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

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NOTE

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Chapter 6

1944-60
The fact was that it took two and a quarter men to do today what one man did before
the war.

— Board President T. Upton, MWSDB Minutes, 2 June 1948.

He agreed ... it might be worthwhile to hear what the Union representatives had to say. The Board had always been on very good terms with the unions and the deputation would help maintain that state of affairs.

— Ald. Fowle, MWSDB Minutes, 2 September 1953.

For nearly half a century his union had striven to establish a system of perfect conciliation and arbitration ... between the Board and its employees.

— W.A. Macpherson, (as part of the above deputation) in MWSDB Minutes, 8 September 1953.

Introduction

The period between 1944 and 1960 continues *ribid*., rather than widens the context of the last chapter. The Board’s financial divisions between loans and revenue funding remained. So too did the divisions between the ‘A’ Class maintenance workers and the ‘B’ Class on construction. The union continued to reflect these distinctions. Macpherson’s group was still almost entirely from maintenance. They were interested in negotiating with the Board to get the best possible conditions for maintenance. In return, they could offer a largely obedient A’ Class workforce vital to the Board’s daily operations. As well, through the structures and rules they had built into the union, they could dampen any outbreak of overt dissatisfaction on construction.

Macpherson’s group had weathered the difficulties resulting from depression and war. Postwar prosperity promised easier times. Yet, the years to 1960 were to awaken problems deeply linked to the ruling group’s structural control of its membership. Depression and war had decimated the construction workforce. Many union members went off to war. Some died in action, others looked to different jobs on their return. While the upheavals of the previous 16 years had thrown up rank and file challenges on relief works and at the Graving...
Dock, the very precarious nature of much of the employment meant that the threat never lasted. The postwar picture was to be very different.

The first section of this chapter opens by examining the unique context of postwar prosperity. Certain aspects were of particular relevance to the Board’s workforce and union. There was the central relevance of Federal institutions in economic life. This placed the Board’s affairs on a larger stage. It also weakened the house union’s traditional reliance on municipal labourism through the NSW ALP.

The second factor of fundamental importance was sustained full employment — that condition which could weaken the historic allegiance of maintenance workers to the Board and its union and, at the same time, encourage resistance on construction. This was especially so when, as in the postwar period, public works spending in general and on the Board’s works in particular, remained at high levels. The limits to any gathering oppositional momentum within the house union were partly due to another important characteristic of the postwar period and of Federal government policy — the use of a large immigrant workforce for unskilled labour.

Subsequent subsections examine those forces, both international and domestic, which contributed to political conflict and stability. Of particular concern is the way they affected the labour movement. One arena, long central to the house union’s operations, was compulsory arbitration. Continued controversy over centralised wage determination brought forth a variety of responses from different unions. These provide a barometer for measuring the wage policy of the Water Board and its union.

The second section examines the Board’s construction programme, the location of major work groups and the Board’s employment policies. The third and final section analyses in depth the behaviour of the house union under conditions which appeared both favourable and destabilising. In particular, it asks why and how, given sustained full employment, the ruling group survived so comfortably. Of particular importance in this light is the section devoted to the Warragamba Dam, the Board’s major Board and the one which fomented the most likely challenge to the status quo.
1. The economic and political context

a. International economic expansion and effects on Australia

Well before the war ended, the allied powers were busy fashioning the post-war international order. Militarily and economically, US leaders were planning to contain and ultimately defeat communism throughout the globe. US policy was to dominate its sphere with US corporations enjoying the lion's share of the spoils. The Bretton Woods Conference of 1944 sealed this state of affairs. The outcome laid the basis for more than a quarter of a century of economic growth in the industrialised and industrialising capitalist world. US military and economic might was crucially important. It underpinned, directed and ultimately controlled free trade and capital flows, stable currencies and multinational cooperation.

Curtin had turned to the US military might when Australia faced imminent Japanese invasion. Faced with US economic domination, Chifley reluctantly brought Australia into the Bretton Woods system.1 This symbolically marked the beginning of the end of Australia's traditional economic subservience to Britain. For the next two decades, the Australian economy was increasingly to become an offshoot of US manufacturing capital.

b. Post-war planning

After the Great Depression, the period of reconstruction between 1942 and 1952 has attracted more interest among economic historians than any other this century. Again, attention has also turned to the economic debate and policy making of the time.2 The Curtin Government, like others elsewhere, began discussing post-war reconstruction early, during 1942. As in the previous world war, this was partly to encourage further sacrifice from the military forces and those working in the tightly controlled war economy. Again, there were promises of a peace fit for heroes. As the war drew to a close, other problems stimulated

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1 M. Beresford and P. Kerr, 'A Turning Point for Australian Capitalism: 1942-52', Wheelwright and Buckley (eds), Political Economy, Vol. 4.
thinking. One was the necessity to manage demobilisation so as to minimise economic dislocation, social suffering and the potential for political rebellion.

There were other reasons for this forward planning. Much of the population, and particularly the labour movement, carried deep and still unhealed psychological scars from the Depression. There had been insufficient resources to employ many of them for a decade after 1929 yet, these resources became available to send young people to fight and die on distant shores. There was now a widespread desire for a post-war world of greater financial security and plenty. Curtin’s ALP convincingly invoked these aspirations to win a crushing election victory in August 1943.

These various impulses became the premises for post-war planning and then policy. The main policy aim of the Curtin-Chifley Governments was full employment for rising living standards. Chifley, the first Minister for Post-War Reconstruction and, from 1945, Prime Minister, was to be the main political architect. If full employment was the goal, then increased government intervention was to be the means. Wartime central planning and regulation had demonstrated the possibilities for more efficient resource allocation without threatening private property rights. Those involved in post-war planning saw such co-management as a rational and productive way to organise capitalism.

Experience and Keynes’ writings indicated two major problems for the maintenance of full employment. One was inadequate levels of private investment. The second was vulnerability to the international economy. The policy methods adopted were a continuation of traditional labour movement recipes. Heavy anti-cyclical public works spending was to compensate for low levels of private investment and a range of welfare payments to maintain consumer demand. Behind both stood the old labour demands for credit creation and deficit financing. Finally, there was protection of local industry. The departure from the past was thus in form and context rather than content. Within the post-war programme, these measures became part of an overall policy.


4 As well, they no longer belonged on the margins of economic thinking. Keynes’ theories and policy prescriptions had, in the light of the depression, brought them into the mainstream. Whitwell, op. cit., chs. 3 and 4.
Although it played a lesser overall role than in the past, public works spending was also to encourage the direction of economic development. The Loans Council forced national coordinating of public works spending; wartime planning and controls had heightened it.\(^5\) For the post-war programme, the government established a National Works Council (NWC) to oversee the ordering of priorities by Federal and State authorities. High priority works in the interests of national development were to go ahead irrespective of the general employment levels.\(^6\) There was also a change in the direction of spending. Railway construction lost out to road construction, electricity generation and water and sewerage.\(^7\)

A diversified economy was to reduce the local impact of the other major threat to full employment — fluctuating export income. In particular, full employment depended on a rapidly growing, capital intensive and low cost manufacturing sector.

There were problems with this strategy. Sustained full employment created inflationary pressures which would undermine the drive to reduce costs. One anti-inflationary tool was the continuation of wartime controls. Another, immigration, would reduce labour shortages and wage pressures. It would also allow manufacturing industry to produce more cheaply by making the leap from small-scale production. A rapid transition to consumer goods production and housing would then release some of the pent-up demand while maintaining full employment.

The post-war immigration scheme embodied major changes to traditional philosophy and practice. It was the policy of a Labor government, a party by tradition at least suspicious of subsidised immigration. Also, it recruited large numbers of non British migrants. These factors were a response to a new context. Australia's birthrate had fallen, yet wartime experience had intensified the old desire for a rapid increase in Australia's white population. Defence and 'nation building' priorities linked in with the plan for economic development.\(^8\)


\(^6\) Lower priority works were to take up employment slack at the first sign of a downturn. The latter ultimately proved unnecessary. Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 682, 707, 710-1.

\(^7\) Butlin, Bannar and Pincus, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-40.

c. Post war development and the Menzies millenium

The demilitarisation of the economy went smoothly. With but a few brief pauses, full employment continued until the early 1970s. For the period until 1960, it managed to coexist with low levels of inflation.

In the immediate post-war years, Australian industry was well placed to take advantage of the dislocation in other countries. From then on, the rapidly expanding international economy swept Australia into another long boom. The major growth sectors in heavy industry had all developed greatly during the war. Peacetime reconversion allowed for a boom in consumer production. These sectors became the major employers. They were also concentrated within the major metropolitan cities. As a result, the metropolitan populations and workforces, especially those of Sydney and Melbourne, continued to numerically dominate their states and Australia as a whole.9

In the immediate post-war years there were acute shortages of labour and materials for public works, housing and the basic manufacturing sector. These shortages threatened the government's wage and price control policy. They also hamstrung development just as it was gaining momentum. The supply of immigrants repeatedly failed to match demand. The official response was to widen eligibility criteria. In the end, the main criteria were that immigrants were young and European.10

Among the first large groups to arrive were the 'DPs', those from the camps for people displaced by war and then peace. The first were 'Balts' — from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Then came Ukrainians, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians and Yugoslavs.11 During the early fifties, as these sources dried up and labour shortages continued, large numbers of Dutch and Germans and then Italians arrived.12

11 Ibid, pp. 79-80.
The government lodged many of the immigrants or 'New Australians' in holding camps and hostels. These were mostly squalid barracks. Many assisted migrants had to sign agreements bonding them to live and work wherever the government sent them for two years. This was a new form of industrial conscription. Yet, the labour movement remained unmoved. Instead, there was widespread resentment towards the new arrivals. There were the traditional fears of losing work to new, and maybe low wage competitors. Underlying these fears, were a variety of prejudices brought forth as a result of sudden contact with different cultures.

To dampen these emotions, governments limited migrants' access to the better jobs. The gates to Australia were open, but they led to the hardest, dirtiest and worst paid work. Language difficulties were only the most obvious block. Union officials played an important official role in enforcing the very restrictive recognition of overseas qualifications. This helped the Chifley Government win the consensus of large numbers of union officials who already supported its general programme.13

Union officials held an instrumental view of recently arrived members. Many on the right were not averse to anti-communist East Europeans, as long as these limited their union participation to voting in union ballots. For the same reasons, Communist union officials viewed them as a threat.14 On the whole, the union movement was not prepared to address migrants' specific industrial needs. This fitted in with the governments' assimilationist policies. Partly for this reason, migrants appear to have had no real influence on the traditional structures and methods of the Australian labour movement.15

Post-war immigration was clearly and consciously an urban phenomenon. The capital cities and steel towns Newcastle and Wollongong had the semi- and unskilled manufacturing and construction jobs to which the immigrants were destined. Thus, immigration was the major factor in Sydney's strong population growth between 1945 and 1960.16 It also exacerbated the city's growing

13 Spearritt, op. cit., pp. 94-5; Markus, 'Labor and Immigration 1946-9', pp. 87-90.
15 ibid., p. 193 and passim; Quinlan, 'Australian Trade Unions and Postwar Immigration', op. cit., pp. 268, 273-4, 279
housing shortage — the result of restrictions which depression and then war had placed on homebuilding.  

More than ever, housing became a Federal priority. Adequate housing for all was part of the programme and promise of post-war reform. Pragmatically, the Federal government feared the inflationary effects of a housing shortage. It therefore provided massive funding for the States’ housing programmes. Nevertheless, shortages of materials and labour initially hampered attempts to overcome the backlog.

