging any ballot for his removal they needed to control the Committee of Management. In the meantime, there was the question of Savage who was standing for the newly created position of Assistant Secretary. Both sides endorsed him. While he publicly spurned support from the 'ticket', it nevertheless stood him in good stead. He was the only Macpherson supporter to win office.

There were nearly 2,000 votes cast out of a financial membership of between 3,000 and 3,500. The 'ticket' won about 65 per cent against two other equally unsuccessful teams. Potter, Toohey, Rosewell, Champion, Woodhill and the rest were out. Kirkwood was the new President. Both the new Vice President, Roe and Treasurer, Fern worked on sewer maintenance. Together with three new Committee members — a low level sewerage maintenance worker, one from house drainage and lorry driver Brogden, they were the only ones who could have been 'A' Class. The new Trustees, J. (Joe) Tynan and J.J. Healy, respectively were a miner and concrete worker on sewerage construction. Healy was one of the job delegates on the NSOOS. So was U. (Ughie) Lynch, together with C.R. (Charlie) Ramm the other two sewer miners elected. There were also two other sewerage labourers. Four of the remaining five were labourers from water construction, particularly the dams. So too was Ray Edmonds who had beaten a large field to become the full time Organiser.

Clearly there was a high degree of cooperation between the three main opposition groups — the labourers on sewerage construction, those at the dams and disgruntled

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65 *LD*, 19 June 1929, p. 6. There were now an Assistant Secretary and an Organiser in place of the old Organising Secretary. MBWSSEA Minutes, 19 March 1929 (CE)
66 *bid*, 31 July 1929 cross referenced with membership, *ibid.*, 23 October 1929, taking account of members who had left in the meantime.
67 *bid*, 31 July 1929 cross referenced with occupations in *ibid* 29 July 1931.
maintenance workers. The first two brought in votes from larger, compact sections. The maintenance men were able to ensure the collection of information and the distribution of propaganda to the many depots, pumping stations, workshops and gangs spread throughout the metropolitan area. Particularly important in this respect were the drivers who, in the course of their work, came into contact with diverse work groups.

Change was not slow in coming. First there were general labour movement questions. Within minutes of the declaration of the poll, the Annual General Meeting declared its fervent protest against state repression of striking timberworkers. The strikers were to continue to receive financial support. The AGM also voted to send delegates to the first Annual Conference of the Australian Section of International Class War Prisoners' Aid, a united front which included left wing ALP and CPA activists. Affiliation signified a dramatic leftward shift in identification within the labour movement. The meeting chose Kirkwood and Macpherson as delegates. The intentions had been to send the union's highest officers. While a sign of commitment, it allowed Macpherson to monitor all activity. It meant he became a source and filter of important information and reaffirmed his status both inside and outside the union.

Industrially, the situation was similar. Among the new Committee members, Lynch, F. (Frank) Page and Bert McClure in particular, constantly brought up the complaints and demands of a wider range of work groups. Job delegates, especially from sewerage construction, also brought grievances before the Committee. Most grievances now concerned construction workers. They ranged from payment for crib time to work discipline and dismissals. The new coalition came out of a tradition of struggle among some of these work groups. Yet, once elected, they had no alternative strategy for dealing — from on high — with small, localised grievances. As a result, there was an increasing tendency to shift

68 ibid., 31 July 1929.
69 Farrell, *International Socialism*, p. 125. Another sign of this shift was the warm invitation to a Labour Council delegate to speak of his recent visit to the USSR. MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 March 1930, 9 April 1930 (C), 6 June 1930 (SC). The shift also probably explains why the very status conscious chauffeurs wanted to transfer into the salaried officers' division. ibid., 11 September 1929 (C), 16 October 1929 (C).
70 This probably explains the controversy within the C of M as to the delegates' reports of the conference. ibid., 14 August 1929 (C). As a result, the ICWPA's Secretary, H. Moxon, a leading CPA official, explained to the C of M that the ICWPA was a non political organisation. ibid., 16 October 1929, (C)
the responsibility to Macpherson who was only too happy to make himself busy and indispensable. As a result, the union’s traditional strategy of negotiation backed by arbitration or litigation continued. Early in the piece, the new group insisted on choosing a deputation to accompany their General Secretary when he negotiated with senior Board officials. Within a matter of months Macpherson was going alone.\footnote{ibid., 28 August 1929, 11 September 1929 (C), 16 October 1929 (C), 23 October 1929 (C), 13 November 1929 (C), 11 December 1929 (C), 17 December 1929 (SC), 8 January 1930 (C), 12 February 1930 (C), 9 April 1930 (C), 30 April 1930, 30 July 1930, 15 August 1930 (SC), 29 October 1929, 14 November 1930.}

On only three issues was there any real difference to previous practice. The first, the endorsing of a sewer miners’ stopwork meeting, had largely symbolic value. The second concerned demands for a new award. Here a General Meeting elected a majority of prominent rank and file (Bodkin, Tommy Cavanagh and Jack Williams) onto a committee to draw up the claims, subject to members’ wishes.\footnote{ibid., 23 October 1929 (C), 30 October 1929, 27 November 1929.} The third issue was the Board’s attempted blacklisting of Cavanagh at the end of 1930. Instead of letting the matter drop once Macpherson had exhausted negotiations with the Engineer-in-Chief, the dam representatives had it taken up before the Labour Council. Similarly, six months later, General Meetings exerted greater pressure on officials to conduct a more concerted and finally successful effort to get the sacked Williams reinstated.\footnote{ibid., 29 October 1930, 14 November 1930 (C), 27 May 1931, 24 June 1931, 29 July 1931.}

The Depression both complicated and simplified matters. As Water Board employees worked under (the initially lower) state awards, the Federal court’s 1930-1 real wages cuts had no immediate effect. Further, Lang made sure that the Federal wage cuts would not effect those on public sector contract work.\footnote{Sheldon, ‘Wages in the Depression’, p. 113.} There was no reason for the Board to try to decrease its labour costs by abandoning day labour. Because of the Depression, there was no new Water Board award between 1927 and 1936. Wage rates mainly changed with Living Wage declarations. As there were none between 1929 and mid 1932, Water Board employees on award rates and full time work did well. In response to Bavin’s 48 Hour Week Act, Chief Engineer Haskins, advised the Board that the five day, 44 hour working week was more economical on construction. The Board agreed to its retention with
proportionally reduced wage rates. So did Nepean Dam members and the Committee. Maintenance workers returned to the six day, 48 hour week with no change in pay.75

In general, the newly elected Committee of Management was much more active than the old. It doubled the number of its meetings to two each month and showed much more interest in all matters.76 Nevertheless, there were problems. Glaring flaws in the union’s structure gave greater voice to those in Sydney at the expense of those who worked at the distant, isolated dams. Committee meetings were on Wednesday nights. It was nearly impossible for dam workers to get there for the 7.45 p.m. start. Since very few workers had cars, it was even more difficult to return to the dams now that meetings concluded at around 10.45. The alternative was staying overnight and missing a day’s work. As the union’s ‘out of pocket’ expenses did not extend to compensate for this, attending meetings meant significant losses in wages. Also with much dam work done on shifts, one way of victimising ‘troublemakers’ was to roster them away from day shifts. This undoubtedly explains why those from the dams rarely attended meetings during 1929-30 yet received strong confirmation in the elections for 1930-31.77

Rank and file dam workers wishing to attend General Meetings confronted the same problems in exaggerated form. While they could participate through their branches, these only made local policy within the bounds decided at head office. Clearly, in democratic terms, the union’s decision-making structure took no account of the realities of the industry. Nor had Macpherson and his group ever intended it to. As a result, some of the old guard, particularly Rosewell, Woodhill, Court and Champion began to reassert themselves at General Meetings. Bodkin, a new member of the Macpherson group, was also prominent. The new coalition easily controlled the Committee of Management but their decisions continually met rejection or major amendment at General Meetings. It was especially ironic that General Meetings, nominally the avenue through which the rank and file exercised control over their officials, were the medium by which hundreds of them were denied any

75 MWSDB Minutes, 25 June 1930; LD, 26 June 1930 (WSEU-PCB); MBWSSEA Minutes, 20 June 1930 (SC).
76 ibid., 14 August 1929 (C).
77 Interview with Ron McIntosh, Beverly Hills, 21 November 1985. Re expenses, MBWSSEA Minutes, 11 September 1929 (C). Those most often absent were W. Missingham, R.H Douglas, W. McClelland and H. McDevitt.
voice at all. The reuniting of Williams and Cavanagh, rank and file militants together in the RWIB, in support of Lynch and Ramm made General Meetings more interesting but did not change their basic orientation.\(^{78}\)

Not surprisingly, the old guard advanced the claims of maintenance workers.\(^{79}\) More importantly, they were able to resist change in virtually all the areas in which the new coalition pushed forward. They had proposals to affiliate with the Labour Council postponed and then rejected.\(^{80}\) Strong motions of moral support for the timberworkers continued together with a resolution to collect more money on jobs on their behalf. But, after intense arguments, there was a decision to stop further support for the miners.\(^{81}\)

The next point of contrast was over the union's finances. In October 1929, Macpherson reported 2,965 members financial and 505 not. A further 635 had left the Board's employment since July. The wages workforce included another 1,000 or more workers, only a few of whom would have been in craft unions. Finances were steady but low.\(^{82}\) The new group wanted to improve the union's membership figures and finances by spending more. They wanted an additional temporary organiser elected and the union to buy a second car.\(^{83}\) After much procedural skirmishing, Woodhill and Waterson had the decision on the second organiser rescinded.\(^{84}\) Losing this and other votes to the old guard at General Meetings demoralised supporters of the new group and precipitated a further decline in their attendance.

This also weakened their constitutional challenge. From their first Committee meeting, the construction workers in particular had pushed for a major change of the union's rules including the annual election of all officers and the striking out of the two thirds

\(^{78}\) ibid., 26 March 1930, 30 April 1930.. \(^{79}\) ibid., 14 May 1930. \(^{80}\) ibid., 11 September 1929 (C), 25 September 1929; 26 February 1930. \(^{81}\) ibid., 8 January 1930 (C), 16 January 1930 (SC); 29 January 1930. \(^{82}\) The credit balance at 30 June 1929 had been £1,484. At the end of October it was slightly less and total income up to October was £3,026. ibid., 23 October 1929 (SC). \(^{83}\) ibid., 23 October 1929 (SC), 11 December 1929 (C). At the same time, Edmonds who could not drive, was to retain the luxury of a driver for his travelling among the far-flung membership. \(^{84}\) ibid., 27 November 1929.
majority needed to dismiss the General Secretary.\textsuperscript{85} Once again, Macpherson's group controlled crucial votes at General Meetings.\textsuperscript{86}

By early 1930, strains were becoming apparent within the Committee. One source of disagreement was the extent to which the union should expend more of its dwindling funds on solidarity with other organisations. To some extent, the same people were also worried about further spending on active organising work. These issues interacted. In essence, the question became: to what extent was the union's effectiveness related to safeguarding its finances or rather more connected to the general class struggle? The first group, still some distance from Macpherson, included Kirkwood, Roe, Fern, Douglas and Brogden — 'A' Class workers with much stronger commitment to the industry and its house union. Construction labourer Page sided with them. The second group included almost all the construction workers. They had only the most tenuous hold on Board jobs and unionism and identified more strongly with the working class in general. With the dam representatives mostly absent, the first group began to win key votes at Committee meetings.\textsuperscript{87}

With disintegration apparent among the new group and intensifying pressure from the old, the 1930-1 elections shaped up as keenly fought. Despite a partial realignment of factions, the successful coalition of the previous year largely held. Prior to the poll, it won the key position of Assistant Returning Officer. He and the scrutineers visited the two major dam sites as well as the Sydney jobs with the ballot papers and boxes. This ensured that construction workers could make their numbers count. The ballot paper was again to carry each candidate's usual occupation. This helped reduce uncertainty among the casual construction workforce.\textsuperscript{88}

Kirkwood again led a team of construction labourers and a few maintenance men to a clean sweep.\textsuperscript{89} Page and McClure, who had conflicted with the more radical elements within the Committee, had joined Rosewell and Woodhill to head the Macpherson group.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{85} ibid., 14 August 1929 (C); 17 December 1929 (SC).  
\textsuperscript{86} ibid., 26 March 1930.  
\textsuperscript{87} e.g ibid., 12 February 1930.  
\textsuperscript{88} ibid., 28 May 1930.  
\textsuperscript{89} They won about 60 per cent of a reduced vote, although local loyalties obviously affected certain candidates more than others.}
Page was their candidate for President. Healey lost his position to Cuddihy from water maintenance, until then seemingly a Macpherson supporter. A newcomer on the Committee, F.P. (Frank) Mannix, and S. (Sam) Edmonds topped the poll. Mannix, a fireman, had been prominent in bringing forward complaints from Marrickville Pumping Station. Edmonds was a labourer from sewerage construction. The three other newcomers were T. (Tommy) Simpson, like Brogden a driver from Paddington Garage, H.C. Quinn and F.G. (Doc) Kennewell both labourers at Nepean.90

