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

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Chapter 5

1939-44
Introduction

The market for unskilled labour was a key element influencing the Water Board union's character and behaviour. Depression and 'recovery' had made this even clearer. They had also brought into play another factor, the entry of federal politics into the Board's funding. These were of fundamental importance during different stages of the war. Employment or the lack of it had always been a central concern in labourers' lives. Construction labourers suffered acutely from the lack of continuity in their industry. Water supply and sewerage increasingly received construction priority but the general state of the market for unskilled labour continued to affect those doing the work. Thus, while more labourers were likely to find work in the industry, they had no job security. Periods of unemployment, of having to move to other areas and to other industries still punctuated their working lives. Even when they had jobs on water supply or sewerage, there were always many ready, willing and able to take their place.

Due to the urgency of their work and the source of their funding, maintenance workers did much better. They received permanency from an employer dependent on their loyalty and conscientiousness. Chronic, high unemployment for labourers outside their own sheltered area of employment was a constant reminder to the 'A' Class of their good fortune. As a result, their interest and identification turned inwards to their industry-employer with whom they had struck an unwritten bargain of mutual convenience. The union was the medium. The 'B' Class remained excluded. Nevertheless, they had their uses. Their great numbers bankrolled the union, providing a comfortable living for its officials and resources for lobbying and legal activity on behalf of all members.

Events since 1929 had made the distinction between the aptly termed 'A' and 'B' Class even more brutally clear. The union had begun and functioned on behalf of the conservative, municipal labourist goals of a large group of the 'A' Class. When they lost
control of the union, it was the effects of economic forces which soon returned it to their hands. The Depression literally wiped the 'B' Class out of employment and off the membership books. The 'A' Class remained at work and financial members of the union. Only the most fortuitous combination of full employment and a large scale Water Board works programme would enable the dispersed and disinherited 'B' Class to mount a successful and enduring challenge. Prior to the outbreak of World War Two, such circumstances had not occurred. The major groups remained isolated from each other on distant projects. Macpherson's rule changes had virtually destroyed any challenge from the large branches. More than ever, any attempt to win union elections needed the support of large groups of disaffected maintenance workers. Opposition to Macpherson's leadership was inseparable from more acute opposition to the Board. But maintenance men had done well. Therefore, while mass unemployment and misery were either a reality or a recent memory, rebellion from those quarters was likely to remain rare and muted.

The war was to finally provide full employment simultaneous with a large Water Board works programme. The economic conditions for an increase in job organisation existed by the end of 1940 but support for the war effort reduced demands and encouraged sacrifice. Political loyalties added a further element to this spirit of cooperation. Construction labourers increasingly worked alongside workers from more active unions. This exposure to more militant organisational methods had an effect as the period of greatest military danger passed. By 1943, frustration with wartime sacrifices stimulated outbreaks of conflict. As construction workers remained under the tight control of the Federal Government and its bureaucracy, wartime controls again thwarted any real challenge.

1. Politics, economics and public works

Australia entered the war in September 1939 still preoccupied with the Depression. The advent of war was no surprise. The Federal Government and bureaucracy had already made contingency plans. Yet, in reacting to the Depression experience during the first eighteen months of the war, the government did little to bring in overall war planning or regulation. Unemployment was still high, especially among the unskilled, and a recent downturn had shaken any complacency about the strength and durability of recovery. Further, the initial
impact of the war was to cut off export markets, dislocate some manufacturing production and investment. Unemployment rose and, despite enlistment, remained high until the end of 1940. As a result, the workforce, the labour movement and some policy makers made employment levels the most pressing priority. R.G. Menzies' UAP-Country Party Government had the barest majority in federal parliament. It too had little choice but to tread lightly in this area. Thus, providing jobs became an important element even for funding war-related construction at the end of 1939. As S.J. Butlin later lamented: 'the spectre of unemployment haunted all discussion of policy' during the first year and a half of the war.1

In its approach to managing a war economy, Menzies' government relied mostly on appeals to patriotism and self interest expressed through market forces. At the same time, during late 1939 and especially after the fall of France in June 1940, it laid the legislative groundwork for later government controls. One of the main concerns was control of the labour market to maintain sufficient supplies for allied nations and for Australia's military forces. High unemployment among the unskilled coexisted with severe shortages of skilled workers for the munitions industry. Some of the earliest areas of government regulation therefore included provision for industrial conscription in the munitions and related engineering industries. The government also used its special powers to introduce dilution agreements in the metal and boot trades. This allowed for the training of skilled workers outside the apprenticeship system.2

Yet, the war seemed distant and there was resistance from different social groups to greater government controls. Even among the many who supported the government's decision to commit Australia alongside Britain, there was a strong feeling that living standards should not suffer. For unionists, this meant, at the least, maintaining their unions' existing freedom of movement. Strikes continued, particularly in coal mining. More radical sections of the organised working class were extremely hostile to any suggestion that they again make sacrifices for God, King and Country. For some, the experience of the Great

War had left a distaste for fighting for England and its ruling class. The long, bitter depression years also created scepticism as to the worth of fighting or sacrificing for an Australia which had treated so many so poorly.3

Local communists added an extra, ideological support to these misgivings. Since the mid-thirties, members and sympathisers of the Communist Party had been the most active group in anti-fascist propaganda. However, in August 1939 Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler. According to the Soviet rulers, the war was simply a struggle between competing imperialist powers; the USSR remained neutral. The working classes in nations at war were to remain uninvolved while building the basis of a revolutionary insurrection. In a complete about-face, the CPA like fraternal parties elsewhere, fell in behind Moscow. Unions under CPA control pushed for a peace conference abroad and continued industrial militancy at home.4 Menzies, whose role in the 1938 pig iron dispute was ample evidence of lack of anti-fascist commitment, reacted by having the CPA declared illegal in June 1940. This enlarged his anti-union reputation. It was a warning to militant workers of what to expect in the name of the war effort.

Menzies' November 1940 budget exacerbated to their suspicions. War spending exceeded estimates and the government cast around for additional sources of revenue. The initial proposals included the spreading of federal income tax to the lowest paid workers, until then exempt, and increased sales tax on items such as alcohol and tobacco which hit the poorest consumers hardest. Responding to emphatic public protest and its precarious parliamentary position, the government eased its exactions but the result was still a significant reduction in the living standards of many of those earning least.5

Because of the prominence given to unemployment, spending on construction did not immediately suffer from Australia's entry into war. State governments had traditionally been responsible for maintaining employment levels. In general, they viewed with great

disfavour any attempts to reduce the loan finance available to them for increasing employment. Nevertheless, by mid-1940, the Loan Council had instituted central monitoring of expenditure on all public works and had cut the allocation of funds to the states by more than 30 per cent. Most of what remained was to go on war related construction. On the other hand, there was an enormous boost of funds for federal works. When these fell behind schedule, state governments and instrumentalities used the existence of high unemployment to maintain spending while strongly resisting further cuts. But they were swimming against the tide. The Loan Council continued to tighten its control over all loan works and, in August 1941, reinforced the orientation of spending to works supporting the war effort.6

The Mair administration in NSW was one of the least concerned with the employment question. Like the previous Stevens government, it was loathe to contribute to rebuilding of employment levels as Australia edged out of the Depression. On the other hand, it was vociferous in its support of the war effort. In its patriotism, the government found a new reason for its lack of energy over public works. In May, W.J. McKell led a united ALP to a sweeping general election victory. He had criticised the Stevens and Mair governments for being slothful and ineffectual in encouraging recovery. In particular, he had accused them of neglecting, abandoning or running down important developmental works and essential services, including the Water Board's. McKell promised prosperity through planned development.7

The Federal UAP-CP Government was also collapsing from within and soon lost office. With John Curtin as ALP Prime Minister from October 1941, the government's attitude to the war changed dramatically. The pace of economic regulation and other government intervention intensified. A number of factors contributed. In June, the armies of the Third Reich had invaded the Soviet Union. Spearheaded by communist parties faithful to the Kremlin's cause, masses of left wing sympathisers now saw the war effort against the Axis powers as vital to the defence of the socialist state and to the democratic rights of the working class elsewhere. In Australia too, there was now growing left wing

6 ibid. 353, 381-2.
support for involvement in the war. The Federal Government requested and received the cooperation of union leaderships previously hostile to the war effort. In particular, CPA union officials became especially zealous in pushing their memberships for maximum output, minimum disruption and the greatest possible identification with the ‘patriotic war’ effort.\(^8\) The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941, cemented the issue. Australia went to war with Japan and armed conflict moved menacingly closer to Australia’s shores. It was no longer just Britain’s war.