In NSW, McKell had established a Housing Commission in 1941 to provide low cost housing. Wartime government priorities halted progress. In the early post-war years, the Commission provided emergency temporary housing. With the aid of Federal funding, its activities expanded from the early fifties. By the end of the decade, it had provided a large proportion of the new houses, particularly on the urban fringes. So too had owner-builders and private developers. Location was no longer the problem it had been as the car was becoming increasingly accessible. The suburban sprawl had begun in earnest.

d. Political struggle and stability

With the end of the war, international fascism lay in ruins and left wing parties were gaining electoral successes. It appeared to many on the left that: 'Privilege and property were everywhere on the defensive'. Australians, and particularly the working class, had put up with years of depression and then war. A growing conviction that the post-war world should bring greater freedom and social justice was alive in the land. At the parliamentary level, McKell won a major electoral victory in 1944 and Curtin and Chifley dominated in Canberra. As an organisation, the ALP was again forced to talk about a socialist objective. The CPA too was at the height of its influence.

1974, pp. 9, 11; and 'International Migration and Metropolitan Growth in Australia', in ibid, pp. 100-1.
18 Butlin and Schedvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 682, 696.
19 Spearritt, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-8, 101-4.
20 T. Sheridan, 'A Case Study in Complexity', p. 96
CPA leaders continued to follow policy laid down in Moscow. For ten years after 1946, the line was that of the Cold War, of a world riven into two monumental economic-political blocs. International capitalism was to generate renewed depression and war. The role of communist parties in capitalist countries was to take the offensive and win the working class away from their social democratic or labourist allegiances. The CPA’s main arena of conflict with the ALP was in industry. At stake was Chifley’s relaunching of Australian capitalism.

Continued organising and centralising work within unions delivered vast sections of the workforce into the hands of officials who were CPA members. By 1945, the CPA could strongly influence the ACTU Congress.22 Yet, during 1944 and 1945, the party’s unconditional support of the war effort increasingly cost it support among workers keen to improve their working and living conditions. To sustain maximum output, the party supported industrial peace on the employers’ terms. These terms were harsh: long hours and intense production. Wages remained pegged. To sustain maximum output, the party supported industrial peace on the employers’ terms. These terms were harsh: long hours and intense production. Wages remained pegged.

As a result, the rule of CPA union leaders became objectionable to a growing number of war weary and rebellious workers of whatever political bent. Absenteeism grew rapidly. There was also a growing number of unauthorised strikes. In early 1945, rank and file Balmain ironworkers won a major strike for local autonomy and democracy against a tyrannical CPA-controlled FIA bureaucracy.23

With the end of the war, the CPA could make amends by reverting to an oppositional role. Within a full employment peace economy, workers wanted to be rewarded for their wartime sacrifice. They wanted to win back the ground lost since the beginning of the Depression, and more. In particular, they wanted the 40 hour week. With gritty optimism, they set about their task through militant unionism at a time when they enjoyed a widespread public support. Industrial direct action blossomed.24

Chifley’s economic programme involved an apparent contradiction but one which he nevertheless managed to ride out for most of the mid-and late forties. The aim of policy — sustained full employment — threatened to clash with one of the means, stable prices and wages. A tight labour market and pent-up demand provided a perfect environment for a strong wages push.

ACTU officials understood the contradiction and made their choice — full employment at any cost. After 16 years of depression and war, many ALP union officials had lost all sense of industrial fight — if indeed they had ever had any. Instead they had come to rely almost entirely on Labor governments. This caught them between supporting Chifley’s programme of labour market controls and intense rank and file pressure for gains at the point of production. Chifley used his political stature and skills to win time by refusing, then delaying or modifying any gains.

The CPA was in a good position to ride the surging activism. With the ALP in government and the unions holding back the rising tide of working class demands, it was not hard to expose the contradictions of labourists running capitalism. CPA union militants and officials resumed their lead in the struggle against the boss. But it was the growing rank and file militancy even in traditionally placid unions which most clearly marked the first few years after the war.

Conservatives found in the CPA a convenient scapegoat for major disputes such as the 1945 steel strike and the metal trades dispute of the following year. Sharpening this growing intolerance was the leading role of CPA unionists in a series of successful political strikes during 1946-7. In particular, the wharfies’ bans on Dutch ships carrying arms to Indonesia displayed the power that unions, and through them the CPA, could muster over Australia’s international relations.

This did not go unnoticed. Amid-growing Cold War hysteria, its enemies worked successfully to marginalise the CPA. The party’s own strategy came unstuck with the

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27 Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists, pp. 150-2.
28 ibid., pp. 206, 212-3; Davidson, op. cit., pp. 99-100.
1949 coal miners' strike. With shortages of power and an election pressing, Chifley immobilised opposition unions and sent troops to work the mines. This dealt a body blow to the CPA-led unions involved. However, the party was also facing a more concerted offensive.

Important elements within the ALP were becoming hostile to the threat of a CPA takeover of their union powerbase. To stem the tide, they made an alliance of convenience with anti-communist Catholic activists who had already organised their own networks. One result, the ALP Industrial Groups, was a very successful attempt to mobilise the active participation in union affairs of anti-communist workers. In time, it became clear that some 'Groupers' had larger ambitions over the ALP and its affiliated unions. When Federal ALP leader H.V. Evatt dramatically disowned the Groups in late 1954, many conservative Catholic elements seceded to form the Democratic Labor Party.

In NSW, there was a tradition of cooperation between ALP and CPA union officials. The growing CPA push now took on a different light. To counter the threat, Labour Council officers launched the first Industrial Groups in 1945. Bitter faction fighting returned to the NSW ALP, deepening as the AWU, the traditional Labour Council right wing, the Groupers, the centre and the left entered into a shifting and confusing series of alliances. Having built up a self-sufficient parallel organisation within the party, the Groupers took control of the NSW Executive of the ALP in 1951. They consequently suffered a strong counter-offensive from another right wing group who intended to control the party — the AWU officials. The NSW party did not split as most Groupers chose to remain inside where they formed a solid core on its right wing.29

While internal power struggles convulsed the labour movement, it was the anti-Labor coalition which clearly and publicly pinned anti-communism to its electoral masthead. During the 1949 Federal election campaign, Menzies promised to ban the CPA.30 The coal strike that year no doubt helped him win. In power, he was as good as his word. The 1950 Communist Party Dissolution (or 'Anti-Red') Bill sought to ban the party and remove party

members from public employment or union office. This threatened working class activism, civil liberties and union autonomy. The Grouper-dominated NSW pushed for acceptance of the Bill except where it threatened union officials. The ACTU Executive decided to oppose it, calling on the Federal Labor Party to do likewise. After much debate both bodies agreed on a policy of amendment rather than rejection.31

When the High Court found the Bill unconstitutional, Menzies tried to suppress the CPA through a referendum. The ALP and the unions became more worried and bestirred themselves. As well, the CPA adopted a more consensual line and, with its militants organising grass roots opposition, this helped to narrowly defeat the referendum.32

e. Unions, arbitration and industrial relations

When the war ended, the Federal government repealed some of the most unpopular labour regulations but still retained much tighter control than before the war. In particular, wage pegging was still in force. Chifley gave some way during 1946 and as pressure continued to mount, abolished most of the wartime controls during the following year.33

Other tendencies centralised industrial relations. State awards followed the Federal Court’s Basic Wage and margin decisions. The Court’s policy now had an important bearing on small state bodies such as the Water Board union. As well, strong growth in union membership coincided with a further concentration of organisation. There were more unions organised nationally, more affiliated to the ACTU and more subject to federal arbitration. Still, many of the new unions were, like the Water Board union, relatively small and industrially weak.34

As part of wartime restrictions, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court had deferred hearing the Basic Wage case in 1941. With Chifley’s backing, it did not resume hearings until October 1946. This meant holding down real wages. It also temporised for nearly two years over shorter working hours. Mounting union pressure finally convinced J. McGirr’s ALP Government in NSW to legislate a State 40 hour week from July 1947. The Federal Court followed six months later.35

31 Hagan, A.C.T.U., pp. 236-7
32 Davidson, op. cit., p. 112.
33 Butlin and Schedvin, op. cit., pp. 556, 701, 783, 801.
Chifley and the Federal Court continued to stall on the Basic Wage. Most union officials remained loyal to Chifley’s anti-inflation programme and managed to hold back the tide until after the 1946 Federal election. Growing impatience then finally spilled over. Key unions in engineering and transport became involved in major, long and successful action.36

The first alteration to the Basic Wage in nearly a decade was a 7/- increase in 1946. In October 1950, the Court added £1 per week to the existing rate of £7.2. This was a substantial and long overdue improvement. Inflation fed into quarterly adjustments over the next two years and the Court also raised the female Basic Wage from 56 to 75 per cent of the male rate.37 Employers blamed these increases for a worsening of the pre-existing inflation and pressed the Court to end the quarterly adjustments, reverse the improvements to the female wage and re-introduce the 44 hour week. In 1953, the Court obliged them over the quarterly adjustments.38 With no National Wage Hearing until 1956, the Basic Wage remained frozen.

The Court, and from 1956, its successor, the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, turned to annual hearings to decide the Basic Wage. The main criterion, as it had been for suspending the automatic adjustments, was the tribunal’s assessment of Australian capitalism’s ‘capacity to pay’. In this, it took a very protective stance, arguing that previous increases had raised the Basic Wage too high.39 Margins cases also came within the Court’s programme of holding down real wages. The metal industry wage structure was central to Australian wage fixation. In January 1952, Conciliation Commissioner Galvin, in the most notorious decision of the period, rejected any increase in metal industry margins. Again, national capacity to pay was the only criterion.40

It was not easy for the Court to hold fast against union demands that the Basic Wage and margins match rising prices. Consistently full employment and booming demand in key sectors of the economy meant employers were hard pressed resisting the demands of their

36 Gollan, Revolutionaries and Reformists, p. 181; Sheridan, Mindful Militants, pp. 171-9.
37 ibid., pp. 218, 219.
40 This was unusual. Margins decisions usually took account of price, work value, comparative wage justice, industry product and labour market factors. Hancock, op. cit., p. 154; Hutson, Six Wage Concepts, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Surry Hills, 1971, pp. 136-9.
employees. In their defence, the Court, with the Menzies Government in strong support used, or threatened to use, penal sanctions to enforce discipline.41

Metal industry unions, in particular, reacted to the Court’s decisions with strike action. The ACTU Executive tried to halt these moves outside its jurisdiction and against its strategy.42 When subsequent major margins cases continued to go the employers’ way, the ACTU Executive began to support national stoppages.43 In November 1954, the Court improved the position of the most skilled but this did little to placate the unions. Some of the larger organisations turned to collective bargaining.44 In 1956, amid-rising resentment over the Basic Wage, a Federal Unions’ Conference voted narrowly for a national strike. This came to nothing as the state branches, prominent among them the NSW Labour Council, refused to countenance any stoppage.45

For the Federal bench, neither boom nor slump were good times for wage increases. The judges also refused to reintroduce quarterly adjustments. Claims for compensatory increases to the Basic Wage also fared very poorly. As a result, and in tandem with the Menzies Government, the tribunal carried out a conscious and very effective wage freeze during six years of rising profits and national income growth.46 Finally, in 1959, the Commission increased the Basic Wage by 15/- This largely compensated for the previous losses.47

The NSW Industrial Commission followed the Federal Basic Wage. It also agreed with the underlying reasoning as to the inflationary impact of the 1950 increase and attempted to restrict increases to margins in state awards.48 The Commission had long left dormant its range of penalties under the Industrial Arbitration Act. From the early 1950s,

41 Hagan, A.C.T.U., pp. 219, 286; Mitchell, op. cit., p. 47.
42 ibid., pp. 242-3.
43 ibid., p. 248.
48 e.g. NSWIR, 1951, pp. 725-8. Ferguson J., responsible for construction industry awards, was more generous. Justices De Baun, Kinsella and Cantor sitting on the full bench were particularly unsympathetic to union claims. Cf. NSWIR, 1946, pp. 336-40 and ibid., pp. 166-176
before the growing pressure from the building and construction trades in particular, it began to use them heavily against strikes and other direct action. The first weapon was fines; the second, deregistration.50

Two unions in close contact with the Water Board union’s members — the FEDFA and the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU) — were major protagonists.51 The FEDFA had an active and solidaristic rank and file among plant operators. Furthermore, local branches enjoyed a degree of autonomy. This combination led to the Commission’s deregistration of the union in April 1955. The FEDFA remained deregistered for over two years.52 This made it vulnerable to a concerted incursion from an ever expansionist AWU.53 The BWIU narrowly survived deregistration in 1954 and, even more narrowly, in 1957.54

In 1948, other amendments gave the conciliation commissioners powers similar to low level industrial judges. As their hearings were less legalistic, union officials increasingly took the place of outside lawyers.55 Yet, re-opening an award for a few items remained problematic as it could throw the rest of the award open to a hostile decision from a conciliation commissioner no longer dependent on achieving consensus.