The victory of the Kirkwood team gave maintenance men control of the Executive, but water construction labourers alone constituted half the Committee.91 There was good reason for their predominance. With the effects of the Depression, the wages workforce had shrunk from 4,647 to 2,938 in 12 months. While the dam workforces declined rapidly as the Depression deepened, in February 1930 nearly 500 were working on the Woronora Dam and Pipeline and a similarly large number at Nepean Dam.92 Given the local branch activity at each, it made sense to have a large number of dam candidates on a ticket. Kirkwood knew all about tickets.93 Among those to lose was Ramm who had contested Kirkwood’s rulings once too often. He polled 400 votes and Cavanagh, outside any ticket, 267. Sewerage construction workers seemed to be losing influence but there was a substantial minority who still identified with the militants. There was also a referendum as to Labour Council affiliation. Macpherson’s group disliked the left wing Garden group which still controlled Council. On the other hand, Kirkwood and others were hostile to Lang and therefore also to his allies among the Trades Hall Reds. Their votes joined as the vote against affiliation went 639 to 510.94

90 Kennewell earned his nickname for his encyclopaedic memory and linguistic ability. Interview with Ray Greentree, Bargo, 1 April 1985.
91 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1930 cross referenced with nominations, ibid., 28 May 1930.
92 ‘MWSDB Water Construction Woronora Dam’, Typewritten Report, February 1930, MWSDB Archs. NB. The numbers fell from nearly 900 at Woronora and 465 at Nepean in October 1929 to 200 and 340 respectively at the end of April 1930. SMH, 3 July 1930. Many remained at the dams and probably maintained (unemployed) union membership allowing them to have a major impact on the June election. Ray Greentree remembered there being more than 500 on the dole at Nepean Dam town and Bargo where the ‘Wangat mob’ in particular had settled. op. cit.
93 e.g. LD, 27 May 1929, p. 8.
94 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1930.
The attendance record of the new Committee was little better. But with the defeat of both the most radical and conservative members from the previous year, there was much less internal dissension. There was also a general softening towards Macpherson and Savage who were continuing to appear active and useful. To reduce the impact of those still hostile, the Committee decided to bind its members to support all its decisions at General Meetings. Significantly for the revision under way, one of the first was the reaffirmation of the union's commitment to negotiation through conciliation and arbitration. There was also a more positive attitude to the NSW ALP, Kirkwood's anti-Langism notwithstanding. In exchange for much union support at municipal and state elections, the Committee confidently but unsuccessfully nominated Macpherson for appointment to the Legislative Council. Soon after Kirkwood's second team took their seats, the Depression disrupted Water Board employment, radically altering the composition of the membership and also of the ruling group.

Before the Depression worsened during 1930, intense agitation by the union played a part in ensuring a large construction schedule. The new Committee was active on the question of work for unemployed members. Here again, there was little they could do that was different to Macpherson's practice. Of course, the rhetoric was new and harder. But the reality of a downturn of such proportions and dimensions left the small, house union with little room to manoeuvre. Direct action was now very difficult for construction workers, those most immediately affected by the Depression. The new group tried to make the best of a bad situation.

In November 1929, at a Special General Meeting to discuss the question of unemployment among members, Lynch accused the Board of closing down jobs even though money was still available. The new group clearly understood the grounds on which to demand increased spending. His resolution therefore charged that members were: 'Unionists, Citizens and Ratepayers', that the Board had 'many important works' and 'the greatest avenues of Revenue, and its work as profit maker is second to no other.' In

95 ibid., 20 April 1931 (SC).
96 ibid., 14 November 1930 (C). For election support, ibid., 9 September 1930 (SC).
97 ibid., 16 November 1929. The meeting was on a Saturday morning and at the Trades Hall.
support, he noted the vital importance for public health of completing major works already under way. Finally:

in view of the Board being a Public Institution we protest against their action in adding to the tens of thousands of unemployed, more workers, many of whom gave the greatest part of their health to the service of the people and the Board; the Government and the people to see to it that these most important works are continued.98

It was all there — public health, income generation and spending to create jobs — but it was now the union defending the industry. A committee of 12 was to lobby affected municipalities. Board President Cooper agreed and relief came with the Board borrowing heavily from the United States. As a result, loan spending remained high during 1929-30.99

The deteriorating financial situation became increasingly marked from the beginning of 1930 and the Board considerably reduced its loan construction programme during the following financial year.100 Initially, there was a reduction in construction activity but from March 1931 the Board closed down almost all major works. Only the use of large loans and grants from the URC kept some works going.101

Through this crisis, the new group continued to use the traditional arguments in favour of water and sewerage construction as it pressed both the Board and the NSW Government to seek more finance and to spend it.102 At the end of June 1929, there were 3,524 Board construction workers. Between November and the end of February 1930, with funds running out, 1,521 lost their jobs.103 Three years later, the 155 left in normal construction employment were mostly regressed inspectors and overseers.104 Many of the remainder had gone onto relief works, particularly sewerage reticulation.

At the end of 1930, the Lang Government transformed all Board construction jobs into relief works. By January 1931, there were 1,009 men working on relief jobs and this

98 ibid.
99 It was over £3m. LD, 3 April 1930; Sun, 3 April 1930, WSEU Press Cuttings Book (WSEU PCB) WSEU Archs; ibid., 26 February 1930; MWSDB Reports, 1929-30, No. 2.
100 The percentage of interest to a marginally lower revenue jumped from 58.13 in 1929-30 to 66.25 the following year. Bank exchange was a completely new cost in 1930-1. The following year it accounted for nearly 10 per cent of growing revenue. MWSDB Reports, 1931-2, Nos. 2, 3 and 6
101 ibid., 1928-9, p. 7; 1930-1, p. ?, 16; MWSDB Minutes, 26 February 1930.
102 MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 April 1930 (C); 25 November 1930; They received solid support from the daily press. see e.g. editorial, DT, 25 March 1931; LD, 24 March 1931.
103 MWSDB Minutes, 26 February 1930.
increased to 4,605 in March, before falling off to 2,631 at the end of June. At first, they came from the government’s Labour Bureau. From 1931, the Board only kept new workers on for two months at a time as the Government wanted the work distributed as widely as possible. After the Board protested on efficiency grounds, the URC allowed it to retain up to 35 per cent of those engaged for the duration of the work. Still, the number involved fluctuated greatly and never again reached the March 1930 level. By the end of June 1932, nearly 12,000 workers had worked for varying periods on Water Board relief works. From mid 1932, the Board also received funds from the Commonwealth Unemployment Council.

The shift to relief works drastically worsened workers’ industrial conditions. Bavin’s Prevention and Relief of Unemployment Act, 1930, provided for the suspension of all State awards and gave the Minister for Labour the power to prescribe all the terms of employment. All the rates so determined were below those of the corresponding awards. Here was another reason for employers to seek the conversion of normal activity into relief work. After transforming Water Board construction into relief works, Lang’s government was prepared to listen to union arguments on employment conditions. In January 1931, it restored award wage rates. Unions continued to guard award rates but could not enforce sufficient hours nor award conditions. Stevens’ government returned relief workers to their position under Bavin.

Water Board relief workers faced a three-cornered and sometimes four-cornered contest for their membership, freely given or otherwise. The ULU and RWIB spoke for groups on country works and began to focus on the city. The MMM sought to take these unions over from below as a prelude to their rationalisation along OBU industrial lines. The Water Board union first ignored relief workers and then approached them depending on the threat its officials perceived. It also conflicted with the UWM over the unemployed.

105 MWSDB Report, 1930-1, pp. 3 and 16.
106 ibid., 1931-2, p. ?.
107 For overall course of relief work financing, Snooks, op. cit., p. 3; Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, op. cit., p. 182. MWSDB Report, 1932-3, pp. 2-3; Aird, op. cit., pp. 53-4.
109 SMH, 30 August 1932; LD, 1 September, 1932.
The house union's involvement in the relief work question began in mid-1930 and mirrored much of the union's internal conflict. Like the union, it underwent severe changes of direction. Here again, the new Committees of Management differed most from the old over the union's relationship with the wider labour movement. The construction labourers brought a positive class consciousness into the union. They strongly encouraged unemployed members to link up with similar groups from other unions. The union's officers were to contact other Sydney unions to organise a conference to discuss: 'common policy of resistance in all matters at present before the trade union movement.'\(^\text{110}\) Officials lobbied the Federal Government to alleviate the plight of the evicted unemployed and, with the closedown at Nepean and Woronora Dams, pressed the Board to decrease the rent for those living onsite.\(^\text{111}\)

There continued to be rank and file dissent from an organisation of the union's unemployed members. They favoured an immediate boycott and a common front of unions to resist relief work in protest at below award wages and conditions. Given the times, the boycott failed miserably.\(^\text{112}\) The next question was whether to try and organise among Water Board relief workers. Once again the union's internal tensions surfaced over who was to formulate policy. The new group won within the Committee of Management, the old, on behalf of Macpherson and Savage, at a General Meeting. Kirkwood preempted further debate by ruling that as relief workers came from the URC, they were not Board employees and could therefore not join the union. This decision reflected the desire not to spend scarce union funds on those who could not afford to contribute or were difficult to monitor. But groups of relief workers pressed to join.\(^\text{113}\)

\(^{110}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 8 August 1930 (C). Also ibid., 9 April 1930 (C). This emphasis on 'left' activism within the labour movement together with a holding operation within the industry paralleled that of the Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA), another union of the unskilled with 'generic' left wing officials. J.A. Merritt, 'The Federated Ironworkers' Association in the Depression', Labour History, No. 21, November, 1971, pp. 56, 58.

\(^{111}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 12 February 1930 (C); 20 June 1930 (SC); 8 August 1930 (C); 15 August 1930 (SC).

\(^{112}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 August 1930. Cavanagh was prominent in this group.

\(^{113}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 15 August 1930 (SC), 27 August 1930, 9 September 1930 (SC), 24 September 1930.
Others did not, including a group on sewerage construction in Wollongong, a working class area undergoing rapid radicalisation. The sewerage construction group were part of this political environment. The union’s Committee had recently stopped paid officials visiting smaller, more distant jobs. Angry at paying the high unemployment relief tax out of below award wages, the men appealed to the union to enrol them, preferably as a local branch. Savage refused because they were not receiving Water Board award terms and conditions. Disgusted that the union only enrolled workers once they had won their demands independently, they organised separately and affiliated with the CPA influenced Illawarra Trades and Labour Council. Among them were familiar faces. In fact, for the Board and the full time officials of its union, here was a rogues’ gallery of rank and file agitators. Williams was president and Cavanagh was one of the other six committee members. John Powell was the secretary.

Wollongong was a problem but it was isolated and easy to ignore. Mass sackings on construction jobs and the conversion of others into relief works provoked new worries for Macpherson and Savage. The ranks of unemployed members grew and with it their activism and insistence that the union act. There was much angry criticism that full time officials were deaf to these demands. The officials denied it. Macpherson claimed he and the others were using: ‘all the eloquence with which nature has blessed us ... in an untiring effort to ... find employment for our unfortunate fellow members.’ Discoursing rather patronisingly on the declining dignity of the once ‘industrious workman’, he could offer little hope and no rallying point. It was simple: ‘the matter now rests with the powers that be’.

To ensure this, he cancelled a Special General Meeting called to deal with the dissidents’ complaints. It was for a Saturday morning. Construction workers on their five day (reduced wage) week could attend, as could unemployed members. Maintenance workers, now forced to work Saturday mornings, could not. He had always organised the union’s decision making to suit himself and his supporters but now hypocritically declared

115 The others were Neilson, Larance, Reynolds and Payne. SMH, 12 and 20 January 1931; LD, 15 January 1931; MBWSSEA Minutes 14 November 1930 (C); 28 January 1931;
116 LD, 9 December 1930. For their demands, MBWSSEA Minutes, 14 November (C) and 25 November 1930. For the complaints, Evening News, 5 December 1930, WSEU-PCB.
117 LD, 9 December 1930.
that: 'Any meeting ... held at any time which prohibits the free attendance of each and every member is, under the Rules, altogether unconstitutional.' An unofficial meeting of some 200 men sent deputations to the Board, sympathetic MLAs and the government.

Once Lang had converted all Board construction into relief works, it was unrealistic to ignore relief workers completely. They could once again become the majority within the union. Further, the government paid no heed to union preference in its distribution of this work. The activities of other, competing organisations forced Macpherson and Savage to change tack. If the Water Board union could or would not enrol relief workers, the ULU and the AWU most surely would. Further, the UWM in Sydney had become the Metropolitan United Front of Unemployed and Employed Workers so as to take in those on relief work. The Water Board union therefore was looking at a large-scale penetration of 'its' industry and workforce by potentially hostile elements.

There was already some self organisation among the relief workers. The union moved to enrol them. Ray Edmonds became the paid organiser for relief works. By the end of March 1931, his efforts had resulted in 600 new members. In return for a low joining fee, the union offered to protect their interests. This meant the usual round of deputations. The union's officials unsuccessfuUy lobbied the ALP to remm Water Board construction to day labour. The government, after all, was spending on water supply and sewerage. It was just that relief works money did not provide for continuity of employment or award wages, hours and conditions. The union had to push for change within this context.