The broader national consensus over Australia’s involvement in the war allowed Curtin’s government to more tightly regulate the economy. The Japanese push south through Asia, and especially the bombing of Darwin, increased the cohesiveness of the war effort. By the end of 1940, the workforce was nearing full employment. The closing of this traumatic experience removed another hindrance. In a period of crisis, a Labor Government could more readily deliver controls and restrictions on working class economic activity than their parliamentary opponents. Some of these controls were of an unprecedented severity. Curtin’s government froze wages, extended industrial conscription and introduced military conscription. It also abolished most public holidays and award annual leave.\(^9\)

The military forces and munitions industry had been the immediate priorities for the early war economy. With the transfer to a ‘total war’ economy, a third priority emerged. There was an urgent need for military installations for Australian and newly arriving US troops as well as for defence fortifications. It became imperative to find the finance and labour for their construction. A new Manpower Directorate controlled the allocation of all labour, whether for military or civil tasks.

Early in 1942, the Federal Government appointed an Allied Works Council (AWC) to assume central control over the state and semi government bodies with the necessary construction experience. All construction works for military purposes became ‘Allied Works’. The AWC had the power to conscript and deploy labour in the same way as the

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military but began with the existing labour of those instrumentalities. These workers became part of a Civil Constructional Corps (CCC) organised for large scale wartime works. As their numbers were soon insufficient, the AWC began to heavily draft others. To avoid conflicting with the needs of the military, the AWC conscripted older workers, those between 45 and 60 years old. Later, the minimum age became 35. In other industries too, there were severe shortages of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Increasingly, the entry of women into the paid workforce kept manufacturing industry, in particular, running. The AWC determined that the CCC workforce was to remain completely male. For strategic reasons, much of the work was in the northern Territory and Queensland. CCC workers from the southern states, and particularly NSW, had to go there. An aging workforce, doing long hours of arduous toil in a harsh climate meant high rates of injury, sickness and breakdown.  

The government successfully co-opted almost the whole union movement within this heavy centralisation of control. Union officials sat on tripartite bodies advising the government on personnel and industrial relations questions. More than ever, Australian unions had become a part of the machinery of state. The AWC Director General had power over all CCC employment conditions. Yet there were no great changes. After consultation with union officials, the AWC declared that workers would receive the existing award pay rates for the areas where they worked. They were also to retain their existing union membership and continue to pay their union dues. These arrangements caused discontent. Queensland wage rates were well below those in the southern states. Workers forcibly transferred to Queensland therefore suffered large pay losses. Responding to growing resentment, the AWC transferred this problem and other CCC industrial powers to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. In March 1943, the Court brought down a general award of £5.10.0 for a standard 44 hour week. This was a relatively high rate in comparison to many existing awards even in NSW. Unions generally approved the changes.  

By this time, the course of the war had taken a decisive turn. In both the European and Pacific theatres, Allied forces had stopped the Axis powers and were forcing them back. Federal wartime administrators were aware that the economy could not long stand a continuation of the existing war demands. There were now two reasons to fundamentally alter direction. First, US forces were now playing an increasingly dominant role in pushing the Japanese back. Australia's strategic role therefore became one of providing food and materials for the US and British forces. Rural industry desperately needed more workers to cope. Given the very full employment, there had to be an urgent restructuring of the workforce. Those constructing military works became the first target for demobilisation. In August 1943, the government began reducing the CCC. After that, there was a continuing running down of the AWC workforce in favour of defence support and civilian production.13

There was another reason for beginning a planned demobilisation and reconversion. Labor governments in Sydney and Canberra much more explicitly linked successful completion of a still bitter and bloody war to discussion of a post-war order founded on greater social justice. There was to be an array of concessions and improvements for those who had suffered most during the Depression and sacrificed during the war. Full employment was the major objective. In December 1942, Curtin set up a Department of Post-War Reconstruction to oversee this programme. The Federal Treasurer, J.B. Chifley, became its Minister.

While the war lasted, the first steps towards rebuilding a civilian economy, improved social security provisions and the associated rhetoric of a better post-war Australia were to help lift morale at home and at the front. Alongside the deepening war weariness, there was also the problem of containing inflation in a rigid, fully employed economy with greatly repressed demand. The government had kept consumer production very low and house building had almost ceased. These sectors had to expand once again to meet rising expectations. The release of large numbers of CCC workers would help decrease the

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demand for labour, keeping labour costs down. Wage pegging continued and there was a tightening of government direction over the labour force.\textsuperscript{14}

Nevertheless, an increasing number of industrial disputes were evidence of rising resentment. The government had raised new wartime finance by depressing personal consumption and raising taxes. This spelt reduced living standards for wage and salary earners. As the threat of invasion receded, the enforced austerity and tight controls became harder to accept. The military rigidites of working life, the continued heavy overtime and the deteriorating conditions of work in many places all began to foster a new irritation among many workers. Rank and file unionists were now less enthusiastic about making the same sacrifices. In those unions under CPA control there was an emerging dissatisfaction with the officials' emphasis on maximising production at all costs. Industrial conflict, whether individual or collective, was on the rise. The absentee rate grew and strikes became increasingly common. At the same time, the CPA suffered strong challenges and reverses in key union elections. To calm the gathering storm, the government re-introduced public holidays and award annual leave.\textsuperscript{15} This was to have little effect as strike activity increased notably from 1945.

2. The Water Board and its workforce

The war thus massively increased the growing influence federal government decisions had on the Sydney Water Board's operations. It also affected the Board's workforce in a number of ways. The most obvious was through enlistment. By the middle of 1941, 411 Board employees had signed up for military duty. A year later the number was 784 and after a further 12 months, it was 912.\textsuperscript{16} As the Federal Government increasingly placed the economy on a war footing, the focus of the Board's activity moved to supporting the military machine.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} ibid. pp. 362, 367, 555, Gollan, \textit{Revolutionaries}, pp. 109, 113.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Butlin and Schedvin, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 339-42, 370-1; Johnston, 'The Communist Party and Labour Unity', pp. 82-4.
\item \textsuperscript{16} MWSDB Reports, 1940-1, p. 35; 1941-2, p. 50; 1942-3, p.45. Total Board employment figures (including CCC workers) at these dates were 5,546, 6,809 and 7,094.
\end{itemize}
The Board publicly agreed with the government's downgrading of civil in favour of military works. It had little option. The Loan Council slashed the Board's own greatly reduced loans estimates. This meant drastic reductions to planned spending. Between July and November 1939, 2,600 Water Board workers lost their jobs. Faced with continuing scarcity of loans, the Board intended to get rid of another 800 each month until February. And this, when continuing and more desperate water shortages due to the worsening drought were causing the Board acute embarrassment and prompting cruel taunts from the press and public. Politically, this made the Board extremely vulnerable to demands for a thorough restructuring or replacement by a single expert commissioner. In tough times, with loan moneys for civil works scarce, it had to find ways of justifying expenditure for water supply construction.

Over the half century of its existence, the Board, as an institution, had developed an increasingly sophisticated political intuition. In depression, it claimed for itself exceptional benefits for employment generation. During the war, it began to redefine some of its major works in terms of defence necessities. This was the case for the completion of an enlarged Woronora Dam and the pipeline which connected the dam to Penshurst Reservoir, south of Sydney. These provided southern Sydney with an alternative supply source independent from the Upper Nepean dams, reducing the city's vulnerability to air attack on key conduits or reservoirs. Even the completion of the first stage of the Warragamba scheme, particularly the second pipeline, and testing for the main dam became increasingly important for the war effort by providing extra water when needed.