Finally, NSW Labor governments passed important legislation affecting Water Board unionists. The 1944 Annual Holidays Act provided two weeks’ annual leave. Amending legislation in 1958 increased this to three. The 1955 Long Service Leave Act improved on some other aspects of the house union’s award.56

51 The BWIU was the result of a 1942 merger of the unions of carpenters and joiners and bricklayers and tuckpointers. It was the strongest and largest union among the building trades.
52 NSWIR, 1955, p. 171.
56 Mills, Industrial Laws, pp, 224-5, 497-8, 519, 527.
2. The Water Board

a. Construction

During the post-war period, the Water Board again had a role within national economic policy, and a major one within the NSW economy. The years to 1960 were, on the whole, boom years for Board activity. The spreading suburbs extended the metropolitan boundaries, at the same time boosting and drawing in previously detached towns. Even distant Shellharbour Municipality, to the south of Wollongong, came under the Board's control. By June 1956, the Board's area of operation covered 4,000 square miles and included the largest industrial concentration in Australia. Within its boundaries lived 60 percent of the NSW and 23 percent of the Australian population. In June 1946, the Board supplied water to a population of 1,628,269. Fourteen years later, this had grown to 2,264,000. The figures for sewerage were 1,178,064 and 1,560,000 respectively.

The Chifley Government's emphasis on public works presented the Board's workforce with the possibility of commencing important head works and completing others. Thus, although wartime labour shortages had meant a serious deterioration of maintenance standards, it was in construction that Board activity really surged forward. The available figures of expenditure and employment for maintenance and construction in Table 6A are some guide. Given the much heavier mechanisation of construction (part of a national trend) the difference was even greater. The declining relationship between expenditure and workforce figures for construction makes this clear.

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57 Aird, op. cit., pp. 100-1.
58 MWSDB Report, 1955-6, p. 17.
60 ibid., 1944-5, p. 13.
61 Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, op. cit., pp. 41-3.
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<td>3,880</td>
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<td>11,294</td>
<td>5,394</td>
<td>1,214</td>
<td>6,608</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>11,692</td>
<td>5,573</td>
<td>1,404</td>
<td>6,977</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>14,338</td>
<td>6,464</td>
<td>1,351</td>
<td>7,815</td>
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</table>

In 1943, the Board submitted to the NWC a high priority works programme. Nevertheless, shortages of labour and materials greatly hindered the spending of allocated amounts for much of the late forties. Only when these shortages eased from about 1948 could the Board spend the greater amounts needed. Subsequently, neither Upton nor his successor, J.W. Goodsell, failed to let pass the chance to warn politicians and government officials of the priority that Board spending had to play in metropolitan development. With the recession exceptions of 1952-3 and 1955-6, the Board had no difficulty raising loans in Australia and abroad. Increasingly, the NSW government augmented the Board's own

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62 From MWSDB Reports. Note figures are as at end of July each year. There was always considerable variation in employment levels during each year. The figures for Columns 2 and 3 are for 'B' Class and 'A' Class employees respectively. Given that almost all maintenance were 'A' Class and that only between 100 and 400 working on construction were 'A' Class, the two columns are good guides to the rapid growth of construction employment relative to maintenance. Random checks of monthly figures appearing in the Board's Minutes support this.

63 It was costed at £3m — a conservative estimate of what was realistically necessary. MWSDB Report, 1944-5, p. 19.
heavy borrowings in an effort to speed up water supply reticulation of outlying areas and to overcome sewerage backlogs. By 1954-5, total construction spending had reached record levels.64

The rest of this subsection indicates the areas of greatest construction activity. These often allowed for more stable construction workforces and developed stronger industrial profiles. The main area of construction activity was water supply. Recurrent droughts made this an obvious choice. Immigration and the rapid growth of manufacturing during the fifties stimulated metropolitan growth and made heavy demands on an already inadequate supply system.65 Substantial expansion was imperative.

There were also strong pressures in favour of sewerage reticulation. NSW governments were sympathetic to both. There were also divisions on priorities within the Board. The problem was means. Given the shortages of labour and materials, a choice was necessary. Federal and state government commitments to massive housing expansion made water supply a more immediate necessity. As a result, the NSW Government gave water supply equal funding and resource priority to housing. A majority on the Board agreed.66

Therefore, the lion's share, often up to 75 per cent of the Board's construction spending, went to water supply in the years to 1960.67 One problem was sufficient storage. The other was adequate distribution. Dam workers finished the first task, the rebuilding of the Nepean Dam spillway, in 1946. The main priorities then became the construction of the massive Warragamba Dam and Pipeline, and the City Tunnel to duplicate the Pressure Tunnel.

The Warragamba project dominated all Board activity, accounting for between a third and a half of total Board construction spending each year between 1944 and 1960, the year of its completion.68 By far the Board's largest ever project, it was the Board's longterm answer to the water shortages which had plagued a growing Sydney since the arrival of the

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64 MWSDB Reports.
67 MWSDB Reports.
68 ibid.
First Fleet. The Board's senior engineers pushed for the most rapid completion possible. It was a race against time to get the wall up high enough to impound sufficient water before the next drought arrived. The NSW government, convinced of its priority advanced massive loans to speed up the work.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding round-the-clock shifts, progress was at times slow. There were the difficulties of a site prone to torrential flooding and with many unexpected geological faults. Finally, there were the effects of the changing labour market. The Warragamba section tells the story in detail.

The Warragamba project also involved the completion of a second and larger pipeline from the dam to Prospect to replace a smaller main from the emergency scheme. The project suffered delays due to shortages of pipes and labour. Large numbers of migrants, accommodated at the Mulgoa Road camp along the pipeline helped sustain output. With others camped along the line, they remained largely cut off from the closely knit dam town. At the end of June 1947, the pipeline workforce counted 434 men. A year later it was 348 although the average number during the intervening period was 410. Numbers continued to fluctuate but gradually declined as the work neared completion in 1953.

The Board then had the men build a new 84 inch main between Prospect and Pipe Head. The largest distribution works was the City Tunnel. It was to supplement the Pressure Tunnel by carrying water from Potts Hill to Waterloo. Miners began work on the first shaft in 1946. Shortages of labour slowed progress and once again, the Board instituted the maximum possible mechanisation. At any one time between about 136 and 330 workers were involved. The tunnel came into operation in 1957.

There was also a host of smaller works — reservoirs, pumping stations and distribution mains as well as reticulation. Mechanisation allowed for major increases in

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69 ibid., 1953-4, p. 17.
70 MWSDB Minutes, 22 August 1951, 13 January 1954, 2 February 1955.
72 MWSDB Minutes, 8 October 1947; MWSDB Reports, 1947-8, p. 17; 1948-9, p. 13.
73 ibid., 1947-8, p. 16; 1948-9, p. 20.
74 MWSDB Report, 1954-5, p. 27
pipelaying, especially after the mid-fifties.\textsuperscript{76} Much of it went into the dramatic expansion of housing on Sydney's western fringes and for the rapid development of heavy industry at Port Kembla and the resulting residential growth of suburban Wollongong.\textsuperscript{77}

The large sewerage construction projects which survived the concentration on water had two main purposes. One was the completion and extension of major trunk works or reticulation off them. In particular, the final stages of the No. 2 SWSOOS and the very large North Georges River and the East Bankstown Sub mains came into operation in the early fifties. During the same period, important works boosted the service that the NSOOS provided to the rapidly growing western and north western suburbs. Reticulation continued into new development areas. Yet, in some areas, population growth was such that the backlog at the end of the period was worse than it had been initially.

The second major focus of sewerage construction was the reduction of beach pollution from the ocean outfalls. The Board stood by ocean outfalls but decided on the construction of treatment plants. Work on the first, at Bondi, finished in 1954.\textsuperscript{78}

The spread of the Board’s area of operations and the increase in its scale encouraged a greater regionalisation of activities. New offices, depots, stores and workshops opened in the suburbs. This resulted in a number of groups influential in the union’s activities changing location. The Crown Street facility declined in importance. Most of the heavy machinery maintenance work went to the Waterloo workshops, built in 1936. In 1949, the Central Motor Garage moved from Paddington to Waterloo. Water and sewerage maintenance operations had already had a new headquarters established at the Leichhardt depot while a major construction equipment and servicing depot opened at Birrong in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{79}

b. Employment policy

\textsuperscript{76} ibid., 1946-7, p. 16; 1957-8, p. 16; MWSDB Minutes, 5 October 1955.

\textsuperscript{77} Aird, op. cit., p. 36. Major South Coast supply developments awaited the completion of Warragamba. Then, Board employees designed and built works which had Avon Dam join Cordeaux in supplying the area. ibid, pp. 99-100.

\textsuperscript{78} Aird, op. cit., pp. 135-6.

\textsuperscript{79} ibid., pp. 226-30.
For all the official rhetoric, the Board did not go out of its way to smooth the path for those returning from military service. Any real benefits were the result of Board cooperation with Federal aid programmes. In this and other matters, Board members continued to congratulate themselves on being such fair and reasonable employers. As ever, the reality was quite different.

With full employment, the construction workforce had a better time of it than in previous decades. But, with work steady and wages mostly higher elsewhere, casual Board jobs lost much of their attraction. The Board’s attempts to compete by introducing better conditions for the ‘B’ Class were too late and inadequate to compensate for its inflexibility over wages. The Board either attracted too few new workers or they did not stay long. Even in early 1954, after heavy immigration and shortly after a recession, the annual labour turnover rates percentages were 176 per cent on district works, 183 among those on the City Tunnel and 72.5 at Warragamba.

The Board remained inflexible in seeking to retain labour. Instead, it directed its energies to finding replacements. Initial sources were the depressed settlements on the metropolitan fringes and among the seasonal agricultural workers who had always been a force on dam construction. But, as full employment persisted, even this source dried up.

As a result, the Board increasingly relied on immigrants coming through the Federal Government programme. The first arrived in 1948 and discussions of how to gain access to greater numbers of ‘Balts’ dominated the Board’s labour force discussions in the following years. Given its disastrous record with turnover, the Board particularly sought those DPs...
tied to two year bonds. By June 1951, these made up the vast majority of the 1,504 'New Australians' on Board works. This made the Board one of the largest employers of these workers in Australia.

Yet, under Federal Government allocations, the Board continued to lose out to the Snowy Mountains Scheme with its more imposing national symbolism and, in Wollongong, to the demands of an AIS steelworks in constant expansion. The Board repeatedly lobbied for extra allocations but largely in vain. Like private employers, it therefore pressed for an expanded immigration programme. In the meantime, the Board enlisted the support of successive NSW Labor Premiers by pointing to the urgency of major works such as Warragamba or the chronic backlog of suburban sewerage. In this, Goodsell, as Under Secretary for Treasury, was especially useful.

Most European migrants went onto construction. In particular, they went onto 'country' works such as Warragamba Pipeline where the isolation discouraged open recruitment or to the Wollongong area. The Board sent many others to Sydney's more affluent northern suburbs where local labourers were especially scarce.