The more militant members of the Committee demanded uniform hours of work on relief works, the reinstatement of award wages and conditions, union preference and fair hiring, the last two to be enforced by rotation hiring through the union office. But they at times worked at cross purposes to militant groups among the rank and file. Tending to operate from the top down using radical labourist procedures, they reinforced central authority against any perceived threat from below. This played into the hands of

118 Letter to LD, 9 December 1930.
119 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 November 1930.
120 LD, 24 March 1931, WSEU-PCB.
122 ibid., 20 April 1931 (SC).
Macpherson and Savage who they continued to use as intermediaries with the Board and the ALP.

Militant rank and file members organised horizontally.\textsuperscript{123} They worked both within the union's General Meetings and by building alternative structures at the workplace. While they too used deputations to the Labor Government — at times through Garden — they did this after defining common policies on the job.\textsuperscript{124} Rockchoppers and sewer miners, for example, were among the worst affected by the removal of awards. They no longer had shorter hours for dangerous, dusty work. Instead they worked eight or even more hours each day for much lower hourly rates.\textsuperscript{125} Those working at Maroubra and Diamond Bay were particularly active. As a result, shorter hours and award wage rates returned to Water Board relief jobs. Macpherson and Savage on one side, and a rank and file committee on the other, each took sole credit.\textsuperscript{126} This tension was to continue.

While construction workers suffered terribly during the Depression, permanent maintenance workers were, as usual, luckier. The Water Board needed them to continue running its operations. With its control over finance and monopoly position, the Board was in a special position. Revenues barely suffered from the general economic catastrophe between 1928/9 and 1932-3. In fact, they rose in real terms but had to cover a greater share of a larger debt burden and shortfalls on construction.\textsuperscript{127}

In the prevailing financial framework, the only variable cost was for maintenance and administration. Thus, the Board put off large numbers of maintenance workers as part of the heavy sackings in March 1931. By the end of June that year, the blue collar maintenance staff of 831 was only two thirds of the previous year's total.\textsuperscript{128} The Board was used to sacking construction labourers: 'according to the volume of construction work'.\textsuperscript{129} Maintenance workers were different and: 'It was with considerable reluctance that the Board

\textsuperscript{123} ibid., 13 March 1931 (C), 10 and April 1931 (C); ibid., 16 April 1931 (SGM). The main rank and file speakers were S. (Sam) Black, E. M. O'Brien and J. (Joe) Roe.
\textsuperscript{124} ibid., 25 February 1931, 20 April 1931 (SC), 13 March 1931 (C); 29 April 1931; LD, 4 May 1931; 9 May 1931.
\textsuperscript{125} MWSDB Reports; LD, 16 January 1932.
\textsuperscript{126} ibid., 16 and 25 January 1932, WSEU-PCB.
\textsuperscript{127} MWSDB Reports, e.g. 1938-9, p. 31. For demoted overseers, Allsopp, \textit{op. cit.}; MBWSSEA Minutes, 15 August 1930 (SGM). For the different treatment of 'B' and 'B' Classes, ibid., 25 March 1931.
adopted such a course, which meant dispensing with many men who had faithfully served the institution for a long period of years.\textsuperscript{130}

As the impact of interest and exchange charges lessened, the Board revived maintenance activity.\textsuperscript{131} Rationing of maintenance workers, which had also begun in March 1931, made this revival both more urgent for the functioning of the system and at the same time financially easier. The Board rehired a number of retrenched maintenance workers and, by the end of June 1933, the maintenance workforce had stabilised at more than 1,050. These were relatively lucky workers. Not only was their employment very secure, but they did not suffer the heavy wage cuts which was the lot of those working under federal awards. In theory, their real wages at first rose strongly. In practice, rationing and then the public service wage and salary reductions of 1931 cancelled out the gains.\textsuperscript{132}

Most employees initially accepted rationing as better than the sack. Notwithstanding Labour Council policy, unions generally accepted it for the same reason. The ALP remained ambivalent and directed most of its criticism to private sector abuses. Lang's Minister for Labour and Industry, J.M. Baddeley, therefore abolished rationing by private employers.\textsuperscript{133} Water Board employees, like others in the public sector continued to work short time.

By introducing this form of rationing, employers could retain a reputation for fairness and caring while at the same time cutting overheads and keeping the largest possible skilled workforce on hand.\textsuperscript{134} It was a perfect blend of old style paternalism towards key employees and hard headed assessment of the links between product and labour markets. For the Water Board, maintenance men came into this category but those on construction

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{130} MWSDB Report, 1930-1, p. 7
  \item \textsuperscript{131} The lower total expenses remained steady until 1934/5 so that the Board made a number of surpluses (profits), including £95,254 in 1929-30 and £115,636 in 1932-3. Deficits, particularly large ones, were rare. \textit{ibid.}. For the problems of collecting rates, interview with Leo Baggott, Dolls Point, 30 August 1984. One method was to have debtors work off their rates on pick and shovel work. This caused great hostility among an underemployed workforce. Allsopp, \textit{op. cit.}.
  \item \textsuperscript{132} P. G. Minns, 'Short-Time or No-Time, A Study of Work Rationing in Sydney During the Great Depression, 1929-35', unpublished B.Ec. Honours Thesis, Department of Industrial Relations, University of Sydney, 1983, p. 40; Sheldon 'Wages in the Depression' pp. 112-3, 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{133} Minns, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 24, 36, 39, 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{134} See \textit{ibid.}, esp. pp. 7-19.
\end{itemize}
workers at Nepean Dam, for example, did not. It had no need to hold onto them and their skills.

The Board offered maintenance men wage cuts in line with the rest of the public service, or rationing. A mass meeting of 400 members chose to hold onto their award rates. From March 1931, the Board rationed those under its awards one week off in five. Although this meant a 20 per cent cut to earnings, at least working hours fell accordingly. Two months after the new Industrial Commission hacked the Living Wage from £4.2.6 to £3.10 in August 1932, the Board reduced the number of rationed weeks to one in ten. With the further Living Wage reduction in May 1933, the Board completely ended rationing for day labourers. Macpherson falsely claimed that this was in advance of other areas of the public sector and due to his special efforts. Yet, rationing went from the railways in September 1932 and had virtually disappeared for the rest of the public sector by the end of that year. In the end it mattered little. For ‘A’ Class maintenance workers, the Depression was over.

Depression thus sharpened the differences between the circumstances facing maintenance and construction workforces. The Board’s reaction to the crisis not only reinforced this division but reaffirmed a commitment to it. Like construction workers elsewhere in the NSW economy, those on Water Board jobs increasingly worked on relief works, a system which accentuated the casual and insecure nature of their working lives. Relief work dominated construction until the mid-thirties. Those on maintenance, like trusted, experienced and necessary skilled work groups outside the Board, experienced a much less drastic rationing of their working week and, on the whole, maintained their job security.

The different fates of maintenance and construction labourers helped decide who controlled the union. With the closedown of major works, almost all construction labourers lost their jobs. Prior to the start of major relief works, one effect was to scatter them. No

135 MWSDB Minutes, 5 March 1930.
136 MBWSSEA Annual Report, 1932-3, in Minutes, 26 July 1933; LD, 16 October 1931; Sun, 27 October 1931, WSEU-PCB.
138 MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 June 1933 (C)
139 For many, this meant being forced to tramp the outback, moving from town to town. Some Woronora Dam families established a ‘happy valley’ at Engadine, near Sutherland. Others from
longer in Board jobs, many, including some of those most active in the 1929 group, let their membership of the house union go. This decimated an industrial presence and culture which had promoted and sustained the successful 1929 challenge. Union disregard of relief workers hastened this trend, allowing Macpherson’s supporters to sweep back into power in mid-1931.

But it was not a complete reversal. There must have been an accommodation as Kirkwood remained President. Sam Edmonds and Brogden were still there. McClure and Page, construction labourers, were back — with Page as Vice President. So too were Waterson, Cuddihy and Rosewell, the last as Treasurer. Among those elected for the first time, John Todhunter, J.C. Carter, M. Ryan and A. (Alec or Nugget) Stephan were to remain in office for many years. The majority were still from maintenance and there was again a sprinkling of supervisory staff. But Macpherson had learnt an important lesson. There were also more construction workers than he had included prior to 1929. These included P. Coyne, a delegate for the sewerage miners on the Maroubra relief works. A large majority of members also voted for their union to re-affiliate with an increasingly mainstream Labour Council.

The effects of the Depression also helped consolidate the Macpherson group’s subsequent grip on power. The union’s finances were in a terrible state. Later, Macpherson was to place almost all the blame on those PWD labourers who had transferred onto Board works in late 1928, as: ‘Almost immediately, taking full advantage of their numbers, they secured control of the organization and adopted a scheme of ... reckless spending’. Only as an afterthought did he mention that the reduced construction work had caused the union’s membership to fall from about 3,000 to 800. Those remaining were almost all maintenance


Nearly 2,000 voted, a quite remarkably high turnout but there are no details available of the losing candidates or of the margins. MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 July 1931. Coyne left the Committee when he left his Board job. The Committee chose G. Champion to replace him. Ibid., 11 December 1931 (C); 8 January 1932 (C).

To indicate that this meant no real shift to the left, Kirkwood stymied attempts by Cavanagh and Ramm to have a Special General Meeting elect delegates to Council. Ibid., 29 July 1931. The vote was 1,238 to 561.

General Secretary’s Report to the AGM, ibid., 26 July 1933.
workers. Macpherson knew that alone they could not sustain him and his supporters in the manner to which they had become accustomed.

The new Macpherson group reacted to the financial crisis in a number of ways. It did away with job delegates as too expensive for collecting dues. Committee members took over in aiding the officials.\textsuperscript{143} The union's staff twice 'volunteered' large and regressive salary cuts. By early June, even this was not enough as the union was £250 in debt. Pending the recovery, the Committee 'suspended' Edmonds and a clerk, cut the wages of those who remained and suspended their own allowances. Then there was the replacement of the union's car with a motorbike. It also introduced quarterly rather than weekly dues to reduce collection costs.\textsuperscript{144}

More fundamentally, it suspended elections and monthly General Meetings for the duration of the Depression. Only the AGMs and half-AGMs, respectively at the end of July and January, survived. The changes entered the rule book.\textsuperscript{145} Kirkwood claimed this was to ensure that finances and hence the organisation survived through its darkest hour.\textsuperscript{146} Another rule change suggests at least a secondary motivation.

Union branches were to have their own officers as before, but branch members would no longer be able to nominate for any of the elected Committee of Management positions of the union as a whole. Instead, the branch would have delegate representation to the Committee of Management: one delegate for up to 500 members and a second if the branch had more than 500 members.\textsuperscript{147} This disenfranchised the dam branches making it impossible to use their numbers to outvote the city maintenance workers. Macpherson had learnt another important lesson. He could not always trust the vagaries of public finance and Board expenditure to create employment instability at the dams. Those workforces, though distant and isolated, posed a threat to his control. He used the rules to ensure that their isolation from power was more than geographic.

\textsuperscript{143} ibid., 11 September 1931 (C).
\textsuperscript{144} ibid., 10 October 1931 (C), 15 November 1931 (C); 23 November 1931 (E), 17 June 1932 (SC); 29 June 1932; MBWSSEA Report, 1932-3, \textit{op. cit.} Membership remained very cheap at 6/6 per quarter.
\textsuperscript{145} MBWSSEA Minutes, 8 January 1932 (C), 30 May 1932 (CE). Rule 21 (a), \textit{MBWSSEA Rules}, n.d., c. 1939?, (author's collection).
\textsuperscript{146} President’s Address to Special General Meeting, MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 June 1932.
\textsuperscript{147} ibid., 30 May 1932 (CE). Rule 41 (a) and (e), \textit{MBWSSEA Rules. op. cit.}. 
With the exception of relief works, the number of industrial complaints coming before the Committee had declined markedly by the end of 1931. There was to be no rise in expectations prior to definite signs of recovery. More than ever, the Committee gave Macpherson and Savage responsibility for presenting the union's claims. With no threat from those quarters, the union's officials moved more slowly. The main concerns involved cuts to the maintenance workforce, breaches of award conditions for permanent workers, the Board putting off long term employees in favour of rate debtors and its attempts to alter the award to reduce wages. Then there were complaints over the Board's slowness in making new 'A' Class appointments, or its failure to do so in the proper manner. Again the ultimate solution was to renew calls for an appeals board. This needed Water Board or NSW government approval. With the Board uncooperative, the best hope was the ALP government. However, for most of the second Lang government's short tenure, construction labourers were a majority on the union's Committee and they had little interest in these issues. By the time Macpherson's group regained the reins, Lang was caught up in vicious faction fighting and the Battle of the Plans.