The Board also addressed the continued depression trauma, relating it to the war effort. There was nothing better, of course, for encouraging full employment than metropolitan water supply and sewerage works which also offered solid financial returns upon completion. The national emergency demanded full concentration on the war effort,

18 For information on the drought, *SMH*, 2 April 1940. The strongest attacks on the 'No-Water Board' came from the *Mirror*, e.g. 7 and 13 January 1942; Press Cuttings Books (PCB), MWSDB Archs.
19 MWSDB Reports, 1939-40 (t), p. 14; 1940-1 (t), p. 11; 1941-2 (t), p.14. The pro union *Daily News (DN)* also staunchly pushed for increased finance for the Board to carry on a full works programme. The reasons were public health, national defence and full employment. e.g. *DN*, 4 September 1941, Press Cuttings Books (PCB), MWSDB Archs.
said the Board, and this meant (as in peacetime) no halting of major Water Board projects already underway. 20 When the drought finally broke in June 1943, much of the Woronora scheme was completed. It was not long too, before an easing of the war emergency made possible the return to a complete construction programme.

For most of the war, much of the new water and sewerage works were for military camps and installations. 21 Water Board employees also worked feverishly to prepare works of civil defence in and around Sydney. Others, armed with pick handles, guarded strategic Board works. More than anything else though, wartime work meant constructing the Captain Cook Graving Dock for the navy at Woolloomooloo, in the heart of the city. After much political controversy, and against a most strenuous public and private campaign by the Board during mid-1940, the Premier Mair convinced the Federal ALP Government to allocate overall control of the project to the PWD. 22 The PWD then divided the work among other public construction bodies. The Water Board had to content itself with control over building the main 'body' of the dock.

Construction began in December 1940. In early 1942, Water Board workers took over and began excavation works. With the war pressing more desperately, their work continued around the clock, seven days a week. By the end of the year, they could begin the massive concreting job which they had largely completed by early 1944. From then, the Board's CCC labour concentrated on subsidiary works. Much of the work had ended for Water Board labour by the official opening of the dock in March 1945. 23

At times of peak activity, some 4,000 employees, the bulk of the workforce on Water Board jobs, worked at the graving dock. By then, they and the rest of the wage workers on the Board's defence-related works worked in the CCC. By the end of June 1943, the Board had spent some £6m. on military projects. Out of a total workforce (wages and salaries) on Water Board work of 7,041, there were 4,631 on defence jobs, of whom 3,902 were CCC workers. 24 These figures declined as the graving dock neared completion.

20 MWSDB Report, 1940-1 (t), p. 11.
22 e.g. SMH, 6 June 1940; Daily News (DN), 20 June 1940; DT, 5 July 1940; SMH, 10 July 1940, Press Cuttings Books(PCB), MWSDB Archs.
24 ibid. 1942-3, p. ?.
1939-44

War also wrought more general changes to the working lives of Water Board workers. At its outbreak, and even to the end of 1940, high unemployment still plagued the construction workforce.25 Thereafter, there was a growing shortage of labour for construction. The Board tried advertising before relying on the NSW government procuring men from country areas. By the middle of 1942, the Board, like other public employers, had to use the National Service Office to get workers. The CCC draft then took over. Another way of reducing labour mobility on essential construction was for the Federal Government to declare certain works ‘protected’ undertakings. For those on ‘protected’ Water Board works, there was to be no enlistment nor dismissal, but they could not leave.26

Throughout the economy, shortages were most glaring among skilled building workers. On Water Board construction, this meant carpenters in particular. The general trend towards dilution suited the Water Board’s way of doing things. It had always used ‘rough’ carpenters, in particular, regressing them into the labouring ranks when it suited and keeping the problematic and independent craft unions at arm’s length. To overcome the wartime shortage, in March 1942 the Board organised a carpenters’ training school on works connected to the Woronora Pipeline. Here: ‘67 men received elementary training such as is suited to a great deal of the carpentry in the the Board's works’.27 This was just a continuation of the Board’s traditional practice of using promoted labourers in place of qualified craftworkers. Many of these went straight onto the pipeline works. Wartime shortages of materials also caused variations in the number of workers on the pipeline during 1941-2. At the end of June 1942, there were 250.28 Similar shortages of pipes, plant and skilled and unskilled workers due to the demands of the AWC plagued progress on the Warragamba Pipeline.

As for other areas of construction, the international wartime phenomenon of massive female employment did not reach the Sydney Water Board.29 Construction and

25 The Board provided special funds for Christmas relief work for between 500 and 700 ex employees in 1939 and 1940. MWSDB Report, 1940-1, p. ?; DN, 9 November 1939; SMH, 24 November 1939, PCB.
26 Butlin and Schedvin, op. cit., pp. 16-7.
27 MWSDB Report, 1941-2, p. ?.
28 ibid., 1940-1, pp. 12-3, 1941-2, p. ?.
29 The only repeated indication of women employees in Board or union records are the ‘lady cleaners’ at the Board’s head office. e.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 February 1940 (C).
maintenance work remained the province of men. One source of extra labour was the rehiring of former employees or the continued employment of those due for retirement.\textsuperscript{30} Then there were the AWC and the CCC draft. The Board also found replacements elsewhere. It recruited some 300 Chinese workers stranded in Australia as a result of shipping losses. There were also smaller groups of Fijians and Malays, subjects of British colonies. China was an allied country so there were none of the difficulties of employing ‘enemy aliens’. Nor were there any problems about these Chinese workers replacing or competing with workers of European origin, a traditional element in Australian working class racism. The Board was 800 workers short at Warragamba. The Chinese offered no threat.\textsuperscript{31}

The very pro-union Federal Minister for Labour, E. Ward, made sure the Board hired them through the house union’s office and under award rates and conditions. Naturally, they joined the union. Given this situation, Savage was only too happy to welcome them. Other union leaders agreed, although the Secretary of the BLF thought the Chinese should live in a separate camp as: ‘Their ways of living are foreign to Australian workers.’\textsuperscript{32} Obviously the Board agreed as it placed the Chinese in a special camp with their own cooking and living conditions. There was no antagonism between these new groups and existing Board workers.\textsuperscript{33} Chinese delegates sent in dues from the isolated camp and there was no problem with continued membership.

3. The Water Board union

The first time the war really entered the Water Board union’s deliberations was in June 1940. The Executive had to deal with the question of unpaid overtime for workers doing defence picket duty. There was not much enthusiasm for ‘national sacrifice’. Again fearing wage cuts for ‘A’ Class members, the union’s officials were desperately trying to avoid the Board opening new award hearings. The Executive therefore decided to cooperate with the Board

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{ibid}, 3 September 1941 (C).
\textsuperscript{31} Many non or even anti-fascist residents born in axis countries suffered wartime incarceration as a consequence of nationalist paranoia. For the wartime ‘left’ and attitudes to the Chinese, Gollan, \textit{Revolutionaries and Reformists}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{DT}, 1 May 1942. PCB.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{SMH}, 30 April 1942. PCB; The Fijians worked on the Nepean Dam spillway, the Chinese and Malays at Warragamba. Greentree, \textit{op. cit.}, 1 April 1985; Allsopp, \textit{op. cit.}, 13 March 1984.
and waive any claims to payment for: 'overtime necessary within reasonable limitations.'

Rosewell, a World War One regimental sergeant major, put this position most forcefully.

There was a strong feeling that the war was no excuse for ignoring the award.

Thus, until 1942, the operations and policies of the Water Board union remained seemingly unaffected by the war. The general feelings of uninvolvelement or scepticism abroad in the union movement seems to have even reached this conservative backwater. In January 1941, a General Meeting approved Bert Anderson's motion strongly protesting against the Menzies government's: 'rich man's budget ... further worsening the living conditions of the great mass of the people', to the benefit of 'the monopolies'. The motion also included tough criticism of Curtin and his colleagues for cooperating so closely with the government. A further resolution protested against Acting Prime Minister Arthur Fadden's verbal attacks on the pro-CPA State Labor Party. Water Board unionists too felt there was little room for compromise when Menzies and Fadden were involved.