In the early years, most lived in special camps to service either major works or areas of intense immigrant deployment. The main camps were at Potts Hill, Hornsby, Coniston, Warragamba and Woronora Dams, Manly and Horley. Some of the huts were new, others came from Nepean Dam or other completed jobs. Life in camp was tough, restrictive and lonely. After the emotional wrench of leaving the homes, families and culture of their native lands, many suffered further emotional trauma from the enforced family separations. The extent of this is clear in a letter from the Board to the union in early 1950:

stating that the visiting hours for wives and families of migrants at Potts Hill camp would be extended by 2 hours and would now be 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturdays,

87 ibid, 2 August 1950.
88 MWSDB Report, 1950-1, pp. 6-7; MWSDB Minutes, 7 June 1950; 9 August 1950.
90 The Board had much less influence under Menzies than it with Chifley. MWSDB Minutes, 30 November 1949, 10 January 1951. NB On one occasion when the Board desperately needed extra workers for whom it had provided accommodation, it found that the Federal authorities had sent them crop harvesting. ibid, 23 January 1951.
91 ibid, 29 September 1949; 9 August 1950; 8 November 1950; 16 May 1951.
Sundays and public holidays. This to continue until March when the hours of 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. would be reverted to. 93

Conditions at Potts Hill were also primitive. Many had to live in tents. Some of the huts were in bad repair and there was a lack of hot water, showers and electric coppers. In early 1951 there were nearly 1,000 men living in the camp but the sharp businessmen selling food from their rudimentary shops had neglected to install refrigeration and had a woeful record for hygiene. 94

The 'Balts' came from a variety of occupational backgrounds but few had had much manual work experience. They therefore needed a period of training and 'hardening'. 95 Still, Upton considered them hard working, clean and generally: 'of a fine type'. 96 Most of the other Board members agreed and took a keen interest in their output and attitudes to discipline. On the other hand, Carroll voiced traditional labour movement suspicions as to their capacity and 'undesirable influences' among them. 97

He was not alone in his resentments. By 1950, there was something of a jealous backlash against the recent arrivals. Upton insisted that the Board treat the 'Balts' no differently than other workers. Some Board members thought differently. Aldermen Campbed and Carroll felt migrants were 'over-generously treated' as they paid no rent for living in the camps yet still received a camping allowance. They wanted the allowance withdrawn. Beers, the Industrial Officer, agreed. Aldermen Maunder and Fowler felt that there were too many showers and toilets supplied at Coniston camp. 98

Some longtime Board labourers felt the same resentments. The Water Board union approved the use of Balt labour so long as they joined up and received award wages and conditions. The Board agreed, even attempting to sack one who refused to join the union. 99 There was also resistance in other quarters, the fruit of ignorance and fear. 100 While, local

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93 In MBWSSEA Minutes, 3 February 1950 (C).
94 MWSDB Minutes, 21 December 1949; 17 and 24 January 1951; MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 September 1951 (C).
95 MWSDB Minutes, 20 June 1951.
96 ibid., 16 and 23 June 1948; 24 November 1948 1 June 1946.
97 ibid., 13 April 1949.
98 ibid., 21 June 1950; 30 August 1950.
99 ibid., 13 April 1949.
100 For example, Wollongong City Council opposed the construction of the Coniston camp for migrants as nearby residents feared their children risked molestation on the way to school. ibid, 23 March 1949.
hostility to European migrants was particularly sharp in Wollongong, councils elsewhere also displayed similar levels of blind prejudice.

By 1952, the Federal programme involving bonded ‘DP’s’ had come to an end. As they worked out their contracts, many, aware of the possibilities elsewhere, walked out. As a result, by late 1953, labour was again in short supply and turnover rising. This state of affairs continued to the end of the decade.101 Immigrants remained the key to the Board’s requirements.

The second way the Board responded to its new labour market situation was through a policy of vigorous mechanisation. Trench cutting machines had been the norm since the First World War. Now back and front loaders, dozers, and other heavy, mobile plant appeared in greater numbers. As well, with surplus military vehicles available, there was a rapid increase in the size of the Board’s car and lorry fleet. Mechanisation allowed the Board to use money it could not spend on unavailable low wage labour for increasing output with the little labour on hand.102

There were two levels to the Board’s employment policies. One was the question of the rate of exploitation. Gone were the days of seemingly unlimited cheap, unskilled labour. Chronic labour shortages from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s made Board members and senior engineers nostalgic for earlier days when an abundance of desperate and hungry labourers poured onto Board works. The relationship between the general labour market, work discipline and output is clear not just from management claims of declining unit output and rising labour costs, but from Upton’s satisfaction over one aspect of the 1952-3 recession. The large number of sackings had led to increased productivity as: ‘many of the unsatisfactory elements in the labour force had been eliminated.’103 These included all those over 65.104

Out in the field, supervisors continued their past practices. They were, after all, often the same men as before. But, the men they ruled were changing. The fear of

102 ibid., 1947-8, p. 10; MWSDB Minutes, 2 June 1948, 6 April 1949..
103 ibid., 18 February 1953; MWSDB Report, 1952-3, p. 20. For another example of claims of declining productivity since the late thirties, see the Engineer-in-Chief’s Report to the Board, MWSDB Minutes, 18 August 1948.
104 MWSDSB Report, 1951-2, p. 7; MWSDB Minutes, 5 August 1952.
unemployment was slowly lifting and the knowledge of better paid or easier work elsewhere became more and more widespread. Many still chose a Water Board job ahead of others for reasons which included family ties, the chance of promotion, preference for outdoor work or the benefits of permanence. But, the existence of alternatives slowly weakened the reign of fear under which they had always worked.

Beyond the daily grind, there was the Board's specific industrial relations policy, a matter of very high priority for Upton and then Goodsell. They continued to involve themselves in general policy as well as operations such as the sittings of the Crown Appeals Board. Yet, beyond the need to resolve labour shortages, there was no real forward planning of employment or industrial matters.

Overall, employment and industrial questions fell well behind engineering and financial concerns. Thus, the position of Staff and Industrial Officer was not a particularly senior one but rather a stepping stone to greater things in administration. During this period, the SIOs, Beers and then, from 1950, G.D. (Gordon) Grieg largely confined themselves to the bureaucratic enforcement of existing industrial provisions and where possible, to their reduction. In this, they were the perfect foils for Macpherson, and Savage.

3. The Water Board union

a. Membership and finances

As Table 6B makes clear, the prosperity of the period 1944 to 1960 were years of institutional fat for the union. The union's jurisdictional monopoly allowed it to take advantage of the major works programme without having to do serious organising. There are no available membership figures for the years between 1944 and 1948 and figures after that date combine the wages and salaried divisions. At any one time, between one quarter and one third belonged to the latter. Of the 3,520 members in 1949, only 20 were female.

105 ibid., 7 June 1950.
106 e.g. ibid., 28. July 1948, 23 November 1949.
107 In December 1957, there were 1,800 members of the Salaried Division of the union out of a total of 6,300. Copy of the union's return to the Commonwealth Bureau of Statistics, MBWSSEA Warragamba Dam (Warrag.) Minutes.
At the end of the decade, the number stood at 18. It was a male industry and a male union. While membership figures climbed as a result of a growing construction workforce, there was no corresponding recruitment of women.

Compared to other NSW unions covering workers in building, construction and the public sector, the union began the decade as small to medium in size. For example, in 1949, the BLF had 8,000 members, the BWIU 18,963, and the FEDFA 8,445. In 1952, the MEU had 17,200 and the PSA 9,321. However, these were the exception rather than the rule. The main characteristic of organised labour in NSW during this period was its fragmentation into a host of tiny unions, most much smaller than the Water Board union. Growth during the late 1950s placed the Water Board union among the middle ranking unions in NSW.108

Financially, it did even better. The Water Board union came out of the war with very low dues. Increased use of the reformed conciliation processes reduced spending on lawyers' fees. Most of the union's funds now went to pay the officials. Initially, there were very few reserves. Therefore, any increase in their remuneration or drop in revenues caused a conflict between the dues level and the cost of those officials. Whenever this occurred prior to 1960, the dues increased. On the first occasion in 1947, Committee members were clearly concerned as to rank and file reaction. As a result, Broome proposed a referendum. The suggested increase to 10/- per quarter passed by a margin of two to one. While satisfied with the outcome, Macpherson was unhappy that it had involved an 'unnecessary' plebiscite.109 Four years later, Savage again pressed for an increase, to 13/-. After 'considerable discussion', this passed through a general meeting by a similar margin.110

The union continued to have trouble with unfinancial members and other workers refusing to join. The first step was to print their names in the Gazette. The next was prosecuting them for arrears.111 This worked well enough for long term Board employees. It was much less successful for the many who worked only short periods and finished up

108 There had also been substantial growth in other unions. In 1957, the AWU had 30,310, the ETU 23,740, the BWIU to 21,300 and the MEU 20,635. The BLF had, on the other hand, declined to 5,000.
109 Annual Report in MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1947 also 17 January 1947 (SC)
110 ibid., 7 March 1951.
111 ibid., 11 April 1947 (C); 11 April 1947 (C);
without joining.\textsuperscript{112} Active and vigilant job reps were thus of crucial importance but, the structure of the industry worked against change where it was most needed. The steady jobs or sections with established workforces tended to have their long standing reps. Maintenance workers, in particular, identified with permanent lifetime employment, the Board and the house union. They remained financial and their reps faithfully remitted their dues, in the process earning a commission.\textsuperscript{113}

Construction was the problem. The work was casual and many workers continued to drift in and out of Board jobs. This reduced the cohesion and predictability necessary for regular dues collection. Some jobs failed to elect a rep and some of those elected proved inactive.\textsuperscript{114} Also of great concern was a minority of reps who misappropriated dues collected.\textsuperscript{115} Yet, construction was providing an ever greater part of the Board’s workforce and the union’s potential membership. The union’s finances and, in particular, the officials’ incomes, depended upon a steady flow of construction workers’ dues. The officials sought ways of guaranteeing regular collections. They sent the organiser collecting but the spread and number of jobs limited his effectiveness. Another alternative was to have ‘A’ Class drivers and chauffeurs do the collecting. Their work included regular visits to a string of jobs.\textsuperscript{116}

The level of dues did not at first permit benefit or welfare payments. Expansion of the union’s financial reserves did not lead to any change in policy. While there was no general benefit system, union meetings did undertake to help hard pressed members or their dependents. One method of raising money was running sweepstakes on horseraces.\textsuperscript{117} As well, keen members or groups ran dances and other benefits on behalf of sick workmates or their dependents.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{ibid.}, 30 July 1947; 25 July 1956;
\textsuperscript{113} For reps from larger workplaces such as Ryde pumping station or Waterloo workshops, it meant substantial earnings. \textit{ibid.}, 4 February 1940 (C); 8 January 1954 (C); 1 January 1955 (C);
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{ibid.}, 28 July 1954; 6 August 1954 (C);
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{ibid.}, 3 September 1948 (C); 1 April 1949 (C); 2 August 1956 (C); 7 December 1956;
\textsuperscript{116} Some, such as Bampton, Eric Cornwell and Anderson, were among the most important collectors, earning large commissions. MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 February 1949; 1 February 1952 (C); 6 February 1953 (C); 1 January 1955 (C); 3 January 1958 (C);
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{ibid.}, 6 September 1946 (C); 2 February 1951 (C);
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{ibid.}, 29 January 1947; 14 April 1950 (C);
Increasing dues, low costs and a growing membership contributed to the union's spectacular financial growth of its own right which far outstripped the general growth of union finances in NSW. (Table 6B) In 1952, the average balance per member of registered unions was £1.94, or 82 per cent of the Water Board union's. By 1957, the NSW average of £2.74, had fallen to 64 per cent. In 1959, the union's assets per member were greater than even large and wealthy unions such as the NSW Teachers' Federation and the AEU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Income</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
<th>Balance</th>
<th>Balance per member</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1949</td>
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<td>7,302</td>
<td>6,558</td>
<td>4,788</td>
<td>1.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>3,970</td>
<td>10,553</td>
<td>7,838</td>
<td>9,361</td>
<td>2.36</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12,683</td>
<td>9,034</td>
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<td>13,949</td>
<td>10,816</td>
<td>26,707</td>
<td>5.91</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5,300</td>
<td>15,105</td>
<td>11,174</td>
<td>30,637</td>
<td>5.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From 'Reports of the Industrial Registrar', in NSWPP.