This feuding also entered the union. Kirkwood founded a local branch of the 'Federal' Labor Party, later standing as its parliamentary candidate. Savage was a Lang supporter. Yet, he and Macpherson were sensitive to anything complicating their lives before a more aggressive membership. Macpherson, piqued at missing out on the Legislative Council, was scathing when early house union requests did not meet the expected cooperation from the government. Yet, whatever their level of disappointment, they always stayed well clear of the explicitly anti-Lang factions. They were conservative

148 Cf. the NSW Public School Teachers' Federation which also had a relatively sheltered membership and had depended greatly upon lobbying governments to make gains. It too: 'adopted policies of withdrawal and passivity' during the worst years of the depression. B. Mitchell, 'The N.S.W. Teachers' Federation', in R. Cooksey (ed), The Great Depression in Australia, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra, 1970, esp. p. 69.
149 20 October 1931 (CE), 23 October 1931 (E), 11 December 1931 (C).
150 MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 November 1931 (C); 25 January 1933, 10 February 1933 (C), 9 June 1933 (C).
151 Newcastle Herald, 1 May 1934, WSEU-PCB.
municipal labourists. That meant getting what they could out of Labor governments. Lang was in power. 152

After Lang made all Board construction relief works, some active members wanted unions to avoid parliamentary politics altogether. They favoured building the industrial movement. 153 Once concessions came their way, the bulk of the Board’s workforce, whether directly employed or on relief works, strongly supported Lang. Kirkwood’s residual antagonism to both Lang and Macpherson soon landed him in trouble. He criticised the full time officials for not pushing the government harder on questions such as union preference on relief jobs. Savage retorted by suggesting the government discriminated against unemployed members because of their president. Savage drew the moral. If Les Kirkwood wanted to help these men he should resign. Kirkwood saw it differently: ‘... if Mr. Savage had any backbone he would challenge the government by crossing the floor of the Council if it did not give preference to the men who had fed him since boyhood.’ 154

The membership was pro-Lang and a new branch at Wollongong gave voice to the strong authoritarian streak within Langism. They demanded the removal of all anti-Lang union officials, in particular, Kirkwood. 155 Rosewell led staunch Lang supporters in support of a purge. All officers and Committee members had to declare themselves in favour of the Lang Government and the Lang Plan or face removal and expulsion. Kirkwood tried to rule the motion out of order but his opponents prevailed. The fateful crisis ended in anti-climax. Kirkwood did not appear for the crucial meeting. All bar two of the others pledged themselves for Lang. One abstained. Mannix alone had the courage of his convictions. He declared that he did not: ‘admit the right of members to dictate his political policy.’ 156 The threatened dismissals and expulsions did not eventuate.

More pressing threats to Macpherson’s regime came from outside the Committee. In late 1931, the MMM and the UMW moved onto Sydney’ water and sewerage jobs. They attacked the union’s officials for doing little beyond trusting in arbitration and the ALP. It

152 e.g. SMH, 4 April 1931. NB MBWSSEA officials (except Kirkwood) donating generously and very publicly to Lang’s funds for the East Sydney by-election. LD, 4 April 1932.

153 e.g. William (Cob) Anderson, MBWSSEA Minutes, 31 January 1931 (SGM) and his letter to LD, 24 March 1931. Also MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 February 1931 (C).

154 World, 9 December 1931; LD, 9 December 1931.

155 ibid., 3 December 1931; MBWSSEA Minutes, 11 December 1931 (C).

156 ibid., 11 December 1931 (C). Also ibid., 24 November 1931, 2 December 1931 (SC).
was time, said *Red Leader*, for the building of rank and file committees of action in this industry.\(^\text{157}\) Initially, this call went unheeded but the union's officials began paying more attention to relief workers. It was, said the CPA front, not only a tame, company union, but: 'purely a ticket union without the faintest semblance of rank and file control.'\(^\text{158}\) By September 1932, the Metropolitan United Front of Employed and Unemployed (henceforth United Front) was active on Board jobs. It called on relief workers; 'to refrain from assisting to keep parasites in good soft jobs.'\(^\text{159}\)

The union's Executive finally reacted. Relief workers would only have to pay half cost dues. Edmonds again became relief works organiser and Savage and the Committee were to help him by speaking at relief jobs. As usual, organising meant collecting dues and complaints and then, where necessary, using the union's connections or going on deputation. The great fragmentation of the relief workforce made it difficult for Edmonds. In the meantime, the Committee began its round of deputations in favour of award rates and conditions and continuity of employment.\(^\text{160}\) It also undertook an important test case. The Board had converted an existing day labour job to relief work. It then had reduced an employee from award to relief wages. The union challenged this, spent a lot of money and lost.\(^\text{161}\) It would do no more.

Edmonds first came up against the United Front at outlying Liverpool where relief workers were paying six pence each week to the Front. A Front organiser visited twice weekly. The union officials and the Front soon engaged in a publicity battle, each organisation claiming sole responsibility for any concessions gained. The ULU became a third if minor party to this argument.\(^\text{162}\) The Front was as least as successful as the others. Water Board union officials behaved as though they had only recently discovered the

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\(^{157}\) *Red Leader*, 9 October 1931, p. 3. The Front's criticisms of the union's officials were generally fair. They did not include the particularly vicious personal attacks reserved for 'left-social fascists' such as Garden.

\(^{158}\) *ibid.*, 31 August 1932, p. 8.

\(^{159}\) *ibid.*, 14 September 1932, p. 8.

\(^{160}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 September 1932 (E), 14 October 1932 (C), 8 November 1932 (E), 1 December 1932 (E).

\(^{161}\) *ibid.*, 11 November 1932 (C); *NSWIR*, 1933, pp. 64-8; *SMH*, 15 June 1933.

\(^{162}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 11 November 1932 (C); WSEU Report, 1932-3, *op. cit.*
terrible conditions on relief jobs. In the absence of a Labor government, they became increasingly disconcerted over their inability to resolve them. They now faced competition.

There was talk of compulsory unionism on relief works. United Front leaders realised that this could spell the end of committees of action outside recognised unions. They made a tactical choice, urging MMM supporters to join the ULU. For Red Leader, the ULU officials were as reactionary as their house union and AWU counterparts, but only the ULU had that minimum of internal democracy which would allow the rank and file to mount a challenge. It also had active MMM groups already operating. The Water Board union, with only two General Meetings each year, denied the rank and file any voice.163

The United Front stepped up its agitation among Board relief workers. Those at Diamond Bay formed a rank and file committee. Committees of action grew up on other jobs and affiliated to the United Front. They soon had sufficient hold for Water Board engineers to negotiate with them. Organisationally, the Diamond Bay men proposed a meeting of delegates from all relief jobs. The United Front claimed that relief workers were for keeping house union and Board officials at arm's length. At times, these two categories overlapped. On one job, the United Front had to contend with an overseer, Rosewell, who was also a prominent union official.164

People like Rosewell were in a good position to press their union’s claims on the relief workers under them. Macpherson and Savage went a few steps higher. They had little problem convincing the Board’s senior engineers to enforce a boycott of the United Front. Field supervisors were only to meet with the union’s officials and delegates. There was still ‘unsettled conditions’ at Maroubra but Board preference helped break the Front’s growing if tenuous presence165 A sudden massive downturn in relief work did the rest. It was with little regret that the union’s Executive closed down its own relief work operations. Edmonds lost his job once more. The remaining organising work on relief jobs fell to the Committee of Management and Savage. Kirkwood in particular, together with Page and Savage, became more active with the upturn in relief spending and employment from the middle of

163 Red Leader, 31 August 1932, p. 8; 21 September 1932, p. 6.
164 ibid., 28 September 1932, p. 8; 5 October 1932, p. 8; 12 October 1932, p. 8; MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 December 1932 (C).
165 ibid., 13 January 1933 (C). Also ibid., 9 December 1932 (C), 8 January 1933 (C).
1933. As usual, knowledge that relief workers were members of the house union exhausted much of the officials' interest.166

This situation of relief workers is a telling example of the resilience of the union's ruling group. They had weathered the worst years of the Depression. Whereas economic crisis was providing promising circumstances for major challenges to the established leaderships of other unions, the opposite was the case on the Water Board. The successful takeover had come before the Depression had affected the Water Board. It came out of a massive construction programme which had employed the Board's largest workforce to date. And these were large, long-term projects which offered some hope of employment security on full wages for years to come. They also created working and living environments which fostered the cohesion and solidarity common in other occupational communities. Depression had changed all that. It had caused the sacking and dispersal of much of this workforce and provided Macpherson's supporters with a relatively easy return to power. They quickly formalised their traditional hold over the union through rule changes. There were to be no more easy takeovers. The union could again guarantee the Board full cooperation and no strikes. Only rockchoppers and rock miners continued to provide an opposition from below. Unemployment and relief works fragmented their cohesion.

Maintenance workers remained the key to the Board's operations, Macpherson's support and the structure of union-management relations. These workers suffered much less and for a much shorter time. Efficient functioning of the Board's operation would not permit further neglect. The Board's revenues could permit an early return to full operations — on full award wages and conditions. Union officials continued to argue on behalf of maintenance workers who had reduced their demands to take account of their relative good fortune. There were areas of continuous concern — for example, demands for an appeal board. With Labor out of power or in disarray, this proved beyond those officials who were hoping to strengthen and formalise the symbiotic relationship between the Board, its maintenance workforce and, themselves.

166 ibid., 17 January 1933 (E), 10 February 1933 (C), 14 July 1933 (C).
In the meantime, the Board and government had turned most of the construction workforce into relief workers. If Macpherson’s group were unconcerned with the welfare of construction labourers, they cared even less about relief workers. Their worries were that hostile or competing elements would put down roots among the union’s shadow majority. Only this threat could rouse Macpherson, Savage and the others to spend time and union funds on relief workers. Here, they gained vital cooperation from the Board, as ever intent on keeping ‘outside’ elements at a distance. Once they had signed up relief workers, the main interest was dues collection. It was an even paler version of their activity for construction workers.

Therefore, the Depression exacerbated the already widely different situations the Board’s dual workforces faced. This was not a problem for either the Board or Macpherson’s group. On the contrary, the employer consciously reinforced the divisions. The union’s officials complacently acquiesced. In 1934, for the many construction workers enduring the casualised poverty and powerlessness of relief works, the Depression was far from over. For those on maintenance, particularly the ‘A’ Class majority, recovery was well under way.

3. Recovery, 1934-9

Recovery during the 1930s had little to do with prosperity for most people in NSW, especially the unskilled. Although the economy improved after 1933, this was only relative to the abyss of 1930-3. NSW unemployment by mid-1935 still stood at 22.7 per cent.\(^{167}\) The unemployment rate continued to creep downwards. What is unclear, is how much this disguised the existence of relief work, perhaps the main form of employment on public works construction until the latter years of the decade. In 1936, for example, more than 80,000 NSW families were still trying to get by on the dole while about 55,000 workers toiled on the various relief work schemes.\(^{168}\) The pattern on Water Board works was perhaps better, with recovery a reality from 1936.

\(^{167}\) This figure, based on trade union returns undoubtedly still minimised the full extent of unemployment. *Economic News* (Queensland), October 1935, p. 3.

\(^{168}\) Snooks, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
Thus, for the construction workforce, the largest group of workers, the Depression had definitely not ended by 1934. For the maintenance workers it had. From mid-1933, after large scale rehiring, their numbers were to remain relatively constant until the end of World War Two. They no longer suffered work rationing but enjoyed the 44 hour week on full pay, and the gamut of paid annual holidays, sickness leave and long service leave. Their union recovered in the same way.

National economic recovery after 1933 came largely through import replacement which stimulated iron, steel and chemical production. Governments increasingly encouraged manufacturing, which continued to be city-based and could take advantage of the strong rural-urban drift during the decade. Construction languished badly and did not really recover before war broke out in 1939. Yet, the growing emphasis on urban industry also had its effects on construction. Within the general category of public works, water supply and sewerage construction continued to fare better than other areas. Despite years of contractionary government policy, recovery strengthened to 1938. Even then, the unemployment rate still stood at at least eight per cent.169

Stevens continued to defeat Lang at elections and the UAP-CP retained power for the rest of the decade. In August 1940, he too succumbed to internal dissension to be replaced by A. Mair. In the meantime, Lang's own party battles were becoming fiercer while the CPA was slowly moving back into the mainstream of the labour movement. There was a connection between these two developments. The CPA sought unity with the ALP at all costs. The ALP remained hostile to the CPA, its threatening front organisations and the whole idea of unity.