Between 1939 and 1944, there were virtually no changes to the union's Committee of Management. This did not mean there was no opposition. Sam Edmonds, secretary of a 'Rank and File Committee', corresponded with the Committee of Management. The latter refused to recognise the new group's standing as a parallel organisation within the union. A more difficult challenge arose when Brogden joined forces with Edmonds. It appears that the disagreement was personal rather than political but it is uncertain if his contact with the Rank and File Committee caused or resulted from his estrangement from the Macpherson group. In response, the ruling group passed a remarkable resolution forbidding Committee of Management members from attending meetings of the new group. Once elected, their first allegiance was to each other. The Rank and File Committee was obviously well organised as the ruling group saw a distinct possibility of again losing control. In the end, it

34 MBWSSEA Minutes, 12 June 1940 (E).
35 ibid.; Biographical details of Rosewell, from interview with his son, Tom Rosewell, Ashbury, 21 February 1984.
36 The Committee declined Menzies' Government's request to participate on a committee to sustain the war effort. MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 December 1939 (C). There was a similar lack of interest towards Upton's request that the union support an appeal to Board employees to donate one percent of their wages to the relief of bomb victims in London. ibid., 3 October 1940 (C).
37 MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 January 1941.
38 ibid. 1 March 1940 (C).
39 ibid. 5 April 1940 (C).
was Brogden who lost his position at the 1940-1 elections. His replacement, S.F. Mannix was probably an opponent of the Macpherson group, but not a bitter one.  

Opposition did not only derive from distinctions between maintenance and construction workers. Part of it came from personal differences. It also played on dissatisfaction with the slowness of much of the ruling group's activity and on the view that people like Macpherson had been on the scene too long. Macpherson was now in his mid-sixties and enjoying the early years of a long period of semi-retirement on full pay. He appears to have withdrawn from much of the routine industrial negotiation, from arbitration hearings, from the management of the few disputes and from involvement in the ALP on behalf of the union. Savage, in particular, and Bodkin handled the ALP connections and negotiations with the Board especially as Macpherson did not get on at all well with Upton. Savage was also the union's prominent representative on the Union Secretaries' Association. Bodkin did most of the organising work as well as handling grievances and disputes. Beyond organising a small office, editing the *Gazette* and deciding the overall strategy of the group, it is not clear what Bill Macpherson might have done each day.

Brogden continued his opposition with the aid of other dissidents. The small number of Sydney-based CPA members and their supporters headed by Stan Roy, Bert Anderson, H. Lynne and J.R. Rook also stood against the ruling group but each time lost very convincingly. Their failures had much to do with the changes internal to the ruling group and how it took advantage of the legacy of depression and the opportunities of war. For construction labourers, the Depression was still a reality during the war's first two years. Very casual employment, repeated closedowns or reductions in work activity and the need to look elsewhere for work made it difficult to mount the concerted, organised opposition necessary to unseat the ruling group. This was true for official and unofficial oppositions.

On a few occasions, those opposed to the ruling group made concerted efforts to reform the union. On one occasion, activists from Warragamba bussed down in large numbers to join the disgruntled workers in the metropolitan area. Among others, Stan Roy

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40 *ibid*. 7 June 1940 (C); 2 August 1940 (C).
41 *ibid*. 5 August 1942 (C); 7 October 1943. A grandson who grew up sharing a house with Macpherson remembers that from the 1940s, his grandfather always left home after 9 a.m. because of a dislike of peak hour traffic and never went to work on Fridays. Interview with Neville Grace, Sydney, 5 March 1986.
had done a lot of organising. The aim was to force more frequent General Meetings as part of an overall move to democratise the union. The next step was to make paid officials face elections.

Much excited discussion preceded the meeting which was well publicised and attended. The union officials had booked the large Australia Hall for the occasion. Even many workers who had never been to a meeting of the union came along. It soon became clear that to avoid a hostile vote, officials had stacked the meeting. For insurance, someone, probably Bodkin, had packed the back of the hall with inner city thugs and prize fighters. Others came in through the side door. The union's doormen, paid to check that those entering were financial members, did not challenge them.

From the chair, Kirkwood ruled an opponent out of order. Others challenged the ruling. When the challenge appeared to succeed, the lights went out. Chairs started to fly as the thugs surged forward wearing knuckle dusters and swinging chairs. Over the din, the melee to escape and the blood of those who got caught in the action, willingly or not, Kirkwood declared the meeting closed. There was nothing left to do for those from Warragamba but take the bus home. After that they concentrated on mounting their challenge from the dam. Most of the metropolitan members at the meeting, disgusted with the proceedings, probably never went to a union meeting again.

While the Communist Party's strength grew in many other unions, this was not the case for the Water Board union. CPA members had begun to gain their strong hold elsewhere, largely as a result of the Depression successes of the MMM. The CPA's united front strategy after 1936, and particularly between 1938 and 1941, built on this base to widen party membership among the rank and file. More particularly, it fostered important gains among the top echelons of a number of unions.

The experience of the Water Board union was different. It had shed those members most likely to respond to the MMM during the depths of the Depression. By the time they were switching over from relief to day works towards the mid-thirties, Macpherson's group

43 From substantially similar accounts from interviews with Wally Edwards (30 August 1984) and Ron McIntosh (29 September 1985).
44 For the growth of CPA influence and its united Front strategy, see Gollan, Revolutionaries, pp. 128-30; Davidson, op. cit., pp. 87-93.
had fundamentally restructured the union to remove any threat from construction. Further, Water Board construction labourers did not enjoy that consistent employment which encouraged the birth of confident rank and file direct action among, for example, ironworkers after 1936. In the circumstances, most were just happy to have a job. By the time conditions had improved, it was too late. When the war finally brought full employment on construction, the CPA was no longer taking an antagonistic position towards conservative ALP union officials such as those running the Water Board union. After all, Macpherson's group had a long history of maintaining industrial peace. CPA members, until then among those most likely to organise an opposition, now had little to offer.

Local factors created ambiguities. Workers at Woronora Dam remained particularly quiet industrially but at Warragamba there was some dissent. Here, a growing CPA influence overlay the traditional solidarity to be found in navvy camps. Nevertheless, after the battering taken over many years, self confidence and a spirit of self activity had seemingly drained away with so many other hopes and dreams. Warragamba workers had McCarthy as an observer to the Committee but the Executive was very slow in granting them a branch. Local meetings put their faith in officials whom these workers had spurned ten years before.

The shock in 1929 and the Depression had also changed Macpherson's group and had taught them to be more attentive to construction workers. Savage, in particular, was much more responsive to their complaints and suggestions. The Gazette was one welcome innovation. Others included Bodkin's work at the dam sites and irregular meetings of job reps. In early 1940, a softened Jack Williams spoke for many construction workers when he found that the union; 'over the last two years had developed into a virile organisation.' No stronger praise was possible in the language of Australian labourism.

Bodkin kept a close watch out for dissatisfaction. He was an effective negotiator for those with low expectations and a very persuasive speaker. He and Savage won a number of improvements. The Warragamba men continued to feel satisfaction with the service they received. In the spirit of united front cooperation, they and the other construction labourers

46 Greentree, op. cit., 1 April 1985.
47 MBWSSEA Minutes, 16 March 1940.
always made their criticism in terms of improving the union. Thus, construction rather than maintenance workers demanded higher union dues to improve the level of organisation and maintain the financially troubled *Gazette*. For the same reasons, they supported strong action against unfinancial members.48

Warragamba activists only conflicted with the ruling group over discussion of the CPA. They received no reply to their call for support of party demands for the opening of a second military front in western Europe. Nor did they get any response to their enthusiasm for the Sheepskins for Russia campaign or the Medical Aid to Russia Society.49 None of these demands meant much to the bulk of the maintenance and construction workers dispersed throughout the metropolitan area. Politically, the mass of the Board’s workforce was tightly wedded to a newly re-united ALP which controlled active, effective and seemingly more reforming state and federal governments. In these circumstances, more militant construction workers were not a threat.