There were great variations in the holdings of different types of unions. Some, such as the mining unions, had enormous assets including buildings and other property as well as balances to cater for the union's welfare functions.119 The Water Board union had no property investments nor did it have any welfare scheme. Instead officials placed large sums in Water Board loans. These were a very safe investment. It also showed the clear identification between union and employer as well as being powerfully symbolic of members investing in their future jobs.120

**b. The officials**

Water Board union officials continued to earn well, but they no longer enjoyed the same levels relative to senior Water Board salaries. In 1947, the AGM set Savage's salary at the

120 The amounts involved were either £1,000 or £2,000. MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 March 1951 (C); 5 June 1953 (C); 13 November 1953 (C); 14 February 1958 (C);
same level as Macpherson's — at £11 per week or £572 per year. This was similar to the salaries of middle ranking assistant engineers and engineering draftsmen or chief inspectors. Maintenance men earned less than £6, the best paid miners less than £8 and WSOs less than £7. Within a few months, Macpherson complained that staff had not retained their 1940 margins and the Committee loyal ly granted them a £1 per week increment. The organisers Bodkin and Broome now earned £11 and £10 per week respectively. The first was equivalent to the earnings of middle ranking inspector or workshop foreman, the second to a construction or maintenance overseer. Officials continued to receive large increases but these were less frequent and appear to have followed the new Board awards.

In 1956, Kirkwood pointed out that officials’ salaries again lagged behind those of Board staff in similar capacities. It was at least explicit that the reference group for their wages was not their own membership but highly placed executives of their employer. As a result, Savage, Brightman and Broome received weekly rises of £5, £4 and £3 respectively. Savage was now on £20 per week. After the 1957 award, Savage pressed for still higher pay.

At times of greater activity, the Committee also granted officials, normally the Secretary, a hefty annual bonus. The perks of office were also there for little activity. Macpherson had for a very long time done very little for his handsome pay. On his retirement, he not only collected his long service leave, but also £200 on behalf of the Committee and £100 on behalf of the Picnic Committee. Honoraria for the elected officials remained more stable, if still generous.

122 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 May 1948 (C); Salaried Officers' Award, May 1949, NSWIG, Vol. 93, No. 2, p. 481;
123 MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 June 1950 (C), 1 December 1950 (C), 4 December 1953 (C).
124 ibid., 4 May 1956 (C).
125 ibid., 6 June 1958 (C);
126 ibid., 6 November 1959 (C).
127 ibid., 2 December 1955 (C).
128 In 1955, the President and Treasurer received £57 per annum, the Vice President £50, the Trustees £8 plus £1 per meeting. The Committee members and Labour Council delegates also received £1 per meeting attended. ibid., 6 May 1955 (C).
The sense of peace and comfort was obvious in other ways. With the depression over and class inequality less viciously blatant, the union's officials reverted to their previous language and posture. The word 'association' replaced 'union' to describe their organisation and there was much less talk of 'workers', 'working classes' and the like. In fact, so retiring was the rhetoric and behaviour that Kelland, representing the Warragamba workers, suggested that all the union's publicity and stationary clearly indicate that it was indeed a registered union.

The general conservatism also pervaded matters of a purely organisational kind. Rule changes did not change the union at all. Most changes merely formalised increasing dues levels. Committee meetings were now generally shorter — about one and a half hours long — and had fewer contentious discussions. The Committee continued to run the union, and the officials ran the Committee. They resisted demands from different sections of the membership to increase the frequency of General Meetings.

The ruling group continued to give the appearance of formidable stability. Below the surface though, there was a continuing process of renewal. Death, sickness, retirement and, sometimes, promotion to the salaried ranks forced the entrance of new blood onto the Committee. This meant a gradual change in composition. George Champion left the Committee in mid-1944. Woodhill and Archer retired from the Board and the Committee in mid-1945. Rosewell died prematurely soon after. Macpherson's Committee elected J. Carter to replace Rosewell as Treasurer and J. White and S. Parker to replace Woodhill and Archer. Waterson took Woodhill's position as trustee. In 1947, M. (Merv) Whit took the place of S.F. Mannix. Two years later, Ughie Lynch, now a salaried officer and Macpherson supporter, replaced Broome who had become organiser at Warragamba. The following year, Ryan left his position to A. (Alec) Munro. Other new members were the token and mostly manageable dam representatives. Over time, the following held the

129 Ironically, Savage used exactly those class terms, pitting 'workers' against 'the boss' when speaking in the less volatile climes of the Legislative Council. NSWPD, Session 1950-51-52, Second Series, Vol. 196, p. 2632.
130 MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 March 1953 (C).
131 ibid., 6 June 1947 (C); 28 January 1948; 7 November 1952 (C); 28 January 1953 (C).
132 ibid., 4 July 1945 (C); 1 August 1945 (C).
133 ibid., 1 August 1945 (C).

Bodkin died in 1950. Otherwise, there were few major changes during the decade after 1943. The stability of the ruling group was overwhelming. A lack of challengers meant that there were no elections in 1951, 1952, 1954 and 1958.\(^\text{134}\) The first exodus occurred in 1953 as a result of Board policy to retire employees over 70 years old. Brightman (snr), Carter, Cuddihy and White had to retire. The first three had been core members of the Macpherson group which had regained power during the depression.\(^\text{135}\) Their replacements included H. Hollingsworth, W.R. (Bob) Stone, B. (Bernie) Bowe and the much more independent and critical J. (Joe) Savage (no relative). After a number of tries, J. (Jack) Rutty joined the Committee in 1954. The following year, Page, an inspector since 1949,\(^\text{136}\) and Waterson retired. Munro became Treasurer, McNamara Vice President and Lynch a Trustee.\(^\text{137}\) Rutty and Kelland retired in 1956.\(^\text{138}\) At the end of 1958, Bowe and Whit, promoted to the salaried ranks, resigned from the Committee. F. (Frank) Rudd and T. Reardon took their places. The former was to play an important role during the 1960s. So was A. Thompson who had come onto the Committee a couple of years earlier.\(^\text{139}\)

By the mid-fifties, the ruling group's senior members had all become old and tired. Macpherson remained Secretary until his retirement in November 1955. Then 79 years old, he had held office for 46 years without ever having to face re-election. He died in October 1967.\(^\text{140}\) Savage replaced him and Brightman (jnr) was elected Assistant Secretary unopposed.\(^\text{141}\) By the end of 1955, there were no survivors from the pre-1929 period among the elected officials. Only Kirkwood and Lynch remained from the heady days of the 1929 takeover. Hayes and Hewitt were the only others left from before World War Two. There had been a gradual, bloodless but nevertheless clean changeover. Overall, the rash of

\(^{134}\) \textit{ibid.}, 2 May 1952 (C).

\(^{135}\) \textit{ibid.}, 7 August 1953 (C).

\(^{136}\) \textit{ibid.}, 16 November 1949.

\(^{137}\) \textit{ibid.}, 5 August 1955 (C).

\(^{138}\) \textit{ibid.}, 2 August 1956 (C).

\(^{139}\) \textit{ibid.}, 2 August 1956 (C).


\(^{141}\) \textit{MBWSSEA Minutes}, 1 June 1956 (C).
resignations in the mid-fifties involved aging men who had been in control for 20 or more years. If the Board's mandatory retiring age had not pushed them out, time undoubtedly would have. Their replacements could look forward to similar stability and longevity.

The occupational composition of the ruling group had altered but not to upset the fundamental dynamic of the union's operation. Due to Kirkwood's involvement, water maintenance had gained at the expense of sewerage and there were more representatives from among maintenance carpenters who often moved around their districts.

Salaried officers continued their heavy involvement. Some such as Kelland, Bowe and Whit left after their promotion. Others stayed on. This did not go unnoticed. In 1956, Savage publicly defended their involvement against continued criticism. T. Glover and Bert Anderson in particular led the open but unsuccessful moves against salaried officers holding office in the wages division of the union. They called on the supervisory ranks to find 'ample scope for their activities ... in their own union' and not 'restrict our democratic right to control our own union'.

Kirkwood and Savage both died in June 1959. The former had been President of the union for 30 years. Savage had been involved for 44 years. Brightman took Savage's place unopposed when Ray Greentree's nomination arrived a day late. Bob Stone became the new President.

c. Sources of opposition

In general, opposition or undirected resentment came out in three ways. The first derived from workplace demands which began to inspire workplace action. The original motivations may not have been antagonistic to the ruling group but the officials' handling of questions of workplace autonomy often made this inevitable. Mostly though, they could diffuse the problem by delivering some of the demands. The second focus of opposition activity was in the union's elections where most opposition candidates were openly hostile to the ruling group. The third was through debate at the General Meetings but here again,

142 ibid., 4 May 1956 (C); 31 July 1957; 29 July 1959.
143 ibid., 31 July 1957.
144 WSG, July-August 1959, pp. 1-2.
145 MBWSSEA Minutes, 9 October 1959 (C).
outside a small antagonistic minority, most of the opposition was fluid, depending on the issue and the occasion.

There was more opposition during the mid- and late forties. The graving dock and Wollongong had quietened noticeably. Aside from Warragamba, which appears separately (below), the main source of activism and job level opposition in this period came from the traditionally militant tunnel workers. Large groups of tunnel workers had always been more than a handful for the officials. They had always insisted on their local autonomy as well as access to the union’s resources. In the twenties and thirties it had been the Pressure Tunnel. Now it was the turn of miners on the City Tunnel. Bert Anderson, who chauffered an engineer on the project, was one avenue of complaints. But the tunnel workers also put into action their own organisation. In mid-1947, delegates began coordinating activities. They wanted a central union rep for the whole project. Savage would have none of it: ‘On no account would the Union permit the establishment of “central representatives” to thus usurp the powers of the Union.’ The Committee backed him solidly.

The distance between Savage and the City Tunnel workers grew. There was a dispute during 1947 among workers whose job made it impossible to keep dry. Members of craft unions received wet pay but not members of the tunnel house union. Bodkin felt that field officers had recently embarked on a hard line. In a remarkably terse letter to his friend Savage, he claimed he was: ‘prepared to support the men ... otherwise, this Organisation will go to the wall and cease to function as an organisation looking after the interests of the men.’ Still, Savage was slow to act. A month later, those on No. 7 Shaft stopped work on Bodkin’s instructions. While clearly unhappy with the situation, Savage felt compelled to pay the strikers for time lost. No official had ever supported striking rank and file groups.

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146 *ibid.*, 5 January 1944 (C); 6 June 1945 (C); 13 March 1946 (C); 6 September 1946 (C). In 1956, Wollongong members again asked for a local committee. Savage and Brightman visited and rebuffed their wishes. MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 August 1956 (C).
147 *ibid.*, 1 April 1949 (C).
148 *ibid.*, 4 July 1947 (C).
149 18 September 1947, in MBWSSEA Minutes.
Bodkin’s action raised a new danger. In response, Savage had the Committee restrict for itself the power to authorise such payments.\footnote{ibid., 10 October 1947.}

Ventshaftsmen, previously a quiet group, became more active with the general rise in militancy during the mid-forties. In particular, one group which included prominent militants J. Kenny and E. Rowley, took direct action against the directions of both the union’s officials and the Board. The dispute provides an interesting insight into the way the union’s officials and the Board collaborated to contain conflict whenever it broke out. It also makes clear the importance of arbitration processes in maintaining their close relationship.