The CPA had more success in the unions. An improving labour market encouraged a new militancy on the job. CPA militants were well placed to gain from their years of struggle in the MMM or UWM. They offered aggressive leadership in the struggle to improve miserable wages and conditions. In 1934, CPA militants won the key positions in the Miners' Federation. In 1936, others won over the FIA. The following year, it was the

turn of the Waterside Workers’ Federation. At the same time, the CPA strengthened its advances towards the ALP left, and in particular among union officials. It abolished the MMM, the organisational symbol of its rank and file challenge to labourism. CPA union officials were propounding and winning traditional union demands by using traditional labourist methods. This convergence provided the basis for the major and successful challenge to the staunchly anti-communist Lang.170

Continued dissension contributed to Lang’s 1935 electoral defeat. Both sides of the party split looked to reunification but the unity achieved in February 1936 was fragile. Important unions, in particular those under CPA influence, were becoming increasingly critical. This intensified as Lang and his closest supporters unsuccessfully tried to seize sole control of the Labor Daily from the Miners’ Federation and the Labour Council’s Sydney radio station, 2KY, involving a battle for Council itself. Lang’s support was eroding fast among union officials, left or right.171

During 1937 the Labour Council and major left wing unions sponsored the Industrial Labor Party (or Heffron Labor Party after one of its leaders, R.J. Heffron MLA). During the following year, there was a general drift of union and branch affiliations away from Lang to the new party. By mid-1939, Lang’s party was crumbling from within. A unity conference in August 1939 enabled Caucus to replace Lang with W.J. McKell. With the exception of two less traumatic secessions during 1940, the internal strife in the NSW ALP was over for a decade.172

With Labor out of government in NSW after 1932, it appeared that unions might be facing their bleakest period. Massive unemployment had virtually destroyed any hope of winning on the job and had drained the unions numerically, financially and psychologically.173 The ALP was in tatters and the conflicts spilled over into and poisoned relations within the industrial movement. For those unions, like the Water Board union, tied

170 Davidson, op. cit., pp. 76-8, 87-9; Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists, pp. 70-80.
to arbitration and the ALP, there seemed little to stop a menacing Stevens doing his worst.\(^{174}\)

The result was less damaging. The Living Wage rose gradually after the end of 1933 but the Commission at times did not pass on the full price increases. In October 1937, the Commission adopted the Federal Basic Wage as the standard for the Living Wage.\(^{175}\) Only in 1934, did the Commission finally decide the question of standard hours. In the face of strong government and employer support for 48 hours, it opted to retain the 44 hour week.\(^{176}\)

After using its early depression loans to adjust its debts, the Board’s new loan funds went to major works. Day labour took over some of the work on the Pressure Tunnel. Nepean Dam reopened with day labour in June 1933. Plans to extend the Woronora scheme to provide supply to more than the outlying Cronulla-Sutherland areas remained in abeyance.\(^{177}\) The situation improved when, at the end of 1933, the Board, with the assistance of the State Government, again began extensive loan raising for construction. The special nature of water supply and sewerage construction played an important role in the priority the Government assigned to the Board’s works. A Special Unemployment Relief Loan of £2.5 million allowed for a major works programme until the middle of 1936. As loan funds arrived, the Board expanded construction. While these replaced relief funds, they initially fell well short of pre-depression levels of spending. Work on the Woronora scheme restarted after the completion of Nepean Dam in 1935.\(^{178}\)

The number working on traditional day labour construction increased after 1932, but did not move much above 1,000 until mid 1936. The policy of the government was to convert part time relief work into full time day labour.\(^{179}\) At the end of June 1934, there were 6,864 Water Board relief workers on construction, and about half that number a year


\(^{176}\) *ibid.*, p. 21.

\(^{177}\) MWSDB Reports, 1931-2, pp. ?, 1932-3, p.7; Aird, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-4.


\(^{179}\) Snooks, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
later. Of the more than 10,500 who worked on construction during 1936, about 8,500 were day labour workers and 800 were on relief work. There were also some 1,200 working for contractors. Some 7,394 day labour employees were still working at the end of June 1937. Activity soon slowed and 1,600 Board employees had lost their jobs by November. Employment on construction continued to fluctuate but remained at over 4,000 until war drastically curtailed activity in 1940. Between mid-1936 and 1940, relief work was no longer important on Board works.

In 1935, the Stevens government reconstituted the Water Board within a general public sector reorganisation. The new Board had fewer members. The government appointed the President and Vice President and there were five members, each elected by representatives from one of the constituencies of grouped local government bodies. It was to remain in this form until the end of the period covered by this thesis. The new President was the civil engineer, T.H. Upton.

The new Board adopted an Augmented Loan Construction Programme. Annual expenditure for the five years from July 1936 was to be £3m. First priority for water supply was the amplification of the Woronora system. But it was to sewerage that the vast majority of the funding was allocated. The two most important works were to be the construction of a duplicate trunk for the SWOOS running from Rockdale to Long Bay and the construction of the Northern George’s River Submain Sewer to drain unserviced areas of the southern and southwestern suburbs. But with Sydney once again slipping into the hold of a long drought, water supply became the major priority from 1937. Work at

180 MWSDB Report, 1933-4, p.3. There was still hardship among the unemployed at Woronora. At the end of 1934, the union’s Committee of Management voted a small sum for Christmas Relief for distressed members. MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 December 1934 (C). See Snoeks, op. cit., p. 10 as to the Board as an important destination of funding for reproductive public works.
181 MWSDB Reports, 1936-7, p. 22; SMH, 17 June 1937, p. 5.
182 MBWSSEA Minutes, 8 November 1937 (E).
183 This seems to contradict the contention of Butlin, Barnard and Pincus and Snoeks that unemployment relief remained important throughout the 1930s and restricted the recovery of ordinary public works. Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, op. cit., p. 106; Snoeks, op. cit., p. 19. It might also modify Snoeks’ argument that public works did not play an important role in economic recovery from the mid 1930s. Snoeks, op. cit., p. 22.
184 Larcombe, Advancement., p. 315; F.A. Bland, ‘Recovery Measures’. There appears to have been bipartisan support for the changes in parliament. See e.g. Davidson, MLA, NSWPD, Second Series, vol. 138, p. 507.
185 MWSDB Report, 1938-9, p. 5.
186 ibid., 1935-6, pp. 4-5.
Woronora quickened and, to help cope with the water supply emergency, work started on the first stage of the Warragamba scheme, including the pipelines to Prospect.\footnote{Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 109.}

The house union also recovered after 1933 as its key groups returned to their pre-depression positions, concerns and practices.\footnote{MBWSSEA Minutes, 18 December 1933 (C), 12 January 1934 (C) 13 April 1934 (C), 10 October 1934 (C), 4 October 1935 (C).} After years of stagnation and to the satisfaction of Macpherson’s group, the Board began to make large numbers of ‘A’ Class appointments.\footnote{MBWSSEA Annual Report, 1933-4, in \textit{ibid.}, 25 July 1934, Annual Report, 1934-5, in \textit{ibid.}, 31 July 1935.} Membership and finances recovered strongly. At the end of June 1933, there were 975 members and the union had a balance of just £4 on an annual income of £1677. It also had numerous outstanding debts. A year later, there were 1,500 members and a clear balance of £217.\footnote{Figures for both years in Annual Balance Sheet, 1933-4, in \textit{ibid.}, 25 July 1934. Figures to the nearest pound.} Finances, in particular, continued to improve.\footnote{The balance at the end of 1934-5 was £253 and the union had liquidated all outstanding liabilities. Annual Balance Sheet, 1934-5 in \textit{ibid.}, 31 July 1935. Two years later, £2,773 in dues income allowed a cash balance of £440, even after heavy legal costs for compensation claims. WSEU Report, 1936-7, Minutes, 14 July 1937.}

The Committee of Management also revived elections in 1934. Since Macpherson’s group had returned to power in 1931, there had only been two changes. George Brightman had taken the place of the Cob Anderson while George Champion had almost immediately replaced Coyne. The mid 1934 elections brought two more changes. Alf Bampton and Harry Archer took the places of the last recognisable construction labourers, McClure and Sam Edmonds. There were no more changes for two years. Then, W. (Bill) Hewitt and W. (Billy) Cowie joined. Alec Hayes rejoined. They replaced W. Phillips, Todhunter and Stephan. There was only one other change prior to the outbreak of war. In 1938, F. (Fred) Henneberry replaced Mannix.

These Committees had much in common with Macpherson’s earlier ones including their remarkable stability through turbulent economic and political times. He or Kirkwood probably picked the candidates and did everything possible to secure their election. Rosewell, Woodhill, Champion, Archer, Hayes and Waterson had been there already prior to the 1929 takeover. Moreover, the Committee exhibited the most significant
characteristics of the earlier groups. Maintenance workers dominated and many were supervisors. Construction day labour only recovered solidly in the late thirties. At that point, Macpherson’s rule change which eliminated branch members’ direct access to the Committee did the rest.

Of the 1936-7 Committee, Page, Rosewell and Woodhill were construction overseers. Champion and Waterson were assistant drainage inspectors. The following were ‘A’ Class: Archer (ventshaftsman), Bampton (head office chauffeur), Brightman, (workshops carpenter), Brogden (motor lorry driver), Carter (sewer maintenance), Mannix (fireman), Cuddihy (assistant turncock), Kirkwood (water maintenance), Hewitt (engine room attendant, power station). Hayes was on sewer maintenance and was ‘B’ Class as most probably were Ryan and Cowie. Carter and others soon reached the supervisory ranks. Involvement in Macpherson’s Committee of Management did not mean missing out on promotion. In fact, some cynical union members believed the opposite to be the case.192

Macpherson and Savage appear to have easily dominated the Committee, with the exception perhaps of Kirkwood and Mannix. Labor politics aside, Kirkwood was settling comfortably into his presidential chair. Rosewell proved to be Macpherson’s closest collaborator. Improving finances encouraged Macpherson and Savage to have the Committee restore many of the union office’s pre-depression conditions. The union’s car was back on the road. In June 1934, the Committee decided that the burden of dues collecting warranted buying a second. Three years later, the Committee decided a third was in order and rented Macpherson’s.193

The next question was office staff. In late 1933, the Committee of Management returned clerk Bernie Murphy to £4 per week. In late 1935, this became £5. He and subsequent office staff received generous increases later in the decade.194 The Committee also granted all the union’s full time officers the conditions which ‘A’ Class workers enjoyed. In April 1936, Macpherson and Savage returned to their pre-depression

192 McIntosh, op. cit.
193 MBWSSEA Minutes, 8 June 1934 (C), 16 February 1937 (C), 5 March 1937 (C). The rent was £2 per week. The second car also came second hand through Macpherson.
194 ibid., 8 December 1933 (C), 6 September 1935 (C). e.g. £1 increases for all, ibid., 7 May 1937 (C).
salaries.\textsuperscript{195} While these had declined relative to the Board's best paid officers, they were still very high. Macpherson's £572 (£11 per week) compared well to the Water Board industrial officer's £527, and a mechanical engineer's £540. He and Savage's (£419 or about £8.10.0 per week) had also advanced strongly against the cost of living and the wages of their membership. In the 1936 Water Board award, the top turncock (WSO) wage was less than £5 per week, a leading fitter received £5.6.0 and a sewerage maintenance man £3.19.3.\textsuperscript{196} Those on the Executive and Committee also did well. Their yearly honorariums for President, Vice President and Treasurer had been £25 during 1929-30. In 1937-8, they voted the former and last £40 and the Vice President £35. Ordinary Committee members received 10/- per meeting. The hourly rate for a maintenance man was below 2/- and a WSO received under 2/6.\textsuperscript{197} Thus the return on a two-and-a half hour meeting compared favourably with overtime rates. Some, as delegates, also received substantial sums as their share of dues they collected. All, of course, received payment for any time off organising.

During 1934, Kirkwood, Savage and Macpherson took over visiting relief works. Finances improved and the workload increased but the Committee baulked at appointing an organiser. Instead, Macpherson used his growing clerical staff to do organising work. Murphy was the first to take to the field to assist Savage. The next was T. Dalton, again hired primarily for office work. By the late 1930s, Macpherson had gained further office assistants. He chose G. (George) Brightman Jnr., W. (Billy) Cowie Jnr., and T. (Tom) Rosewell Jnr., sons of his closest supporters on the Committee of Management. W. Brogden, probably Ted's son, also worked in the office.\textsuperscript{198} The union looked very much like a closed affair. These youths, with the notable exception of Brightman Jnr., did not stay long.

These improvements needed financing and therefore a larger membership. The answer was a major day labour construction workforce. Between 1934 and 1937, relief

\textsuperscript{195} \textit{ibid.}, 6 December 1935 (C), 3 April 1936 (C).
\textsuperscript{196} Prices did not recover to their pre depression levels prior to the war. M. Butlin, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 41, 48. \textit{Re} wages and salaries: for officials, MBWSSEA Report, 1936-7, \textit{ibid.}.; for salaried officers, Water Board, List of Officers and Employees May 1935.
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{Re} honorariums, MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 May 1929 (C), 6 August 1937 (C). Wages, from 1936 award.
\textsuperscript{198} MBWSSEA Minutes, 3 April 1936 (C), 3 July 1936 (C), 4 December 1936 (C), 21 June 1937 (C).
work posed the main threat. In the late thirties, it was the return of contractors. The union’s officials appealed to the NSW Government to override the Board; but with Stevens, and then Mair, in power this was not easy.

Without Carey’s enormous influence within the ALP, the officials steered an erratic shift from almost total reliance on the party towards the industrial movement. The need for a small and badly depression-damaged union to find allies in the struggle against relief work, the breakdown of award conditions and the threat of communist front movements had done the rest. It had re-affiliated with the Labour Council in 1931 only to leave again because of financial crisis. It re-affiliated once more in late 1935. Macpherson’s group and much of the core membership had a greater appreciation of the broader union movement than prior to the Depression. They now spoke of the union as such and not solely as an ‘association’. There was also more talk of the ‘union movement’, of ‘workers’. They no longer left all appeals for solidarity lying on the table.

The sordid feuding and resulting splits in the ALP had left many house union officials cynical and bitter about their previous poles of attraction — the party machine and the parliamentary party. Disunity kept the ALP on the opposition benches where it was of no use to the Water Board union. While Lang still commanded sympathy among officials and rank and file, the desire for ALP unity — and government — grew stronger.

In 1936, the union’s officials could support Garden and his Trades Hall allies against Lang over 2KY. Still, Macpherson trusted unity would bring the hoped-for rewards. Circumstances had widened the union’s stage. The reasons for supporting the ALP in NSW

199 The union also affiliated with the Federal and State Public Service Defence Committee in 1934. *ibid.*, 8 June 1934 (C), 4 October 1935 (C).