Early in the war, important and industrially powerful unions were pushing for improvements in hours, wages and conditions. With recovery in key sectors after the mid-thirties, improved employment prospects and the CPA’s early anti-war line helped fuel the demands of coal miners and ironworkers, whose unions were under CPA leadership.50 There were general improvements through the arbitration system too, particularly at the federal level. But, with 18 per cent inflation between September 1939 and June 1942, unions which did not win similar rises had to look elsewhere.51 This was particularly true once Curtin brought in wage pegging. There were a number of responses: the quest for shorter hours for particular groups, the redesignation of jobs so as to allow for a higher wage rates, special war loadings and camping allowances on defence works.52 Given that the Water Board union did not seek gains through direct action, most claims were over

48 *ibid.* 2 February 1940 (C); 1 March 1940 (C); 9 March 1940 (Reps); 16 March 1940 (SC, *Gazette*); 7 June 1940 (C); 7 January 1942 (C); 1 July 1942 (C); 5 August 1942 (C); 7 October 1942 (C); 2 September 1942 (C); 4 November 1942 (C); 13 January 1943 (C0.

49 *ibid.* 5 May 1942 (C); 2 September 1942 (C); 7 October 1942 (C). The requests came through their Camp Secretary G. Adams.


52 War loadings as a form of industry wage margin were common throughout the economy. O. De R. Foenander, *op. cit.*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1943, pp. 71-7.
subsidised pay for garrison duties, war loadings and similar grievances. This was merely adapting traditional concerns and methods to changed circumstances.

The union's officials and membership retained their traditional preoccupations, particularly in the the form these had emerged from the Depression. The appeals board saga continued. Officials had innumerable breaches of the award to follow up and prosecute. There was the question of financial or legal support for members injured in accidents or with their health ruined from working in sandstone dust. Then there was the problem of chasing up and prosecuting members for being in arrears with their union dues. The officials sought to resolve the problem by asking the Board to automatically deduct dues from the pay packets of 'A' Class employees. Stan Roy led a successful rank and file protest at the following general meeting. By then, it was too late. In August 1941, the Board agreed to begin deductions from the start of the following year. It was the end of the collector on maintenance jobs.

At another level, there seemed to be more rank and file involvement. Officials had either acquiesced to, or promoted meetings of job reps to deal with particular problems. Bodkin strongly supported the process. Macpherson and Savage would attend. They monopolised the relevant information and forced through the discussion within limits they had set. This made it easier for them to win against hostile minorities. The same procedure occurred for the 1940 award. In mid-1939, the Committee encouraged the formation of sectional committees to formulate claims for inclusion in the final log. The relationship of these committees to their rank and files varied, some being more tightly mandated than others. This process raised the expectations of work groups and their delegates. It was the job of the officials to dampen them, and heavily. As in 1936, once the claims came in, they

53 *DN*, 17 November 1939, PCB; MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 August 1940 (c); 3 September 1941 (C); 5 November 1941 (C). NB War loadings for Water Board employees came through the NSW Industrial Commission. *ibid*. 1 October 1941 (C). Those for the CCC came through the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Foenander, *op. cit.* , pp. 119-20.

54 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 September 1939 (C); 5 February 1941 (C).

55 *ibid*. 5 August 1942 (C)

56 *ibid*. 2 August 1940 (C); 6 September 1940 (C); 2 July 1941 (C); 30 July 1941; 6 August 1941 (C); 3 September 1941 (C); 4 March 1942 (E).

57 *ibid*. 26 July 1939.
resisted any approach to the court. They claimed that conditions under the union's award were superior to those outside and feared losses at the behest of the Board. The Board had applied to do away with travelling time and expenses. This had been an escalating source of extra earnings for 'B' Class groups. They resisted any such losses. Officials therefore were to lobby Board members and contact the ULU and AWU to press the matter in their awards.

The 'A' Class did not benefit from this allowance. Instead, many feared a re-opening of the award before an unsympathetic Industrial Commission judge would lead to general reductions in their wages. Certainly, the officials indicated that this was the Board's intention. The Committee manoeuvred to jettison travelling time and expenses. It claimed that this safeguarded the membership as a whole. Officials wanted to accept the Board's offer of a flat 1/- per day in lieu. The 'A' Class were not to gain the flat rate. A heated reps meeting had to deal with the question of trading off the earnings of specific groups. Motions flew thick and fast. Many reps had come with strict instructions from their groups. Some backed the Committee, but wanted a higher flat rate. Others refused to give up a long-held benefit without going to court. Still others criticised the Committee for not putting the proposals before a mass meeting. Williams spoke of the 'international situation' as a factor and pushed for an adjournment of the Conciliation Committee to allow further discussion. Macpherson grabbed the opportunity graciously, promising to call a Special Meeting.

This was a good tactic. 'B' Class workers were the majority. Nowhere would this have been clearer than at a reps meeting. General Meetings were different. Those at the dams could not come. Maintenance workers tended to outnumber the city construction workers who came. At the meeting, Macpherson admitted that some 'B' Class would lose to save the wages of the 'A' Class. However, the former losses would be small, the latter hefty. More motions flew. Page deplored the mention of differences between 'A' and 'B' Class and that some members, obviously from the latter, were pushing the union towards the

58 According to Board figures, 4,658 workers received these allowances, costing the Board £26,000 per year. McCarty in ibid. 13 April 1940 (Reps).
59 ibid. 13 April 1940 (Reps), 3 May 1940 (C); 8 May 1940 (Reps).
60 ibid., 8 May 1940 (Reps). The most vocal were E. Stephenson, Roy, Williams, O. Murphy, McCarty, Ughie Lynch.
court. In the end, the meeting gave the officials sitting on the Conciliation Committee full power to do their best by conciliation. The award took away travelling time and expenses in exchange for the 1/- per day. The union had made a number of claims. It received little satisfaction other than avoiding going into court. There was a general tightening of provisions. Sick leave for 'B' Class workers, for example, was less favourable.\footnote{NSWIG, Vol. 57, pp. 1601-21.}

Unlike the 1936 award, this one did not exacerbate the differences in base pay rates between 'A' and 'B' Class employees. One factor narrowing relativities was a 5/- per week fixed loading, the 'prosperity' loading of the Federal Arbitration Court's 1937 basic wage declaration.\footnote{Hagan, A.C.T.U., p. 142. The Federal loading was 6/-. It is unclear why this award only had 5/-.} Otherwise, most categories received something like the cost of living adjustment to the Living Wage plus 1/9 - the one-ninth loading for wet weather lost in 1936.\footnote{Savage in MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 April 1940 (Reps).} Only carpenters, benefitting from movements in outside awards, did much better. Those which had proportionally gained most from the 1936 determination advanced least this time. Head office chauffeurs (£5.2.3 per week) were one exception. WSOs (£5.10.6) also continued to do well, and were only 2/6 behind fitters and turners. Those who had previously suffered most were now catching up. Overall, 'A' Class wage rates were about the same as under the 1927 award although their relativities had changed. 'B' Class wages improved at about the same rate as 'A' Class. Because of the heavy losses sustained in 1936, they remained substantially below their 1927 award levels. Further, the rates for rock miners and machine men were below those working under the existing AWU rockchoppers and sewer miners' award.\footnote{NSWIG, Vol. 57, p. 1538.}

There continued to be rank and file discontent over the lost travelling time and expenses. In their defence, officials would always point to less generous provisions in an outside award. A simpler path appeared when the AWU began a case over this question. The house union decided once again to follow.\footnote{MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1941, 3 December 1941 (C), 28 January 1942.} Oilers working on low level sewers were one group who continued to complain about the award. Their delegates included noted Macpherson supporters P. Hart and S. Parker. They received a generous hearing and some concessions but officials again raised the spectre of further losses should the union make an
application on their behalf. Mapherson's passivity was increasing. He had always sought the path of minimum resistance, following up claims he felt he had a good chance of winning through negotiation or litigation. When some groups suffered losses, he baldly stated that the old terms were no longer defensible. On another occasion, when the Board replaced skilled with unskilled workers, he dismissed complaints by upholding management prerogatives.