The dispute was over safe working in deep manholes. The Board sacked the two ‘B’ Class workers involved and suspended the two ‘A’ Class. Upon protests from the union’s officials, an internal Board enquiry backed the engineer involved but significantly softened the penalties. The officials took the matter to the Industrial Commission. The Commission supported the Board’s enquiry but wanted the penalties lifted. It also supported the men’s (and the union’s) position on safe-working.\footnote{MWSDB Minutes, 14 November 1945.}

Ald. Carroll, successfully opposed suggestions that the Board appeal. He argued that the Board’s interests were best served by supporting Macpherson and Savage. November 1945 was not the time to provide militants with ammunition against cooperative union officials and their ways of working. Upsetting concessions won through arbitration could rebound dangerously on the Board. After all, he noted, it was only the officials’ quick action taking the matter to court which had stopped the whole maintenance workforce declaring the entire section of work ‘black’. The Board had to remember why it had for so long been fortunate in having: ‘freedom from industrial strife and (that) it was possible that certain elements might make the appeal, if upheld, an occasion for disruption’.\footnote{ibid., 21 November 1945.}

For the Board, the matter was closed. The original strike had won its demands and the strikers had their penalties lifted.\footnote{ibid., 28 November 1945.} The union’s officials had not prevented the strike.
but they had contained it within a small section and within the arbitration system. This was a valuable result for them and the Board.

During the mid-fifties, in tune with the rising frustrations and conflicts outside, there was a greater number of industrial disputes which threatened or ended in stop work meetings. In 1954 there was a dispute over the numbers working new drilling machines.\(^{154}\) The following year, mechanical workers walked out for 24 hours. In the same period, there were also unofficial strikes at Warringah Reservoir and threatened stoppages among construction carpenters for dirt money at Allawah Reservoir.\(^{155}\) There was also a threatened strike at Bargo over disciplinary matters.\(^{156}\) Lorry drivers argued for a reclassification through their representative Joe Savage. This Savage knew how to push demands and, facing a stoppage of its truck drivers, the Board conceded increased wages.\(^{157}\)

In contrast to past outbreaks of rank and file action, these brought no ringing condemnation from the officials. Macpherson was on the eve of retirement and long inactive. Savage was spending more and more time in the Parliamentary dining room. Most of the work fell to Brightman who was less given to making statements and more to trying to fix matters behind the scenes. At the same time, Brightman probably recognised that his protesting would do no good. Workers throughout Australia had suffered reduced real wages as a result of the policy of the Federal Court. The most senior officials of the union movement were damping down any real protest, with the support of the officials of the Water Board union. As a result, single groups expressed their frustration on the job or sought to better themselves by claiming various forms of penalty rates.

Away from the workplace, the ruling group managed to more easily retain control. The twice yearly General Meetings could do little. Attendances were low. Most members lived and worked at Warragamba or well away from the City. Then, the Australia Hall fiasco — the stacking of the meeting and the pre-arranged attack on members by paid thugs — was still a vivid memory for many. Finally, the growing number of non English speaking

\(^{154}\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 March 1954 (C); 28 July 1954;  
\(^{155}\) \textit{ibid.}, 8 July 1955 (C); 5 August 1955 (C); 4 November 1955 (C)  
\(^{156}\) \textit{ibid.}, 8 July 1955 (C)  
\(^{157}\) \textit{ibid.}, 4 March 1955 (C); 5 June 1955 (C);
migrants in the Water Board workforce would have found union meetings incomprehensible and not just for language problems. The few General Meetings offered no chance for real participation. The union appeared closed to change.

For much of the rest of the fifties, the general torpor reinforced those trends inside the Water Board union which had traditionally made it a conservative backwater. The union's journal did not fulfil its early promise. It soon degenerated into an unattractive and boring publication which seemed to have trouble finding items of any interest to fill its reduced number of pages. The Gazette had few articles which reflected or responded to the working lives of the union's members. It mostly published the award, ACTU declarations, ALP propaganda, the results of compensation cases and letters of thanks to officials for resolving individual cases. Even the much older Reticulator was more imaginative and therefore sought after by wages employees. Complaints and suggestions from the Committee led to nought and the Gazette, if anything became even less appealing.158

There were periods of general rank and file unease, frustration and agitation. One obvious sign was the holding of a string of special General Meetings in quick succession. In 1944-5, there was strong pressure to change the voting methods to make it easier for the distant construction workers to participate. They now had the right to a postal vote.159 Nevertheless, they had to apply for it in writing at each election. Much of the time, they did not even know what was happening or what they were entitled to. Many Australian-born construction workers were not great penmen. Many born elsewhere spoke or read little English. Their formal access to elections was a sham. It is not surprising then that so few construction workers voted. It also helps explain why rank and file opponents at Warragamba could mobilise locally but could not muster large votes for the union elections. On the other hand, those construction workers known to support the ruling group automatically received their postal vote from head office.160

Beyond Anderson and the Warragamba Branch, Brogden continued to be a thorn in the officials' side. Being a truck driver allowed him to agitate on dispersed jobs.161 By

158 ibid., 4 October 1944 (C); 4 August 1950 (C); 6 June 1958 (C).
159 ibid., 4 April 1945 (C); 30 April 1945.
160 Ron McIntosh interview.
161 ibid., 5 April 1944 (C); 6 September 1944 (C).
the late forties, Brogden was suffering severe illness and the Board transferred him to tap
testing at Crown Street depot. This was convenient for the union officials. While more
confined, Brogden became very active as a delegate, carrying the grievances from Crown
St.162

Workers in sewer maintenance, Macpherson's original stronghold, became
increasingly disgruntled during this period. Apart from the advantages they enjoyed as 'A'
Class, in almost every other respect, it was clear that they were going backwards in relation
to water maintenance and other groups. White carried their complaints to the
Committee.163 In 1952, he, Hayes and Culnane led the fight on the Committee against the
Board's plan to radically reorganise sewer maintenance. They wanted the workers to meet
and discuss the proposal. Macpherson killed off their hopes. The Board had decided on the
change and he upheld their prerogative to manage. Instead, he wanted to be free to press for
improvements to wages and conditions of those effected. In the face of opposition from the
three from sewer maintenance, the Committee agreed. The result, over time, was a decrease
in the number of sewer maintenance workers and a weakening of their position in other
ways.164

From the mid-fifties, Des Melling, a CPA member doing sewerage maintenance,
became increasingly prominent. The CPA had a number of other activists throughout the
Board's workforce but they remained isolated by divisions in the Board's activities. Savage
estimated that some 15 per cent of the membership were communists but, given that he
tended to see all consistent opponents in that light, this is probably an exaggeration.165
Nevertheless, the party's influence within the Board's workforce was such in the late forties
that it organised a secret meeting at Circular Quay — complete with tight security — with
the aim of organising left militants to oust Macpherson's group.166 It came to nothing.

162 ibid., 4 November 1949 (C). NB A branch foreman complained of the operation of a 'darg' in
meter repairs. MWSDB Minutes, 5 August 1952.
163 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 September 1945; 7 November 1947 (C); 7 October 1949 (C); 7
September 1951 (C);
164 ibid., 4 April 1952 (C); 2 May 1952 (C); 26 January 1955; 30 July 1958.
166 John Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview, 1 April 1985.
At an electoral level, opposition to the Committee did not change greatly, but it was even less successful than in the past. During the mid-forties, dam militants, particularly Ray Greentree, George (Bluey) Duncan and Harry Toohey, put up a stiff challenge in the late forties considering they were unknown outside their dam towns. Of the opposition closer to head office, Brogden, chairman, Seatrea, former Woronora representative Frank Henneberry and chauffeurs Bert Anderson and Tommy Simpson were also prominent.

The union's structures told against the dam workers. Not only were there rules restricting the representation of branch members, the actual conduct of the ballot continued to heavily favour supporters of the ruling group. One aspect was discrimination in the distribution of postal votes. In 1988, the Warragamaba Branch boycotted the elections on the grounds that the ballot was undemocratic. Voting figures for subsequent years (when elections were held), such as 1956-7, show the usual opposition losing by more than three to one out of a mere 900 or so votes.

In 1956, Savage won the election for Secretary, beating Bert Anderson by a margin of more than two to one. His high profile as long-time union official, ALP activist, MLC and rugby league identity did him no harm. As well, the Committee gave him decisive support and he received important coverage in the Gazette. Once again the postal vote counted heavily for the ruling group. Yet, the fact that an open CPA member with few resources received 308 votes in the middle of the Cold War was a sign of continued dissidence.

d. Migrants

On the whole, the European migrants who from the late 1940s made up an increasing part of the union's membership proved a force for stability. This was more by neglect than design. It was not that the union totally ignored them. Active union members were keen to see that the employment of migrants did not lead to a deterioration of wages and conditions.

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167 In 1946, Greentree, then at Nepean got 232 votes against the lowest winning total of 332.
170 In back of ibid.,
171 ibid., 17 April 1956.
172 WSG, January-February 1956, p. 2; MBWSSEA Minutes 6 April 1956 (C).
as the Board took advantage of their lack of knowledge of award rights. The union's officials promoted local meetings to consider the grievances.\textsuperscript{173}

On the whole, the language of the union's minute books suggests that officials and many members saw the migrants as standing apart. Minutes invariably prefixed their names with "migrant" or referred to them as simply "New Australians". This sense of difference came out most clearly at times over conflicting claims to jobs, even at times of expanding employment. In one case, the union's officials pushed hard for preference to the ex employees ahead of Italian migrants.\textsuperscript{174} At other times, there was resentment at the number of unnaturalised migrants who were gaining 'A' Class appointments.\textsuperscript{175} Increasingly though, migrant members entered the deliberations of the union as the result of work-related injury and death, particularly at Warragamba.\textsuperscript{176}

While they provided a large sectors of the workforce, migrants did not take an active part in the union's business; neither did most of the traditional workforce. It was, after all, a centralised and bureaucratic organisation with little room for local organisation beyond collecting dues. Migrants faced great problems with language, with understanding local customs, union traditions and values. As well, the sheer effort of trying to establish new lives in a strange country taxed all their time, energy and thoughts. Many of them were doing two jobs as Joe Savage found when he urged them to participate more actively.\textsuperscript{177}

e. Relations with the ALP

The Water Board union continued its wholehearted support of the reunited Labor Party. Not only had Curtin and McKell vanquished the factional warfare, they had led the party into government. Continued Labor rule in Sydney under McGirr and Cahill placed the party in an excellent position to aid the house union. Macpherson and Savage did everything possible to keep things that way. One element was the union's continued, hefty financial contributions.\textsuperscript{178} For example, in February 1953, the party received £100 from Picnic

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{ibid.}, 3 November 1948 (C); 26 January 1949; 7 September 1951 (C); 1 February 1952 (C).
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{ibid.}, 10 April 1953 (C).
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{ibid.}, 7 May 1954 (C); 5 September 1958 (C).
\textsuperscript{176} \textit{ibid.}, 4 November 1949 (C); 28 July 1954; 14 November 1956 (C).
\textsuperscript{177} \textit{ibid.}, 5 April 1957 (C);
\textsuperscript{178} \textit{ibid}, 3 May 1944 (C); 7 March 1947 (C); 4 November 1949 (C); 7 November 1958 (C);
Funds for its NSW election campaign in addition to the £125 in affiliation fees. 179 The following year the ALP received £150 for its federal campaign. 180 In 1959, with little complacency about an inevitable ALP return to power in NSW, the Committee handed over £500 from the Picnic Fund as well as £210 in affiliation fees. 181 This was an enormous amount. Picnic funds also supported party propaganda as the union pledged support to the party’s weekly Standard, then the ALP News, and subsequent proposed weeklies. 182

Yet the tenor of participation in party life changed. In the mid- and late forties, the Labor Party was not only united and in government, it was carrying out some at least of the promised reforms. As well, the union officials had grown older, quieter and even more comfortable. The absence of depression, poverty or real organised competition accentuated this. Even with Menzies’ return to power, this sense of calm prevailed. There were fewer assertions of the value of or need for Labor governments, rhetorical declamations on questions of party policy or positions taken on disputes internal to party life. The officials usually defeated Anderson’s motions condemning ALP sluggishness without great difficulty. 183

The Water Board union escaped the conflicts involved with the cold war and the ALP split. Officials continued to refuse any association with campaigns in favour of the USSR, avoided identification with the CPA by backing the NSW Labor Council’s stand on, for example, Indonesia and fell in behind the rest of the ALP over the ‘anti-red bill’. 184

The 1946 AGM heard the ALP’s Industrial Organiser speak on the need to establish industrial groups. The meeting agreed to support the forming of such groups among the Board’s workforce. 185 Nothing appears to have eventuated. The Water Board union did not have CPA officials nor officials likely to cooperate in CPA-led industrial campaigns. Macpherson and Savage had successfully erected their own time-proven bulwarks against the leftist menace. These defences were embedded in the union’s structure and operation.