200 *ibid., re* lists for seamen (29 January 1936), Port Kembla ironworkers (6 March 1936 [C] and moral support for the Miners’ Federation (7 August 1936).


202 In 1935, Kirkwood, vehemently anti Lang, stepped down from the chair and moved a resolution:

> That in view of the urgent necessity for unity in the Labor movement and having regard to the repeated failure of previous Unity Conferences we truly recommend that all affiliated unions and Electoral Councils of the A.L.P. demand that the Unity Conference be composed solely of the Rank and File of the Labor Movement and that no parliamentarians or paid officials of the A.L.P. be allowed to sit as Delegates to such conference, or take any part in its deliberations. MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 January 1935 (C).

203 *ibid.,* 1 May 1936 (C).
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elections remained powerfully obvious. Municipal politics, as ever, offered sympathetic Board members. The Committee continued to generously contribute union money, cars and organisers. This helped Mannix to a seat on Canterbury Council and Charlie Roe to one at Paddington. The novelty was the emerging Federal Government role in economic management, particularly over public sector borrowings and funding. Macpherson therefore fostered the union’s determination to also heavily contribute to the ALP’s federal election campaigns.

The union’s officials became even more determined to stand off from the daily skirmishing within the party. The emerging labourist influence of the Union Secretaries’ Association drew Savage, in particular, towards Trades Hall. But he supported Lang almost to the end and was a useful ‘numbers man’ at unity conferences. Like many other union officials, he eventually drifted towards proposals for lasting unity. Macpherson had been more sceptical of Lang for a long time but did not throw in his lot with Heffron. In late 1938, Savage and Kirkwood could agree that the union leave this question: ‘until the Labor Party reach a settlement and we then affiliate with the recognised party.’ On the eve of McKell’s victory over Lang, members at a General Meeting expressed ‘disgust’ at the behaviour of party officials and perplexity at the conflicting bodies and platforms. They called upon the Federal Executive and the ACTU to restore order and unity. The result pleased them.

The union needed a new, influential presence to stalk the ALP’s corridors of power. Concannon was well ensconced but his first interest was the salaried officers. Further, his intense activity had broadened. He had a much larger parliamentary role and had become

204 *ibid.*, 7 December 1934 (C), 30 January 1935, 5 November 1937 (C), 7 January 1938 (C).
205 Two contemporary officials of other unions, C. Colbourne, a left wing opponent, and J. Weir, a close friend and ally, gave substantially similar accounts - with differences in tone. Weir said that he and Savage moved to support Heffron before the final ballots because they had become so exasperated with the possibility of unity under Lang. Colbourne, *op. cit.*; Weir, *op. cit.*.
206 MBWSSEA Minutes, 14 October 1938 (C).
207 *ibid.*, 26 July 1939. This desire for federal intervention perhaps coincided with a shift towards the AWU’s position within the party. In contrast to previous occasions, the union did not send its most prominent officials to the 1939 ALP Easter Conference. The delegates were Bodkin who had retained his links with the AWU, Dalton who was a relative of the President of the NSW AWU and F. Henneberry.
part time secretary of many public sector salaried officers' unions. The new intermediary was Savage and he finally won election to the Executive in 1939.

The Depression period had encouraged Macpherson's group to change the emphasis of its political relationships. Industrially, less had changed. Given Macpherson's predilections, the Committee followed an industrial strategy of minimum resistance. If a claim was outside the award, he rarely pushed it, especially if he felt the conciliation committee would not entertain it.208 Those on the Committee who had always pushed claims on behalf of their work groups continued to do so. Mannix brought forth complaints from pumping stations, Brogden spoke up for disgruntled truck drivers and Bampton for Head Office chauffeurs. Response to these increasingly fragmented sectional demands was generally lethargic. The Committee did not move quickly even in the face of health worries for some sewer maintenance men, Macpherson's historic base.209 Even after the the mid-1930s, when construction employment improved strongly and there was a reawakened militancy in other industries, most of the union's activities centered on welfare work, checking award breaches and prosecuting the Board for workers' compensation or at common law.

With a return to easier times in the late 1930s, the old complaints of the settled, permanent workforce became more pressing. There was dissatisfaction with the speed and manner of 'A' Class appointments. There were constant complaints over breaches and the interpretation of the award as well as disputes over classification. Some of the permanent groups put in for overalls, boots and oil skins as well as for extra money for wet work and overtime.210 The Board increasingly accommodated the demands of maintenance workers. Nevertheless, concentration on these questions prompted the union to strongly resurrect its major demands from earlier decades: for an employee (in reality a union) representative on the Water Board and an independent appeals board.

It was Labor policy to have employee representation on the governing bodies of public sector authorities. Unfortunately for the union, the party was out of power. The

208 E.g. *ibid.*, 5 November 1937 (C), 10 December 1937 (C), 14 October 1938.
209 *ibid.*, 5 April 1935 (C), 3 May 1935 (C), 4 October 1935 (C).
210 e.g. *ibid.*, 9 April 1937 (C), 7 May 1937 (C). For an example of an award interpretation, *NSWIR*, 1938, p. 605
restructuring of the Board in 1935 seemed to provide a valuable opportunity. The new No. 1 Constituency of inner city councils was safe for Labor. Only local council representatives in each constituency had a vote but there was no rule that they had to vote for someone from local government. A General Meeting of the union unanimously nominated Macpherson and demanded Labor endorsement as a way of fulfilling party policy. Members at Nepean Dam were enthusiastic and raised money for the campaign.\footnote{MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 January 1935, 1 March 1935 (C); \textit{LD} and \textit{SMH}, 23 February 1935.}

The union had reckoned without aldermanic jealousies. Board seats paid very well for very little work; ‘£260 plums’.\footnote{\textit{DT}, 1 March 1935.} Lang Labor’s municipal representatives mobilised in defence of their own, defeating Macpherson for preselection. The union responded with extreme hostility. Without hesitation, the Committee of Management broke the sacred rule of party solidarity by running Macpherson against an endorsed Labor candidate. This most faithful of Labor unions was ‘ratting’. Macpherson became an ‘independent ratepayers and employees’ candidate with Savage as campaign manager.\footnote{MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 March 1935 (SC); \textit{SMH, LD, Sun} and \textit{DT}, 5 March 1935; \textit{LD}, 7 March 1935; \textit{DT}, 8 March 1935.} Unruffled by rumours of what awaited them at the party’s Easter Conference, they openly mustered support. Feelings rose further. Macpherson faced interjections while addressing St. Peters Council. Quiet, very portly and 60 years old, he challenged one hostile alderman ‘to come outside’.\footnote{\textit{Sun}, 19 March 1935, WSEU-PCB.} Only Kirkwood and the other union officials on hand managed to restrain his rush from the platform towards a more than willing foe. Election sensation in the daily press increased as the UAP-CP accused Lang party officials of intimidating aldermen to vote for the endorsed candidate. Charging Labor with ‘Tammany’, Stevens postponed the election.\footnote{ibid., 13 and 20 March 1935; \textit{NSWPD}, Second Series, Vol. 143, p. 6289.} Ultimately, Macpherson lost.

In 1939, a General Meeting again nominated Macpherson, Savage or a union appointee for No. 1 Constituency. Both officials declined, pleading pressure of union work. This was an unlikely excuse. In the end, the Committee of Management chose Ald. J.J
Carroll, a Langite publican who, once elected, was to faithfully argue on behalf of the union.216

In the meantime union officials renewed their pressure for an appeals board. Support from Board members was sufficient to get a diluted version at the end of 1938. The Committee of Management warily agreed to cooperate with the new staff committee on a trial basis. Officials still wanted an appeals board which would entrench their role in jointly regulating the Board’s personnel and industrial matters. The Board rejected half the union’s nominations to the staff committee panel. Macpherson and Savage were unacceptable because they were not Board employees. This was a decisive rebuff. Neither Brogden nor Hewitt, both ‘A’ Class workers, held sufficiently ‘senior’ positions in the Board’s service. The Board was intent that only supervisory level employees should participate.217 This was not a problem for a Committee once again in the hands of supervisors.

Recovery also meant the making of a new award. Macpherson had boasted during 1934 and 1935 that the house union’s award had not suffered the cuts inflicted on similar outside awards.218 As with most of his claims, it depended on the choice of comparison. In 1936, the union’s application for a new award went to the Conciliation Committee. Macpherson wanted to withdraw rather than face the Board’s application to reduce rates to the lower levels operating outside. Officials were unable to extricate the union and Macpherson accepted the Board’s offer rather than go to court. He admitted there had been some slight decreases but thought it the best result possible at the time. Kirkwood, perhaps sensing dismay among those worst hit, admonished members to carry out the new award: ‘in its entirety, pointing out that the employees were just as liable as the employer.’219

A comparative analysis of the 1927 and 1936 awards is most instructive.220 There were a few new definitions. Turncocks were now water service operators (WSOs), for example. The preference clause was more general, not mentioning the union by name. There were a number of improvements for construction workers. A couple of classifications

216 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 January 1939; 3 March 1939 (C); 2 June 1939 (C); SMH, 5 April 1939.
217 MBWSSEA Minutes, 10 December 1937 (C), 14 October 1938 (C), 4 November 1938 (C), 6 January 1939 (C).
218 MBWSSEA Reports 1933-4, 1934-5, op. cit..
219 MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 January 1937. Also 5 June 1936 (C0, 3 July 1936 (C).
220 For 1927, op. cit.; for 1936, copy in WSEU Archs.
of sewer miner got reductions in hours. This brought the Water Board into line with the AWU award for rockchoppers and sewer miners. Their health also benefited from the banning of pneumatic picks in sandstone tunnels or drives. Another major advance for rock miners in particular was a clause banning piece or bonus work. There was also the inclusion of a removal allowance for those sent to live in a different locality.

Perhaps the most notable change was the Board’s agreement to appoint up to 400 workers to a new ‘A’ Class Construction Nucleus. The Depression had taught the Board’s senior engineers that an overly casual labour market interfered with efficiency. The constant rotation of relief workers reduced output and, in the absence of steady work, many of the most able left to try their luck elsewhere. When it needed to urgently start up major works after 1935, the Board found the most skilled construction workers not always available. The nucleus, a core of very skilled workers, was to resolve this problem irrespective of fluctuations in the construction programme. The Board traded off some of its payroll flexibility for greater operational efficiency. The vast majority of construction workers were to remain ‘B’ Class. In the end, the Board moved very slowly on the ‘A’ Class Construction Nucleus.

The award also emphasised the distinctions between maintenance and construction workers. One element was the formalising of certain ‘A’ Class employment conditions — the ‘privileges’. Another entrenched the effect of the Depression on their relative wages. The first matter, and one over which both the Board and Macpherson gloated a great deal, was paid annual leave. Contemporary outside awards showed a variety of entitlements. Most awards for blue collar workers specified between one and two weeks’ annual leave. White collar workers and those working for example for the Maritime Service Board or in the growing public sector electricity retailing industry received between two and three. ‘A’ Class Water Board workers now received three weeks. ‘B’ Class were only entitled to up to one week’s paid ‘Good Conduct Leave’, at the Board’s discretion.

Then there was sick pay. ‘A’ Class men could take up to four weeks on full pay each year, and eight weeks if the Board was convinced of serious illness. A further four weeks was available on half pay, then longer without pay with the President’s approval. ‘B’ Class

men, many of whom faced great occupational hazards in their work, had only four days. These inequalities also appeared in the long service leave provisions. There was none for the 'B' Class. The 'A' Class gained from a generosity apparent elsewhere in the public sector.222

The disparity between 'A' and 'B' Class did not only relate to 'conditions'. It was also apparent in wages. The hourly rates of the 'B' Class were usually a little higher than those of their 'A' Class equivalents on weekly wages. This partially compensated for the lack of continuity the casuals faced due to wet weather. More interesting is the fate of wages between the 1927 award and 1936. In the meantime, the Living Wage basis had declined 16/-, from 85/- to 69/-. Of 12 representative categories from 'A' Class, all declined by less. Thus lorry drivers (up to 2 tons) had dropped 7/8.5 (to 89/-), WSOs 8/4.5 (96/9), head office chauffeurs 8/8 (88/6), electrical mechanics 9/10 (101/-), fitter/turners 12/3.5 (100/-), maintenance men, water or sewerage 13/4 (79/3), engine room attendants/firemen 13/9 (82/6), ventshaftsmen 14/- (90/6), oilers on low level sewers 14/9 (81/6), meter testers 14/10 (80/6), carpenters 14/10.5 (102/-). It is difficult to deduce a pattern. Those categories common in outside awards such as lorry drivers and the various tradesmen seem to have done well, with the exception of carpenters. On the other hand, those with very active representatives on the Committee — lorry drivers (Brogden), chauffeurs (Bampton), firemen (Mannix), WSOs (Cuddihy, Kirkwood) — also appear to have suffered least. While the Living Wage had fallen 18.82 per cent over the nine years, all these key 'A' Class rates had dipped between eight and 15.6 per cent. As with many groups under the NSW Industrial Commission, those with margins for skill or other factors did best.223

Rock miners working a 35 hour week were down 15/2.5 (to 105/10). Among eight important 'B' Class categories, they were the only ones whose wages fell by less than the 16/-. Form men on concrete work (to 83/3), pick and shovel labourers (79/9) and pneumatic pick men in trenches (92/7) all lost 17/9. Concrete packers working underground (less 18/2), timbemien (19/2) and machine men not working in sandstone (19/6) all ended up on

222 After 15 years service they got three months on full pay. A subsequent five years brought another three months and each lot of five years after that, one and a half months. Industrial News, 21 January 1937, p. 2.
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89/10. Pipelayers dropped 20/8 - to 92.7. Here, with exception of the miners, the percentage falls were between 16.1 and 18.6 per cent.