Employment levels on construction remained a vitally important issue. After all, it determined the financial fortunes of the whole union and that of its officials. There was the old question of contract as against day labour and the more recent problem of relief work. The Board had committed itself to a large five year works programme from 1936. The drought, which had begun even earlier, made the need for large water works especially urgent. Yet, there had already been spending on a stop-go basis. With the advent of war, this situation worsened as civil works took second place. Day labourers on the major works suffered most. Despite spirited opposition from Ald. Carroll and other day labour supporters on the Board, an Upton-led majority insisted that the reticulation works continue to go to contractors.

Reductions in the day labour workforce had a powerful effect. In mid-1940, the union faced another financial crisis. The Executive accepted Macpherson's offer of a £2 per week salary reduction. Murphy lost half that, while Savage and Bodkin appear to have lost nothing. Dalton lost his job. These officials had every motivation for seeing a return to a full, day labour programme. They followed their traditional and often effective methods, going straight to the Labor Party at all levels. This was not just the preference of the conservative and bureaucratic officials. For the reasons mentioned above, those work groups most directly affected and with some tradition of militancy proposed the same strategy, although garnished with more militant language. Finally, there was little that dam workers, for example, could do by themselves to force the federal or state government to provide large sums of money to the Water Board.

66 ibid. 29 January 1941, 5 February 1941 (C), 2 April 1941 (C), 7 May 1941 (C), 3 September 1941 (C).
67 ibid. 3 November 1939 (C), 3 December 1941 (C), 4 November 1942 (C).
68 SMH, 26 October 1939; DT, 27 October 1939; DN, 26 and 28 October 1939, PCB
69 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 May 1940 (E).
On questions of day labour, relief work or when the Board would not spend money it had, Macpherson, Savage or even a deputation would see Ald. Carroll or other sympathetic Board members. The Board's mixed composition which included minorities of members either strongly sympathetic or hostile to the workforce and unionism, made for easier changes of direction. If either minority could win the support of the president, some of the less committed members appear to have followed suit. While the majority was generally unsympathetic to the workforce prior to the 1920s, this had become less predictable. Carroll, in particular, worked hard on their behalf. In return, the Committee of Management was only too happy to place the union's cars, organisers and willing members at his disposal on election day. At other times, municipal representatives, especially those from the outlying and unserviced suburbs received information and visits. The idea was to use public pressure to embarrass the Board or swing enough Board members to the side of those sympathetic to the union's positions.

When problems took on larger dimensions, the union continued to be an influential industry lobby group alongside and not antagonistic to the Board. When the question was state government policy, Concanon was a particularly forceful advocate both on the floor and in the lobby of parliament. Savage was always a useful influence within the State Executive. While the ALP was in opposition, Savage and Bodkin also went straight to party leader McKell. When Labor won power, these contacts stood the union in good stead. Further, with Savage and now Bodkin both on the party's Executive, the union was in a better position to influence both caucus and relevant ministers. While affiliated, it was rare for the union's officials to approach Labour Council over employment matters.

With the Loan Council and various federal instrumentalities increasingly important for the Board's functioning, officials of this small, provincial house union began to play on a larger stage. They had to do this carefully, building up from where they had strength. Again, they rarely followed a single avenue. For example, their most impressive diplomatic

70 ibid. 5 July 1940 (C).
71 ibid. 1 October 1941; 3 December 1941 (C). They also provided this support for other municipal candidates. ibid. 29 January 1941; 5 November 1941 (C); 7 April 1943 (C).
72 NSWPD, Second Series, Vol. 160, pp. 7001-2, 7352; MBWSSEA Minutes, 17 October 1939 (C); 13 December 1939 (CE).
73 Bodkin was elected in November 1940. ibid. 6 November 1940 (C).
performance was in response to the massive sackings during the slump towards the end of 1939. Savage used his influence within the NSW ALP to arrange to meet Curtin, then federal opposition leader. He in turn was to arrange a meeting with Menzies. The delegation included officials from both the wages and salaries division as well as Carroll. They got as far as the Assistant Federal Treasurer, P.C. Spender, convincing him to find the Board extra finance. A delegation to Mair, via McKell, was also successful. Finally, Macpherson joined manufacturing suppliers on a delegation to the Board. As a result, the Board contacted Spender who promised to approach the Loan Council for further funds. Throughout this campaign, the unions' *Daily News* kept up a barrage of articles attacking the sackings. It even editorialised that the question of Water Board (un)employment: 'brings into high relief the brutality and absurdity of the existing social system.' With an inflow of funds and under public, press and government pressure to stem the tide of job losses, the Board cancelled planned dismissals at Warragamba. The union's officials received congratulations from a much relieved branch. With the Board's employment policies a question of public notoriety, they now found it easier to have dismissed workers reinstated.

When Board spending and therefore employment again became a sore point in mid-1940, the union looked to the graving dock for salvation. Union officials made common cause with the Board on the question of overall control of the works. This was not the case at the end of the year when the Board, with Carroll dissenting, applied to the NSW government to reintroduce relief working on a large scale. Initial union protests to the government were successful and the Board converted relief to day labour jobs. But, it was not long before the Board opened new relief works, assuring Savage that there would be no sackings as a result. This was hardly enough. After much discussion, members at a

74 *ibid.* 27 September 1939 (E).
75 *DN*, 9 November 1939, PCB. In return, both rank and file groups and the officials supported the paper's financial struggle to survive. MBWSSEA Minutes, 3 November 1939 (C), 1 December 1939; 2 February 1940 (C); 5 April 1940 (C).
77 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 December 1939 (C).
78 *Sun*, 30 May 1940; *DT*, 4 June 1940, 5 July 1940, PCB; MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 June 1940 (C);
79 *ibid.* 6 November 1940 (C); 4 December 1940 (C); 5 February 1941 (C);
general meeting reached unanimity. They lodged a strong protest against relief work especially on approved day labour jobs. Relief work meant non-observance of award rates and conditions and rationed work. They resolved: 'to utilize all methods within our power to prohibit this iniquitous system'.80 As a fall-back strategy, the same meeting passed a motion to enrol relief workers. In the meantime, following their well-trodden path, officials would contact all MPs about the union's position.

In March 1941, the union's officers were still trying to have day labour take over the work but to no avail. Bodkin, after having visited the jobs in question, said that those workers wanted to join the union on half fees. The union accepted.81 The Board had again turned day labour into relief workers. With Mair's government in power, the union seemed unable to do anything to stop it. The union's officials recognised this and Page had the union push the Board to count this relief work for long service leave.82 One result of Labor's return to power in NSW was the end of relief work on Water Board jobs.

Contract was less of a problem. The Board had heavily favoured contractors just prior to the war. This had threatened union finances and the future of the Gazette. Union officials lobbied the Board, the ALP and the Labour Council.83 They also wanted to widen the union's constitutional boundaries to take in contract labour. Nothing came of it. The AWU was well entrenched and jealously guarded its territory through the Industrial Commission.84 Lobbying was again more effective. In the middle of 1941, there were only 96 workers under Board contractors, less than one tenth the number of two years earlier. Carroll led a very spirited opposition to contract on the Board, and other more conservative members often took his side when there was clear evidence of contractors duping their employees, breaking awards and avoiding specifications. Bodkin put pressure on engineers supervising contract jobs over award breaches. There was little else this small union with

80 ibid. 29 January 1941.
81 ibid. 5 March 1941 (C).
82 ibid. 2 April 1941 (C).
83 ibid. 31 May 1939, 9 June 1939 (E), 14 July 1939 (E), 26 July 1939.
84 See e.g. the AWU's clash with the ULPS (ULU), NSWIR, 1932, p. 371; 1933, p. 199; with the Quarrymen's Union, ibid., 1943, p. 563.
such a strong sense of its limits could do. As for relief work, the election of the ALP to power in NSW heralded better times for day labour in the fight against contract.