179 bid, 6 February 1953 (C); 10 April 1953 (C).
180 bid, 5 March 1954 (C).
181 bid, 28 January 1959; 13 March 1959 (C).
182 bid, 1 March 1944 (C); 2 February 1951 (C); 4 September 1953 (C); 28 January 1959.
183 bid, 26 July 1950. Frank Page maintained some of the old insistence on party policy and social change on the Committee. bid, 6 September 1944 (C); 3 January 1945 (C); 1 September 1950 (C).
184 bid, 3 January 1945 (C); 30 July 1947; 5 May 1950 (C); 1 September 1951 (C).
185 bid, 31 July 1946 (C).
They operated in harmony with the employer’s preferences and the arbitration system. The union’s officials did not need to become part of a larger political play.\textsuperscript{186} Their hold was organic to their industry.

The union had always been well represented within the NSW Labor Party. Bodkin’s death diminished that. During the fifties first Kirkwood, then Brightman and finally J. F. Fitzgerald represented the union on the State Executive but the union never regained Bodkin’s Legislative Council seat.\textsuperscript{187} With the death of Savage, who was NSW Branch Returning Officer and close to Cahill, this situation worsened. The union’s Committee unsuccessfully called on the ALP to nominate a Water Board union member to his place on the State Executive and the Legislative Council.\textsuperscript{188}

While there was a steady shrinking of influence at these levels, changes over time made it less important. Full employment was mostly the rule, the Board received priority funding for most of the period, contract labour was hardly a threat to an expanding Board day labour programme and Board employees had an appeals board. Where problems did occasionally occur, the union’s officials found NSW ALP governments quite amenable.

There was also much less support of specific ALP candidates in state and municipal elections.\textsuperscript{189} Although the Board still had no employee representative, ALP governments could appoint sympathetic representatives. This it did with the appointment of J. Goodsell, first to the Vice Presidency and then to replace Upton in 1955. Further, Carroll continued to fight for Macpherson and Savage and for union policy at Board meetings.\textsuperscript{190} Union officials had less need to arm solitary champions to fight in a hostile environment or to follow a tortuous path to influence. They, themselves, went straight to the top.\textsuperscript{191}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{186} Savage as NSW ALP Branch Returning Officer did give evidence in favour of the grouper controlled State Executive in an inquiry into rigged ballots. Murray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 296. However, it is unlikely he was involved with the groups himself. Colin Colbourne interview, 20 November 1984. Certainly Joe and the rest of the Bodkins were categorically against any splitting of the party. Murray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 291; Sid Bodkin interview, 12 May 1988.
\item \textsuperscript{187} MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 July 1952 (C); D.E. Connors (ed), \textit{Official Trades Union Directory, 1956-57}, p. 127; and ibid, 1958-59, p. 123.
\item \textsuperscript{188} MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 July 1959; 7 August 1959 (C).
\item \textsuperscript{189} One exception was continued support of J.F. Fitzgerald, MHR for Phillip and longtime union member and intermediary. \textit{bid}, 2 December 1949 (C);
\item \textsuperscript{190} e.g. MWSDB Minutes, 21 November 1945, 1 October 1947, 7 July 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{191} MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 October 1946 (C); 7 March 1947 (C); 13 February 1948 (C).
\end{itemize}
If defence of the industry was no longer a recurrent priority for the union's officials, day-to-day industrial relations certainly were. On most counts, the officials were content. As conservative labourists, they insisted that conciliation and arbitration provided the best means of making industrial gains. Sympathetic legislation could crucially affect the arbitration framework. Perhaps even more important during the turbulent mid- and late forties, Water Board union members gained from a number of improvements which the NSW government pressed onto the Board. These were mainly to do with employment conditions and particularly hours and annual and sick leave, mostly flow-ons from victories other unions had won through strikes. Left alone, the Water Board union was very unlikely to make the gains.

A major and continuing area on which the union wanted the government to act was over the issue of long service leave. The Board only counted periods of normal employment. Many workers, particularly those on construction, had suffered heavily interrupted service as a result of the depression and then CCC service. Aggrieved at having to suffer further losses after the sacrifices made on relief works and then on wartime projects, they wanted both types of service to count. A Class workers already had long service leave provisions in their award. They soon got a favourable decision as to CCC employment from the Industrial Commission.

The majority at the Graving Dock continued to miss out. So too did those transferred from PWD control in 1928 and those who had done relief work. B Class workers had no award entitlement but only qualified through NSW government uniform leave provisions for casuals. Under sustained rank and file pressure, the officials continued to press the government for recognition of their varied service. In late 1951, the Industrial Commission made CCC service count for long service leave, but only for those who had worked for the Board prior to the CCC. The union wanted a more open definition and recognition of Board relief work. Savage went back to lobbying the ALP, the government

192 MWSDB Minutes, 9 September 1945; 30 June 1948; 7 July 1948.
193 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 April 1944 (C);
194 MWSDB Minutes, 28 July 1947; 7 July 1948; MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 September 1945 (C); 3 October 1945 (C); 7 March 1947 (C); 26 January 1949; 26 July 1950; 7 March 1951.
and particularly Premier McGirr. Some benefit came from the 1955 Long Service Leave Act. 195

Wage grievances did not stop at the general decline of real wages due to the operation of the federal tribunal. There were also problems specific to the union’s involvement in the NSW arbitration system. Important amendments to the Industrial Arbitration Act in 1943 and 1951 (s. 88A) meant, that once again, industrial tribunals could not award public sector employees inferior wage rates or conditions than those awarded for similar work outside. 196 This made the NSW system more attractive.

Further, the NSW Government’s legislation of a 40 hour week preceded reform in the Commonwealth sphere. Thus while Macpherson and Savage had the union continue to support ACTU campaigns in the federal sphere, advances like these made them hope to win through the union’s own traditional channels in NSW politics. 197

f. Relations with the rest of the union movement

The union’s relationship with other unions did not change. Despite the continued and at times bitter inter-union competition over nearby sections of the workforce, the house union faced no real challenges to its coverage. The sight of active BLF members ‘hanging up’ their cards at Warragamba — something they never did elsewhere — puzzled other unionists at the dam. 198 Certainly the explicit exclusion of Board works and activities from outside awards made bodysnatching more difficult. The Board was one obvious obstacle to any move which would weaken the house union. It ‘started’ all labourers and craftsmen as ‘construction workers’. This allowed it more flexibility to promote and regress them as it suited. Only craftsmen could carry their previous union membership onto Board jobs. Labourers and non-union craftsmen had to join the house union. Still, there was nothing to stop tradesmen, once hired from transferring to a craft union. It seems that Macpherson, Savage or Bodkin had made some arrangement through Labour Council which kept bigger and more aggressive unions outside their fiefdom.

195 ibid., 2 November 1951 (C); Mills, Industrial Law, op. cit., p. 527.
197 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1947;
198 Ray Greentree and John Palmer interview, 1 April 1984.
With its boundaries secure within NSW arbitration, the union could not avoid developments in the wider industrial relations world. The growing importance of the Federal system of arbitration stimulated further discussion within the Committee on the most effective response. The state arbitration tribunal now followed the Commonwealth on most major issues and the tendency was for it to further decline in importance. Yet, state unions without federal registration were powerless to stop the Commonwealth Court granting such registration to predatory unions.

Federal registration therefore became an issue for the house union. One avenue explored was federation with the equivalent union in Western Australia. Nothing came of it. In late 1947, that archetype of municipal labourism, the Federated Municipal and Shire Council Employees' Union, again proposed amalgamation. MEU Federal Secretary Winter pointed out the officials' shared interests and objectives, their past cooperation and that his federally registered organisation already covered water and sewerage workers in Victoria and Tasmania. Further, it operated under both Federal and State awards: 'according to the requirements of our policy or programme and prevailing circumstances.' This offered the Water Board union officials the protection of federal registration and the chance to continue playing in their familiar state arena. When the Water Board union officials were slow to respond, the MEU tried again. At the same time, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Employees' Federation sought amalgamation. Again the matter lapsed.

Nevertheless, a number of members, and, in particular, the Salaried Division became more insistent about Federal registration. Macpherson and Savage wished to avoid risking their influence in any amalgamation. Yet, they had to prepare or appear to prepare such an option. The Perth option was at the same time the least likely organisationally, the most plausible according to their sectional logic and the safest in the event of amalgamation ever coming to pass. Through a series of manoeuvres, they killed the question.

199 ibid., 5 January 1944 (C); 2 May 1944 (C)
200 Correspondence, 3 October 1947, in ibid.,
201 ibid., 5 November 1948 (C).
202 ibid., 6 May 1949 (C); 2 September 1949 (C); 2 December 1949 (C).
The Water Board union continued its traditional attitudes to other unions. This was a combination of industrial conservatism and isolationism. Apart from a few joint award applications with the AWU, officials remained wary of the dangers of cooperation with more militant organisations. When, for example, a Labour Council committee invited joint union action over silicosis victims, the officials were very careful to first check its composition.204

At another level, there was the question of solidarity with outside unions in struggle. Each case provided a testing of the relative strengths of the more radical forces against the conservative officials and their tightly organised and active supporters. And of course, each case varied. The balance of opinion within the union depended on the general political climate within the labour movement at the time and the extent to which the various industrial conflicts generated wider sympathies. For the union’s radicals, the easiest motions to win were expressions of support which involved no practical effort. These caused Savage and Macpherson little heartburn and functioned as a useful safety valve for frustrations gathering from other sources. Thus, for example, the union could take a stand in support of the tram and bus workers in 1944, Garden Island workers in 1955 and waterside workers the following year.205 But the Committee would not countenance financially contributing to the memorial for the late Arthur Rae, a grand stalwart of the left wing of the labour movement. Yet, in almost the same breath, it contributed to an appeal for a sick Water Board inspector who had never played any part in the union.206

More significantly, there was virtually nothing said over the major strikes of the mid-and late forties. Thus, the 1946 engineers’ dispute and the 1949 coal strike entered the union’s minutes only as they threatened to disrupt members’ work. In these cases the Committee approved the Board standing down members when ‘absolutely necessary’.207 Obviously, Anderson and the others recognised that they stood little chance against Chifley’s great prestige. Once again, the officials had kept the Board’s workforce a quiet backwater in a turbulent world. The union was wedded to the Board. Its only outside

204 ibid., 1 March 1944 (C).
205 ibid., 26 January 1944, 5 August 1955 (C); 25 January 1956.
206 ibid., 1 March 1944 (C).
207 ibid., 1 November 1946 (C); 1 July 1949 (C); 5 August 1949 (C)
contacts — with the NSW arbitration system, the Labor Party and a conservative Labour Council — only heightened this mutual dependence. In contrast with the feeling at head office, relations with other unions became of immense importance at Warragamba Dam.