This was a negotiated rather than an arbitrated award. The Board had made strong suggestions. Macpherson and his fellow Conciliation Committee representatives had felt constrained to accept them. The alternative promised to be worse. But the question is for whom? Construction workers had lost more and, at times, significantly more than the amount of the Living Wage reduction. Their margins and loadings had also suffered. On the other hand, the ‘A’ Class had not. They had avoided the full impact of the Living Wage cuts or their margins and loadings had increased. In either case, they had gained where the ‘B’ Class had lost. Their total wages had made strong gains in real terms. ‘B’ Class total wages had gained marginally or just held on. These very different outcomes sit neatly beside the award clauses on conditions. Macpherson was clearly worried what the Commission might do to his favoured maintenance workers. He was more than prepared to trade off lower outcomes for those on construction. This was also important for the Board. It wanted to keep maintenance men happy at the same time as it was also massively expanding its day labour construction workforce.

The recommencement of the larger construction works brought up the question of branches once again. Active branches greatly reduced the time the paid officials spent following the Board’s pay cars and chasing up small local grievances. Still, the union’s officials had a number of reasons to distrust the distant and independent dam branches. The new rules made any effective electoral challenge improbable. Still, there were other problems. Branches were entitled to a third of all dues moneys collected from their members. At times of full construction activity, they accounted for half or more of the union’s total membership. This greatly reduced the cash flow — a problem for a union which had cheap dues but expensive officials. Then there was the question of local autonomy. Branch members elected their local officials. Even with Macpherson or Savage acting as returning officers, hostile elements won positions. Sizeable finances and independent branch officials could prove a potent mix. At the same time, the dams generated a great number of complaints and the Board’s local hierarchy often refused to deal
with local representatives. This meant that many grievances ended up at head office anyway.

The Committee of Management at first preferred, where possible, to replace branches with frequent visits from head office. Macpherson was well past all that so it was Savage who usually went. As the workload increased, Murphy took on an increasing share of the outside work. He continued the traditional practice — following the Board’s paycar around jobs and getting in dues just after members received their pay. This had the advantage of ensuring regular dues accounts. It also minimised fraudulent collections, a constant problem on big and small jobs alike. If there was time to hear grievances from members before the paycar sped off again, so much the better. Finally, when there was no branch, the Committee had the power to select local delegates. On the whole they endorsed rank and file selections, but they made sure to point out just where the power lay.224

Wollongong’s branch, a continuation of the local relief work organisation, did not survive long. Head office felt the numbers did not warrant its continuation after 1933. The presence of Jack Powell as secretary was probably another factor.225 During 1938, the 80 workers on the more isolated Upper Cordeaux and the 160 at Wollongong asked for their own branch. They were most unhappy with the service they received. The answer was negative but head office promised to look after their interests more closely.226

When Nepean started up again with day labour, the Board gave preference to those still living at the dam site. They found familiar faces among the overseers, some of them tyrants happier to sack a man than not.227 Kirkwood, re-opened Nepean’s branch in mid-1933. William Christie became President, the ever active Kennewell was Secretary and M. Aldred was Treasurer.228 Their branch’s relationship with union head office was to be a model for others prior to the second post-war era of sustained full employment. Branch members demanded a show of active involvement and caring. If they did not receive this they complained bitterly. If they did, they were extremely enthusiastic and the most

224 MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 January 1935 (C), 6 March 1936 (C), 14 October 1938 (C).
225 ibid., 8 December 1933 (C); MBWSSEA Annual Report for 1933-4, in ibid., 25 July 1934. H. Bennett replaced Powell as local delegate during 1935. Ibid., 4 January 1935. Later delegates were D. Smith, M. Smith and S. Thomas. Ibid., 4 March (C) and 19 August 1938 (C).
226 ibid., 10 December 1937 (C), 19 August 1938 (C).
227 Greentree, op. cit., 1 April 1985.
228 MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 July 1933
supportive of any efforts to strengthen the union. Results did not have to be outstanding. After years of depression, these men had greatly reduced expectations. With so many labourers still out of work, they were happy to have a job with award wages and conditions. Savage and Murphy were able to earn praise for continuing their time honoured practices. It is no wonder they considered Nepean Branch to be a great success.229 The branch closed again at the end of 1935 with the completion of the dam works.

Nepean branch assets, together with many of its members, went to Woronora Dam. There was already a union representative for the small amount of work in progress.230 Officials from head office opened a branch early in 1936. G. (Geoff) Broome became president, Joe Bodkin was secretary and J. Dowling treasurer. The branch soon began sending its quota of three representatives to the Committee of Management.231 Woronora was much closer to Sydney and rapid public transport than the Upper Nepean works. This made it easier for branch delegates to participate at head office. At the same time, it was still very difficult for the rank and file to get away. This even affected elections as it was necessary to go into head office during the short time and restricted hours the ballot was open. As one active member, F.R. (Ray) Greentree remarked: 'You more or less had to to lose time to go in there.'232 On the whole, dam workers did not vote. In any case, they could not have voted dam candidates directly onto the Committee of Management.

It was a large branch which therefore generated strong finances.233 At the same time, it remained quiet industrially. It took up the typical issues of dam branches — a mix of traditional industrial as well as social grievances. The former included requests linked to the special nature of the working, for example multiple shifts.234 The unsatisfactory supply of firewood for domestic cooking and water heating was a typical example of the latter.

229 MBWSSEA Annual Report, 1933-4, loc. cit.; *ibid.*, 8 June 1934 (C). For an example of diminished expectations in another industry, Merritt, 'The Federated Ironworkers' Association in the Depression', p. 49.

230 The local delegated was J. Kehoe. MBWSEA Minutes, 8 June 1934 (C).

231 *ibid.*, 7 February 1936 (C), 6 March 1936, (C); 3 July 1936 (C); 2 October 1936 (C). Representation was on the basis of one per 200 members to a maximum 600 members.

232 *op. cit.*, 1 April 1985.

233 These amounts quickly climbed to sometimes £30 per month. For 1936-7 it was £115. MBWSSEA Report, 1936-7, in Minutes, 14 July 1937. The weekly rate for a Water service operator (formerly turncock) was £4.16.9 and £5 for a fitter and turner. (MWSDB, Wages Division) Award, 28 August 1936, WSEU Archives.

234 MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 March 1936, (C); 5 March 1937 (C); *NSWIR*, 1937, p. 193.
Workers living in cottages had to cut their own wood from the Board's bulk supplies and carry it to their houses. This took time and effort after a hard day's labouring. So did lighting the copper outside the bathroom for a hot bath. The union's application to the Industrial Court for direct Board supplies failed. Inadequate bus services for the dam was another typical problem. Of the 477 working at the dam in June 1937, 128 lived outside the dam area and 210 others left the dam on weekends. For them, convenient bus-train connections were of prime importance. Branch officials generally went through head office to get satisfaction from private bus proprietors and/or the NSW Department of Transport.

Those working in the bush building the Woronora Pipeline also clamoured for their own branch. They elected their own officials but had to face head office resistance to a second branch in the area. The pipeline workers baulked at directions to join the dam branch. At a conference between the union's executive and representatives from the dam and pipeline, Kirkwood again supported the formation of a new branch. His views carried the day and the more than 300 workers living in the camps along the line soon had their own branch.

The start-up of the Warragamba Emergency Scheme created yet another large dam workforce. A new branch opened straight away. This was the most distant and isolated construction project and the one which promised, ultimately, to employ the largest workforce. It also caused the union officials (and the Board) the most trouble. The Committee responded to trouble among sewer miners and the demanding memberships of the large 'country works' by appointing Joe Bodkin as full time, 'outside' organiser.

Bodkin was the ideal person to filter communication between the conservative, cautious head office officials and the rough and ready and potentially rebellious dam navvies or sewer miners. He might agree with the former, but he spoke the language of the latter. Years of working and union activity on railway and then water and sewerage construction had prepared him well. He knew the rank and file, had been an active delegate and effective

235 MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 April 1937 (C); Greentree, op. cit.
236 NSWR, 1937, p. 195.
237 MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 March 1936, (C); 1 May 1936, (C); 3 July 1936 (C).
238 ibid., 7 August 1936 (C); 28 September 1936 (Sp); MBWSSEA Annual Report, 1936-7 in ibid., 14 July 1937. Early pipeline representatives were L.J. McCrory and D.C. Aickinson.
239 ibid., 2 July 1937 (C).
branch official. Savage and Murphy were clerks. Macpherson had been a labourer 30 years previously but now seldom left the comfort of the union office. Bodkin was the right choice. Alert, a clever speaker and shrewd negotiator, he had the ready knack of knowing how to talk himself and the other full time officials out of a tight spot before a hostile audience of dam navvies. As a tough street fighter, he could and did punch out his opponents on the rare occasions when words were not enough. And for this union, the fact that he was closely connected to the inner-city ALP did not go astray.

Bodkin spent much of his time visiting Woronora and Warragamba. At the former, industrial relations remained quiet due, no doubt, to so many members living offsite or leaving, at least on weekends. There was another, linked element. In mid 1937, 455 of Woronora’s 477 wage workers were married. Many had not had steady or any real work for years. With families to support and unemployment among labourers still rife, they could least afford to get ‘tramped’ for militant activism. The branch remained in the hands of conservative unionists, supporters of Macpherson. Broome continued his active involvement and Fred Henneberry, R. Lance-Mitchell, F. Goodwin and L. Kirkup were all prominent. According to C.E. Phipps, Broome’s main left wing antagonist, the dam developed an active educational as well as a welfare role. He also claimed that Woronora workers intended challenging the rule banning them from the Committee of Management. They failed.

At Warragamba, as on all dam jobs, work was hard indeed. Miners cut through solid rock to depths of more than 180 feet. Others had to use their jack hammers while suspended on cliff faces, supported only by ropes. Such was the desperation for steady work. With Bodkin constantly visiting and sometimes staying overnight to deal with grievances, the

240 Re Bodkin’s appointment, ibid., 14 July 1937, (C). For Bodkin as speaker: ‘They’d be ready to tear Bodkin to pieces. ... He’d talk them round in no time.’ Greentree, op. cit., 1 April 1985. Also, Interview with Sid Bodkin, op. cit..
241 MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 August 1937, (C); 5 November 1937; 3 March 1939 (C).
242 Speakers at meetings included J.B. King, ex IWW and ex Soviet Government Official, Edgar Ross of the Spanish Relief Committee and MLAs and MHRs. Garden and Savage were both to speak. The branch paid the expenses. Rising Main, April 1937, p. 4. For Phipps, Ray Greentree, op. cit., 1 April 1985.
243 Wally Edwards, loc. cit..
branch initially had a low profile.\textsuperscript{245} The response of the branch to head office was mostly similar to Woronora and Nepean — righteous anger at any apparent slight or lack of interest and effusive recognition for any gains made.\textsuperscript{246}

Those living and working along the Warragamba Pipeline were more vocal. Bernie Murphy had been visiting the camps collecting dues. This was obviously not enough. Through their representatives N. Lynne and John Riley, they demanded their own branch but the Committee refused on the basis of financial irregularities in similar circumstances. To calm the waters, the Committee promised that Bodkin would assiduously look after their interests in the future. A local committee of camp delegates was to assist him.\textsuperscript{247}

The pipeline workers soon demanded a share of their dues for local activity and union action for a camping allowance. They also wanted the Board to pay moving expenses they felt due to them under the award.\textsuperscript{248} When the Board refused, pipeline activists called a stopwork meeting. This upset Savage and the Committee had Bodkin increase his involvement at the six camps along the pipeline. When the union officials received pessimistic legal advice on the claims for moving expenses, the Committee took no action.\textsuperscript{249} Macpherson's group had gone as far as it would. The same was the case for camping allowances.