The question of contract labour became entwined with amalgamation, one of the major debates running through the union during the early years of the war. Regulations under the National Security Act 1939-40 greatly widened the scope and powers of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The Court could declare a common rule, its intervention no longer depended upon the existence of an industrial dispute and it had a greatly enlarged jurisdiction over matters previously the sole province of the state tribunals. While it did not eventuate, it looked very much as though, at least for wartime, the federal system was going to completely replace the state tribunals. In late 1939, Macpherson certainly saw it in these terms. This meant the union had to act to protect its coverage of existing members before a federally registered union moved in to take them over.

As with the debate within the RWGLA during 1914-5, there were two main options. The initial preference was amalgamation with the AWU. Curtin and McKell had healed the major divisions within the ALP, a source of much rancour among union officials. There was now no such reason for this small conservative union, well connected to the party machine, not to submerge itself into the similarly inclined giant. After a series of setbacks, AWU officials had continued their empire building, conflicting bitterly with a number of unions.

The AWU covered workers on Sydney water supply and sewerage contracts as well as organising those on country works. Amalgamation offered the Water Board union's officials employment protection from the threat of widespread contract labour. Further, there was the chance for a major expansion of their activities and powers. C.G. Fallon, Federal AWU President was keen. So apparently were much of the rank and file of the house union. The question was terms. Macpherson and the other officials wanted their little union to become the embryo of a large, autonomous water and sewerage workers AWU branch for NSW.

85 ibid. 1 March 1940 (C); 9 March 1940 (Reps).
86 ibid., 2 July 1941 (C).
87 Foenander, op. cit., pp. 5-7, 14-5.
88 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 December 1939 (C).
89 For the fight at Newcastle steelworks see T. Sheridan, 'A Case Study in Complexity', pp. 98-9.
Fallon invited them to send delegates to the AWU Convention at Coolangatta to put their case.\(^90\)

An alternative was amalgamation with smaller but similarly specialised unions to form a new federal body. The obvious starting point was the Hunter District union.\(^91\) Once again, this led to nothing. In mid-1941, McKell’s bill for a Greater Sydney scheme of local government suggested another possibility. Under McKell’s scheme, a new authority would manage all metropolitan services and utilities including those currently under the Water Board.\(^92\) Macpherson therefore ventilated the idea of amalgamating with the Municipal Employees Union, a much larger and federally registered union. It too was in the conservative municipal labourist mould. As a second thought, the Central Executive decided to lobby McKell to exempt the Water Board from the provisions of the bill.\(^93\) No doubt they had the full support of Upton and the Board. In the end, war priorities delayed McKell’s bill.

In the meantime, discussions had continued with the AWU. The Water Board union sent its two ALP Executive members to address the AWU: Bodkin with his impeccable AWU pedigree and Savage. While the AWU appeared willing to agree to the smaller union’s initial conditions, Macpherson began to back off. He proposed a ‘wait and see’ policy to the Executive of the union and suggested asking for more time to consider.\(^94\) Taking their cue, the Executive put a series of more difficult proposals as a basis for discussion. These included the AWU adopting the Water Board union’s constitution, something the larger union would never have accepted. It is not clear why Macpherson changed his mind. Like the similarly placed Secretary of the Quarrymen’s Union, he probably felt they were not offering him enough.\(^95\) He and the others did not want to lose their jobs. Nor did they want a reduction in earnings. Perhaps he had thought more closely

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\(^90\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 31 May 1939, 1 December 1939 (C), 6 December 1939 (E); Wally Edwards, \textit{op. cit.}.
\(^91\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 December 1939 (E); Spearritt, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 179.
\(^92\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 July 1941 (C); 30 July 1941; 3 September 1941.
\(^93\) ibid. 1 July 1940 (E)
\(^94\) ibid. 1 July 1940 (E)
\(^95\) NSWIR, 1943, p. 564.
about the fate of other unions which had disappeared into the AWU. His continued symbolic commitment to the idea was perhaps a defence against amalgamation sympathies among the rank and file. There were further suggestions of forming a federal union by joining up with water and sewerage workers in Melbourne and Brisbane but, again, nothing eventuated.

Crucial international events made the union again face other questions as to its relationship with the rest of the labour movement. The invasion of the USSR and Labor Council invitations to join the Aid to Russia campaign left the municipal labourists controlling the union completely unmoved. But allegiance to the ALP was an article of faith. Due to the increasing influence of federal politics on Water Board operations, the union's officials had already had frequent contact with Curtin. Even before Pearl Harbour, they 'wholeheartedly' and very publicly backed his position on conscription. While officials and members seemed to have initially accepted the major restrictions which the wider union movement endured - the wage pegging, restrictions on mobility and the regimentation of much of the work on construction jobs - this did not mean they were willing to jeopardise their award. When again asked to sanction maintenance workers patrolling the Board's works without pay for overtime, the union refused. Upton was particularly upset at this new-found lack of cooperation. After all, at such times: 'each man should count it a privilege to serve'. The Executive remained unconvinced. There had been strong opposition from those who had previously done picket duty. Kirkwood told of the Board having abused the men's goodwill by sending them from one end of the metropolitan area to the other. All the officials agreed strongly that the union should adhere to the award, Page pointing out that anything else involved betraying the principles of the labour movement.

96 The United Laborers' Union amalgamated with the AWU in mid 1942. It had accepted the same guarantees of autonomy as the RWGLA. Although McNamara kept his job, the construction section gradually lost that autonomy. Card files, Registrar of Trade Unions, Sydney.
97 MBWSSEA Minutes, 14 May 1942 (CE).
98 ibid. 6 August 1941 (C); 5 November 1941 (C); 1 April 1942 (C).
99 ibid. 3 December 1941.
100 Letter quoted in ibid. 12 February 1941 (E).
101 ibid.
Specific work groups and the officials continued to put union principles ahead of the calls for national sacrifice. McKell’s Government enforced compulsory unionism in the NSW public sector. The Board had to follow suit and the union had Upton enforce it. The shortage of labour in all areas made it easier to win a host of small sectional demands. Committee meetings became longer and minutes filled with claims from one group after another. With wage pegging in place, sectional groups continued to find other reasons to have their earnings increased. The main ways were redefinitions of work and claims for special allowances. Among the officials, Bodkin was the firmest in favour of pushing the Board, either through negotiation or prosecution. Due to him, construction labourers received equal encouragement as those on maintenance. When it came to matters involving federal departments, Savage was the more active.

Assistant water service operators (AWSOs) now had heavier responsibilities which required them gaining greater knowledge of the city water supply system. They wanted reimbursement. Various groups of workers asked for and got extra coupons for industrial clothing. Chainmen, tap testers and other groups wanted war loadings. When Bodkin spoke of AWU successes in that area, a General Meeting at the end of January 1942, in full ‘total war’, decided to go all out for war loadings too. Those constructing Woronora Dam and the first stage of the Warragamba project became more vocal about the timing of their Christmas holidays. Even the small, neglected group of ‘frontier’ maintenance workers on the Upper Cordeaux put in for a camping allowance. As was mostly the case, the Board ignored them, counting on the fact that they were tied by long-term residence, kinship and other sentiment to the area. Yet, on many issues, the workers received satisfaction either directly from the Board or from tribunals.

102 E.g. Union officials successfully used their contacts within the Federal ALP to have two union office employees exempted from military duties. ibid. 4 March 1942 (C).
103 See MWSDB Minutes, 9 July 1941; MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 August 1941 (C); 28 January 1942. ibid., 28 January 1942; 4 February 1942 (C); 4 November 1942 (C); 7 April 1943 (C); 3 November 1943 (C). For AWU, NSWIR, 1941, p. 553.
104 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 November 1941 (C). Most of the permanent workers in the area were McNamaras or their relatives, the Walkers. Interviews with Lionel Walker and Jack McNamara, Upper Cordeaux, 9 January 1987.
105 E.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 April 1942 (C);
A most important and long awaited gain was for a camping allowance. The AWU had failed in a major case before the Industrial Commission in 1930. It tried again in 1940. There had also been pressure among the Board's dam and pipeline construction workers on the matter. They wanted their officials to act. The house union put in its bid. The Industrial Commission joined both claims, awarding 3/- per day or 15/- per week for those forced to live in camps because of their work. It also finally abolished the right of the Board to charge rents for camping accommodation supplied.

Members in the CCC sent to military construction work in the Northern Territory also received special attention. Their union rep was McCarty, formerly from Warragamba. Their wages were a federal matter, but the union held that the Board had to provide adequate conditions and expenses. On other matters it used its contacts within federal ALP to win concessions. In mid-1942, the AWC called a conference of unions involved to draw up a uniform award for defence works. As they fell below Water Board award wages, Savage insisted that the proposed rates were too low. Further conferences agreed to improvements. After agreeing to the employment of Chinese workers on Board works, union officials now used their traditional channels of influence to stop the AWC employing 'enemy aliens' on Board works at below award wages.

While Board unionists looked to increase their earnings through a variety of means which would not clash with strict wage pegging, they did not neglect demands with more lasting results. Truck drivers on water maintenance pressed for the re-lining of the very uncomfortable cabins but the main area of concern was safety. Rock miners cutting the tunnels for the Woronora Pipeline pushed on the old question of hours of work when working in dusty tunnels. Other workers building the treatment plant at the mouth of the Bondi sewer also raised the question of safety. Sewer maintenance men wanted improved safety regulations concerning gases and protective clothing in the more dangerous

107 NSWIR, 1930, p. 81. Cantor and Street voted down Piddington.
108 NSWIR, 1942, pp. 303-6.
109 MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 February 1942; 3 June 1942 (C)
110 ibid. 1 April 1942 (C); 3 June 1942 (C); 5 August 1942 (C)
111 ibid. 1 July 1942 (C); 5 August 1942 (C); 7 October 1942 (C)
112 ibid. 4 November 1942 (C);
sewers. While they showed no greater propensity to take hard action, union officials displayed a much less resigned attitude to industrial hazards. This was particularly the case after a spate of fatalities among members in early 1943. Also, in contrast to earlier periods, governments and therefore the Board felt it was imperative that workers complete construction works as soon as possible. One result was that Board engineers and other senior staff were quicker to inspect sites in a constructive manner. This did not mean the Board always agreed.

The main source of larger grievances was the graving dock. It was also where the bulk of the workforce worked. One source of conflict was the traditionally more aggressive water and sewerage groups, rock miners and those navvies transferred from Warragamba. The other, perhaps more important, was the new work environment, somewhere between construction and maritime work. It involved new job classifications and contact with a range of other workers and their unions. This contact was important. Water Board CCC employees retained their membership of the house union. Some of the craft unions made sure that Water Board unionists received their higher craft rates and paid into their funds. It was one of the rare occasions that craft unions took a determined stand against the house union. Contact with craft unionists and their traditions of job control had a strong influence. The two delegates, W. SnashaU and S. Mannix appear to have been active. Finally, the size of the workforce and the growing number of grievances persuaded the Executive to move Bodkin to the dock. It was indicated from where Macpherson and Savage now expected trouble.

They were right. One aspect of this greater, industrial militancy after 1942 was a growth of shop committees autonomous from and hostile to management. They reflected the increasing impatience with war controls and the role of union officials, right and left, in

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113 ibid. 11 August 1943 (C); 1 September 1943 (C).
114 ibid. 3 March 1943 (C); 2 June 1943 (C).
115 ibid. 7 May 1941; 4 June 1941 (C); 30 July 1941; 2 December 1942 (C). A notable exception was the Board's failure to take dust counts after repeated complaints about dangerous conditions from miners on the Woronora Pipeline. For Industrial Commission criticism of Board inaction, *NSWIR*, 1941, pp. 119-27.
116 ibid. 28 January 1942.
117 E.g. Shipwrights' Union, ibid. 4 February 1942 (C); re FEDFA, ibid., 3 March 1943 (C).
118 ibid. 2 December 1942 (C); 16 December 1042 (E).
maintaining industrial peace and high productivity. Foenander fearfully warned the government that the shop committees:

betray an inclination to magnify petty grievances and minor differences...into wrongs and disputes of a major stature, and to arrogate to themselves the right to speak for organized labour in dealings with the employer. Developments of this nature can end in one way only - the undermining of the authority of responsible union and labour leaders and the infliction of irreparable damage upon the Australian industrial regulative system. 119

With the formation of an inter-union job committee under militant influence in early 1943, industrial relations at the graving dock began to heat up. The job committee's first step was to publish the *Graving Dock News*. 120 The committee began dealing directly with the Board and the AWC, bypassing the union officials. The AWC reciprocated. It was not long before the MEU and Water Board union saw what Foenander meant and withdrew their representatives. 121 In October there was a strike at the dock site involving the union's members together with those of the MEU, BLF and AWU. Rosewell proposed a voluntary levy of 5/- per member to sustain striking members. This had the virtue of partially satisfying the demands for solidarity from those at the dock while not really committing any of the more conservative groups to doing anything. To regain control, the AWC, with its near military control over the CCC, transferred the strikers to Brisbane. 122

A similar process was underway at the Board's Waterloo Workshops which had greatly expanded to host large scale engineering for the war effort. A very quiet group of Water Board workshop employees found themselves among metal tradesmen with much wider experience in industrial affairs. They elected delegates to the inter-union workshop committee, but only after their union's officials had appointed two trusted supporters. 123 Here again the complaints began to flow, especially through the union's workshop representative, W. Henneberry. 124

With the immediate danger of Japanese invasion passed, Chifley's post-war development plans were to have a major effect on the Water Board and its workforce.

120 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 May 1943 (C).
121 *ibid.* 1 September 1942; 7 October 1943 (C); 1 December 1943.
122 *ibid.* 7 October 1943 (C).
123 *ibid.*, 7 October 1942 (C0).
124 *ibid.* 13 January 1943 (C)
With half a million Australian troops in the southwestern Pacific zone alone, demobilisation was going to create massive problems. Major developmental public works were going to be one very important avenue for employment generation. Sydney still had inadequate water resources. Towards the end of the war, and with union encouragement, the Board looked to re-start its construction programme. Officials of the union went to see Chifley, who had replaced Curtin in Canberra, and McKell. The Committee of Management decided to use the ALP to make Upton: 'act in the right manner to secure the men required.' A first urgent task was repair work downstream of the Nepean Dam after heavy damage from flooding in May 1943. The Water Board was also finally to get the money to build the mighty Warragamba system. This did not to take off until after 1944.

In the meantime, there were other concessions. In July 1943, following the NSW government's lead, the Board finally extended long service leave to the remainder of its workforce, the 'B' Class employees. Board employees finally gained access to their long desired independent appeals tribunal when the government set up the Crown Employees' Appeal Board the following year. The appeals board was to have an independent chairman and one representative each from employer and union. The union gained further from its involvement within the NSW Labor Party. Savage's lobbying had helped bring improvements to the workers' compensation act dealing with silicosis. However, the nature of wartime financing, industrial relations controls and the thrust of Labor's post-war planning were to tie the Water Board and its union much more closely to decisions taken in Canberra. Union officials had already successfully cultivated their contacts within the federal ALP. Appreciation of the likely permanence of this state of affairs suggested further moves in that direction. So it was, that at the end of 1943, Macpherson had the union affiliated to the ACTU.

126 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 December 1943 (C). Also, ibid., 11 August 1943 (C).
127 MWSDB Report, 1943-4, pp. 27, 28.
128 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 July 1941 (C); 5 December 1941 (C).
129 ibid. 1 December 1943 (C).
Conclusion

The outbreak of war did not change the essential dynamic between the Board and its union. Only with sustained full employment after 1940 did the essential conditions alter. Maintenance continued as before. During 1941-3, however, heavy Federal government regulation of construction expenditure and the labour market added a new complication. Although they now had security of employment, construction workers still had to live very unsettled working lives. Many found themselves transferred around the state and some, even interstate. This added to the usual difficulties they faced in participating in union affairs. Yet, full employment and specific wartime conditions encouraged signs of growing cohesion and rebellion by 1944.