Warragamba clearly warranted closer attention. In July 1938, the Executive stationed Bodkin at the dam on a full time basis so that he could patrol those works and the pipeline more efficiently.\textsuperscript{250} Warragamba workers were very pleased about this and subsequent interest in their welfare. On more than one occasion, they proposed an increase in union dues if necessary to maintain this level of organisation. Even Savage's warning not to cease work in the case of workplace fatalities did not stir recriminations.\textsuperscript{251}

\textsuperscript{245} A. Mason was secretary but there is little evidence of local activity. MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 March 1938 (C); 6 May 1938, (C).
\textsuperscript{246} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, 10 September 1937 (C) and 7 January 1938 (C).
\textsuperscript{247} \textit{ibid.}, 6 May 1938 (C); 13 May 1938 (C); Wally Edwards, \textit{op. cit.}.
\textsuperscript{248} \textit{op. cit.}, s. 11.
\textsuperscript{249} MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 July 1938, (C).
\textsuperscript{250} \textit{ibid.}, 22 July 1938 (E).
\textsuperscript{251} \textit{ibid.}, 4 August 1938 (C).
direct representation to the Committee of Management through J. (Jack) McCarty, one of the camp secretaries.\textsuperscript{252}

While dam navvies provided moments of anxiety for Macpherson's group and the Board, rockchoppers and miners again proved autonomous and militant. Elsewhere, union militancy and job action were on the increase. The MMM had stimulated shop committees. Linking unionists irrespective of political affiliation, these continued to grow even after the dissolution of the Militant Minority. Determination to take advantage of improving economic conditions and regain pre-depression incomes was one spur to action. The inability of the ALP to win government in NSW provided another. Thus, in early 1937, the Labour Council's \textit{Industrial News} exhorted workers: 'to supplement all other action by making a determined struggle in the mines, workshops, factories, and on the streets.'\textsuperscript{253}

From 1936, the building of the duplicate trunk of the SWOOS and the North Georges River Submain brought together hundreds of miners, rockchoppers and boodlers. They had seen their wages and conditions reduced heavily during the Depression and now began demanding more from the union's officials. Some of those active in 1929-30 were among the 73 job delegates as the miners again became the focus of an organised opposition.\textsuperscript{254} A 'Rank and File advocating active unionism within the M.W.S & D. Board' put out a number of issues of the \textit{Rising Main}.\textsuperscript{255} An impressive four page monthly which mixed job news with general labour movement agitation, it was probably the work of CPA members among the rock miners.\textsuperscript{256} It spread well beyond those jobs gaining support for example, from Woronora Dam and chainmen. One reason was that, as yet, the union had no paper or journal of its own. Construction workers, in particular, were hungry for news of unionism in their industry. Macpherson supporters responded at a Special General Meeting by

\textsuperscript{252} ibid., 2 September 1938 (C); 2 December 1938 (C); 25 January 1939, 3 February 1939; 3 March 1939 (C); 5 May 1939 (C).

\textsuperscript{253} \textit{Industrial News}, 21 January 1937, p. 2. For an example of successful shop committee struggle, ibid., 29 October 1936, p. 3; 26 November 1936, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{255} Unfortunately, only a photocopy of one issue still survives.

\textsuperscript{256} Most of the news and financial contributions came from the major sewerage jobs. \textit{Rising Main}, Vol. 1, No. 4, April 1937. Author's collection.
denouncing: ‘the insidious propaganda distributed throughout the Service by the Communist Party ...’

Savage also met the challenge by taking a more active role. As a result, the Board again agreed to improve conditions, some of which were below the award standard of more than a decade earlier. There also were a number of bad accidents leading to injury and death. Workers linked this to another grievance: ‘The intense drive for measurement’ or ‘a pernicious speed-up practice’ underground. They claimed that overseers and inspectors were using lessons learnt from the bonus system on the Pressure Tunnel to extract maximum output at the expense of safety and health. A lingering end to a long depression gave courage to the Board and its supervisors. In practical terms, this meant inadequate timbering of drives and general lack of care.

Echoing earlier rockchoppers and sewer miners, contributors to the Rising Main stressed the first priority of workers’ health and their own responsibility for ensuring it. But miners feared victimisation. It was also no use relying on the union’s officials. After all, much of the union’s Committee of Management were overseers and gangers, and: ‘the paid officials never put up a fight to reinstate any victimised workers.’ The Rank and File called for stronger job organisation. This meant frequent job meetings and meetings of mandated job representatives to overcome the fragmenting effects of shiftwork.

A strike soon broke out and continued for about one week. Cavanagh was, once again, at its centre. The issues combined safety, amenities and tyrannical discipline. Cavanagh’s frontal confrontations on these questions made him extremely unpopular with supervisors. He soon received his marching orders for supporting a workmate sacked for protesting those very issues. As on previous occasions, his courage and forthrightness earned him his workmates’ solidarity. Those on his shift at No. 9 Shaft struck in support and began trying to talk other shifts out.

257 MBWSSEA Minutes, 21 May 1937. The resolution cleverly linked the attack on the CPA with support for the ALP at the following Federal and NSW elections.
258 ibid., 27 January 1937, 9 April 1937 (C); DT, 5 July 1934 and Sun, 7 September 1934 WSEU-PCB.
259 Rising Main, Vol. 1, No. 4, April 1937, pp. 1, 3, 4.
260 ibid., p. 1.
Cavanagh enlisted the union officials' support. Their response could not have been unexpected. Macpherson muttered about strikes in the industry being illegal. Savage worked furiously to settle the strike by isolating the strikers trying to get them back. As a way of achieving both, he took up award breaches and job anomalies with the project engineer who promised not to sack the strikers, to rectify all grievances and for the Board to erect meal sheds at every shaft. Further, in stark contrast to past practice, Macpherson received highest level Board encouragement for the activities of job reps.

This was unheard of and indicates that the Board and the union officials had come to an arrangement. They did not rely only on the carrot. Savage sacked Cavanagh as delegate. The Committee backed him and declared that Cavanagh would: 'not be permitted to act as Representative for this union in the future under any circumstances.' It also threatened his workmates with expulsion if they did not return to work. Given the award's preference clause, expulsion ultimately meant the sack. In exchange for continued cooperation from the employer, the union’s officials were policing industrial order on Water Board works. In the meantime, they called a meeting of sewerage construction job reps.

The 63 representatives present at the meeting showed strong support for Cavanagh but, in the end, by 36 to 19, backed Savage's call for a return to work. The union’s Executive was to take up Cavanagh’s reinstatement. This needs some explanation. First, strike action had forced Savage to act. The consequent resolution of a number of bitter grievances made Savage look good. Savage was at the peak of his popularity. Still relatively young, with a more assertive negotiating style than Macpherson, his prominence within the ALP brought him more respect among construction workers. Finally, just prior to the strike, the Rugby League had appointed him as Manager of the Australian team's tour of England. With Sydney’s working men besotted by that game, this was his crowning glory before union members. Many were prepared to take Savage at his word.

261 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 June 1937 (Job Reps).
262 ibid., 21 June 1937 (C), also 19 June 1937 (SC).
263 Under the union’s rules, Rule 24 (g) forbade members from taking part in strikes. Rule 24 (a) allowed the Committee to expel members for breaching union rules.
264 Wally Edwards worked on the same floor as Upton and remembered Savage strongly arguing matters. op. cit.
265 The job representatives' meeting finished by congratulating him 'by acclamation'. MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 June 1937 (Job Reps).
There were other reasons too. The action of the few strikers from No. 9 Shaft had led to the winning of almost all demands bar Cavanagh’s reinstatement. Both sides had their core of supporters. Others may have supported Cavanagh on principle but, given the circumstances, were willing to trust in the union’s officers. For most, this was probably the first full time job on award wages for seven years. They knew too that even the biggest jobs were prone to shutdowns, layoffs and intermittent hiring. There was still high unemployment among construction labourers. They were loath to throw away a chance to rebuild their lives. Three factors support this analysis. First, many present, including Savage’s supporters, complained over inadequate safety precautions and conditions and supported the militants’ fall-back position which involved no risk but elevated Cavanagh’s supporters. Thus, the meeting elected four experienced miners to work with the Committee of Management over conditions for underground workers. The four were Montgomery, Williams, Tynan and England. The last, in particular, supported Cavanagh and Williams.

With Savage away, one result of the Cavanagh strike was that Bodkin visited the major sewer mining jobs much more often. There continued to be complaints over dismissals and other disciplinary matters, but attention soon focussed on the practice of using shoulder-mounted jackhammers. Job delegates encouraged a joint campaign with other unions to have the dangerous practice abolished. Other grievances prior to the outbreak of war included award breaches over hours of work and a renewed speed up. Overall, the Committee of Management appears to have devolved a certain amount of activity onto the sewer miners’ reps, under Bodkin’s alert gaze. Reps could not make important decisions and were bound by the union’s no strike policy. Still, it provided activists like Williams with a platform and a certain prestige within the union. Together

266 For Cavanagh: Williams, H. Lynne, O. Murphy, A. Mayne and G. Davidson were the most prominent. Vic Henneberry was, like his brother Fred, a prominent professional boxer and Macpherson supporter. E. Stephenson also supported Savage. ibid., 25 June 1937 (Job Reps)

267 Even Tynan, a job rep lost his job. It appears that he, like most of the others, gained reinstatement through union head office. ibid., 14 July 1937, 6 August 1937 (C), 5 November 1937 (C), 6 May 1938 (C)

268 The main union to contact was the AWU. Bodkin, was an obvious member of the deputation. The 1938 half AGM also sent Williams and the newly returned Ughie Lynch. ibid., 2 February 1938.

269 NB For working a miner a 40 instead of a 35 hour week in dangerous sandstone dust, the Chief Industrial Magistrate fined the Board 10/- plus costs. ibid; Daily News, 13 April 1939, MWSDB-PBC.
with a number of other developments internal to the union, this kept sewer miners and rockchoppers relatively quiet if not always satisfied.

Notwithstanding the return of union elections, the effects of the Depression had increased the centralised control in the hands of the ruling groups. Repeated calls for the reintroduction of monthly or quarterly General Meetings fell on deaf ears. At times, officials sabotaged General Meeting resolutions. The one major innovation was the publication, after much Executive discussion, of a union journal from 1938. The Water and Sewerage Gazette, began life as a high quality monthly which carried advertising. The Gazette immediately ran into financial difficulties. However, it had already become a firm favourite with the more isolated construction workers pleased that the union made an effort to keep them in touch. Warragamba members enthusiastically supported its retention and were happy to support an increase in dues to make this possible.

With the dam branches and sewer miners mostly appeased by the efforts of Savage and Bodkin, Cavanagh kept up his attacks but Williams softened. Fragmentary opposition also came from more isolated workers closer to head office. The main figure was Stan Roy. Injured while working on the Pressure Tunnel, the slightly built Roy had found ‘light’ duties as a chainman. Although they disagreed with his CPA politics, he won a great deal of respect among chainmen for his personal integrity. Their support was not enough for him to win his frequent challenges for the union’s presidency. Roy found an ally in fellow party member Bert Anderson, a head office chauffeur and therefore ‘A’ Class. Although as consistently active and coherent as Roy, he was less effective at a personal level. They probably formed a team with sewer miners D. England, Ossie Murphy and E. Nelson. There was also opposition from L. Windsor, G. Johnson and E. Davis, reps of disgruntled workers at the very large Ryde pumping station.

270 MBWSSEA Minutes, 20 July 1934 (C), 27 January 1937, 23 March 1937 (CE).
271 As a result, dues increased by 1½ pence per week. As dues had remained at 6d. until then, it was still a very cheap union. ibid., 21 June 1937 (E), 27 July 1938 (E), 14 October 1938 (C), 2 December 1938 (C), 6 January 1939 (C), 25 January 1939.
273 ibid.
274 MBWSSEA Report, 1936-7, op. cit.; Minutes, 6 August 1937 (C).
These groupings did not derive from job organisation at large workplaces. They were active in General Meetings, but these happened only twice yearly. This explains Roy's (unsuccessful) campaign in favour of a return to monthly meetings. Given the constant sectional identification of much of the workforce, cohesion was unlikely. Other opponents came from maintenance areas but it is unclear whether politics, sectional or personal grievances or the wish to earn the handsome Committee attendance fees was their main motivation.

**Conclusion**

In 1928, large numbers of former PWD labourers entered the Board's workforce as it expanded its works programme. These developments created the conditions for the takeover of the government of the union. It threatened to overthrow the edifice which Macpherson had so carefully nurtured for two decades. The challengers had little idea of how to effect so radical a change. Internally divided, they succumbed to the machine they had sworn to destroy. The depression which followed closely almost immediately removed the basis of the challenge by ridding the union of construction workers. Macpherson and his supporters returned to power and entrenched their hold. They also showed more initiative on behalf of traditionally hostile groups. These, in turn, had lower expectations. Activity to secure their day labour employment won high praise. It had also become a necessity for the officials; their comfortable livelihoods dependent on the flow of membership dues from construction workers.

The officials took up the question of public works spending to a greater extent than previously. At the same time, the terrain was changing. During the depression and slow recovery, Federal governments became involved in economic policy and management on a larger scale. Importantly for the Board and its union, this included the extent, pace and direction of works development. This translated directly into workforce and union membership numbers. Lobbying for more day labour spending brought risks of another takeover. Macpherson's rule changes solved that problem. Further, the slowness and unevenness of recovery limited construction labourers' continuity of employment prior to

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the outbreak of war. There was little chance of Macpherson and his group facing another challenge for some time.

Through all this, ‘A’ Class workers on maintenance continued to gain. With the exception of one year, their employment remained safe, their conditions secure. During the worst of the depression, their real wages had risen steeply, at least for a time. Later, awards improved their relative standing. In a turbulent world, they toiled in a peaceful and protected garden. They had every reason to support Macpherson and Savage in their strategy of accommodating the Board’s operational and financial priorities. They had every reason to support the officials’ involvement in and use of the ALP and arbitration to further the position of the employer, the house union and some of its members.

As before, an appeals board and employee representation on the Board beckoned. Once again, the union was to suffer disappointment. Internal strife in the NSW ALP was one impediment. The end of Lang promised well. Savage and the union had changed sides in time. They were well placed to take advantage of a future McKell government.