**g. Warragamba Dam**

The minutes of the Water Board union's branch at Warragamba Dam tell a fascinating story of the development of strong concerns and campaigns around a whole range of community issues normally defined as outside the scope of industrial relations. They included health care, the provision of adequate and convenient public transport, housing and consumer concerns. Political debate, especially in the early years, was also lively. To understand the special nature of a dam navvy town during postwar prosperity it is necessary to know something of the workforce, their work and their community relations. This then helps explain their unionism.

Each Board dam project had shown advances in technology. For Warragamba, the Board decided upon the most complete possible, large scale mechanisation. This called for the implementation of advanced techniques, particularly for more skilled labouring work. Even here, technological change had an uneven effect. Concrete work, in particular, made a much greater call on the workforce and demanded much more sophisticated handling. Yet, while large numbers still worked on the concrete pours, a single operator now had push button control of the central concrete mixing tower.208 The same mechanisation and sophistication was true for some of the important tunnelling work. In particular, the Board now used divers in heavy suits for difficult underwater work. 209 A small but important part of the workforce were the gangs working the calyx and other large diameter drills crucial for strata sampling.210

Building the dam wall involved a succession of specialised groups working their way through the different sections of the dam. The first were quarrymen who worked on the excavations. They still used the hammer, gad and pick when necessary. But, instead of rockchoppers, there was the greater use of explosives or a mechanical back hoe with spike.

208 MWSDB Report, 1953-4, p. 22;
209 *ibid.*, 1950-1, p. 15.
In the wake of the excavation came the construction carpenters and their labourers and behind them the form setters. The latter were mostly young men. Having to work on six by two inch timbers, they were picked on the job for their agility and balance. The steel gangs putting in the setting steel followed. Finally, there were the concrete workers who only did the increasingly specialised concrete packing.\textsuperscript{211}

As on other dam jobs, there were groups of tradesmen working in the respective workshops. The difference at Warragamba was once again the scale and the continuous shortages. The carpenters were the most important group, followed by the engineering and electrical trades.

Although so heavily mechanised, the project had the largest of all the dam workforces. The workforce grew rapidly from 173 in June 1945 to 1,200 four years later. More than 200 of these were recently arrived European migrants and their number continued to increase. Most of the early migrant workers were from the Baltic countries. Italians and Yugoslavs later came onto the project in large numbers. So too, in the wake of improved condition, did white Australian born workers while there was always a core of aboriginal families working at the dam. The workforce grew unevenly depending on the availability of labour and finance. In June 1954, there was a total of 1,661 while during 1957-8 there was an average of 1,750 wages and 220 salaried employees. As the work came to an end, the Board transferred most workers onto distribution works so that at the end of June 1961, there were only 400 left working at Warragamba.\textsuperscript{212}

Work was still heavy and hard for most and the pace stiff. To get the work out of the men, the Board had some of its most competent and tyrannical overseers and inspectors working at the dam.\textsuperscript{213} Some inspectors would: 'just as well flatten a man as talk to him'.\textsuperscript{214} While they drove the men as before, they were no longer getting it all their way. The protests were both individual and collective. Turnover was one individual response, but it is difficult to know exact motivations. Certainly, part of it was a continuation of the old tradition of workers moving seasonally between navvyng and agricultural work. These

\textsuperscript{211} Eric Allsopp interview, 13 March 1984.
\textsuperscript{212} MWSDB Reports; Eric Allsopp interview, 13 March 1984.
\textsuperscript{213} John Palmer interview, 24 July 1985.
\textsuperscript{214} Ron McIntosh interview, 21 November 1985.
were 'B' Class workers, and mainly the Australian born. The 'A' Class and the craft workers tended to stay on.\textsuperscript{215} Nevertheless, turnover was so high, that only widespread dissatisfaction seems to provide an adequate explanation. In 1950-1, it was over 130 per cent and it continued high throughout the period of construction.\textsuperscript{216}

There was also large scale absenteeism, particularly on tunnel work. The hard living lifestyle of the dam navvies and the lack of entertainment at the dam provide an explanation which may have combined with dissatisfaction. In 1947, for example, the Engineer-in-Chief reported that absenteeism had for quite some time doubled after each pay day. The effect was to reduce the number of shifts workable from two to one. Again, Upton, looked forward to a bout of unemployment to tighten up work discipline.\textsuperscript{217} Collective action involved the local branch of the union. Unlike the rest of the union, this was almost totally industrial. In fact, local ALP supporters only established a branch of the party in the late fifties. It had little impact.

Once again, the building of a dam in a remote area distant from Sydney necessitated the construction of a dam township. At its peak, Warragamba township had a population of 3,500.\textsuperscript{218} As on other dam jobs, it had its start in tents and later rough camp barracks. Conditions in the early years were extremely primitive.\textsuperscript{219} In 1948, with a shift in the location of the dam site, the Board had the township relocated. Much of the work in the early years went on laying out and building the new township and work buildings. Yet, for some time, even some of the salaried officers continued to live in tents.\textsuperscript{220} Finally, the housing situation improved. On the one side, there were the barracks for over 1,000 'single'

\textsuperscript{215} John Palmer interview, 24 July 1985.
\textsuperscript{216} MWSDB Report, 1950-1, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{217} MWSDB Minutes, 20 August 1947, 30 September 1947
\textsuperscript{218} Aird, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{219} The straw-filled palliases were often flea-ridden. J. Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview 1 April 1984.
\textsuperscript{220} MWSDB Minutes, 4 August 1948.
men and, on the other, separate accommodation for the staff.\textsuperscript{221} By 1958, there were 502 one, two and three bedroom cottages available for families.\textsuperscript{222}

Then there was the matter of rent levels and the standards of comfort provided. On both counts, the Board always found room for ample self-congratulation. The rent was originally cheap. Given the shortages of metropolitan housing, it was an important factor in attracting and retaining labour. It also partially compensated for having to live so far from the sea and in a very closed company town. Yet, some Board members felt that tenants should pay market rents.\textsuperscript{223} Rent rises in 1948 and 1953 caused enormously bitter feeling among Dam residents.\textsuperscript{224}

The cottages were of a higher quality than at earlier projects but the Board was not really prepared to provide levels of comfort it did not have to.\textsuperscript{225} In 1949, all the Board members except Carroll thought the Board too generous in supplying furnishings. There was no need for linoleum on the staff barrack floors or for curtains. Upton, wanted to foster self-help. Both he and Goodsell also worried about the opinions of official visitors as to Board extravagance on behalf of its employees and at the expense of the ratepayers. Overall, the Board failed to recognise the new demands of postwar full employment. Goodsell, for example, pointed out that existing conditions were comparable to his past experience on construction jobs — during the late twenties and early thirties! Carroll alone consistently put the case for providing higher standards to attract and hold labour.

In most ways, Warragamba township provided its inhabitants with a range of services and facilities equal or superior to most country towns of a similar size. There was a range of shops, a workers' mess for meals, two churches, a large medical centre, a town hall in almost daily use for a wide range of social activities and a public school which catered for

\textsuperscript{221} Many of these returned to spend weekends with their wives and children in nearby towns like Penrith and Bargo. \textit{NSWIR}, 1951, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{222} MWSDB Reports, 1955-6, p. 19, 1957-8, p. 18. There is evidence that the Board officials allocated cottages in a 'selective way', to those they considered the best workers. MWSDB Minutes, 5 August 1952.
\textsuperscript{223} \textit{ibid.}, 16 June 1948; 1 October 1952; 2 and 8 September 1953.
\textsuperscript{224} \textit{ibid.}; MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 August 1953.
\textsuperscript{225} For instance, Moverly did not think building the toilet a short distance from their house would prove a great 'disability' for the tenants. MWSDB Minutes, 4 August 1948.
over 400 children at any one time. High school students went by bus to Penrith. There were sporting amenities and other recreational facilities.

The Board ran the town like a paternalistic dictator. One area of conflict with the residents was over the medical service to which employees contributed through compulsory deductions from their pay packets. Nevertheless, the Board refused the wishes of townspeople for an onsite hospital to take over from the greatly overworked service. Nor would the Board countenance any local say over the doctors. Thus, notwithstanding concerted local opposition, it sacked a very popular doctor over his ‘attitude’. On the other hand, the Board proved more sympathetic to a couple of doctors whom the local population clearly felt to be unsatisfactory. It alone decided who could take up business permits to operate in the town, again paying scant regard to the wishes of the town’s inhabitants.

Due to Upton’s enthusiasm for community and individual self-help, the Board provided only some of the facilities. The key to this self-help was, paradoxically, the local pub or ‘wet canteen’. The union’s officials were keen on the idea of a local pub as it: ‘would add to the comfort of the men and avoid clandestine drinking of unsuitable liquors which hitherto had taken place.’ Construction workers, particularly the unmarried men, were traditionally heavy drinkers. The wet canteen did not affect their love of beer. Nor did it change the somewhat riotous, brawling behaviour typical of navvy life.

The establishment of the wet canteen was crucial to keeping workers at the dam site and maintaining output. A popular alternative was drunken weekend binges in nearby towns from which they did not return until Tuesday morning. But the most important role the wet canteen played was in the distribution of its profits. Alcohol was a major drain on the

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226 The local branch attempted to have these abolished. The fees were six pence per week in 1951. MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 November 1947 (C); 5 January 1951 (C).

227 When the union’s officials brought high level political pressure to bear, the Board agreed to build extra accommodation at Nepean Hospital (Penrith) and provide an ambulance. MWSDB Minutes, 28 February 1951; MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 September 1951 (C).

228 MWSDB Minutes, 22 December 1948; MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 March 1949 (C).

229 MWSDB Minutes, 3 September 1947; 18 August 1954.

230 ibid., 29 March 1950.

231 ibid., 8 March 1950.

232 As a result, the Board decided that no women were to work at the bar, nor would they be allowed to drink there. ibid, 27 July 1949; 21 September 1955.
earnings of a navvying workforce. The wet canteen redirected the income back into the community, reaffirming some of the traditional solidarity and mutual aid typical of dam life. The local committee running the wet canteen sent a quarter of the annual profits to repay the Board's original investment. The rest provided additional amenities for the town. As all such expenditure had to receive Board approval, its paternalism even watched over the self help.

The wet canteen opened in March 1950. In the first year of operation the profit was nearly £6,000. The following year it was almost £8,500. Money went to the local school to buy books and equipment, to set up a kindergarten for 50 children and a baby health centre, for buses to take dam children to the high schools at Penrith, for the school library at Penrith High, for equipping childrens' playgrounds at the township, on subsidising the union branch's annual picnics, for sporting facilities, sporting teams and other employee recreation facilities. Overall, as Carroll pointed out, the good amenities had probably contributed to the decline in labour turnover at the dam in comparison to other areas of the Board's activities.

Upton was less than pleased with a different form of self help. In 1950, a police Vice Squad raid found locals playing 'two-up' and dice in the combined hairdressing salon and billiard saloon. Joe Bodkin, not long deceased, had an interest in the business. In fact, the Board's senior officers at the dam had encouraged him to set it up. Bodkin's brother Nick, a well-known SP bookmaker had contributed his expertise as a consultant and local Board officials were content that it run in an organised and efficient manner. Given the frustrations of dam life, the officials felt it to be the lesser evil as it helped keep bored single men in town. Upton was horrified and closed it down.

Although it was a single job, company town, Warragamba reproduced many of the social patterns of class and status typical of country towns. Not only was there the quite

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233 MBWSSEA Minutes, 4. October 1946 (C), 7 March 1947 (C), 11 April 1947 (C); MWSDB Minutes, 15 February 1950.
236 MWSDB Minutes, 10 March 1954.
237 A similar operation had run unobstructed at Woronora. Ron McIntosh interview, 21 November 1985.
238 MWSDB Minutes, 7 and 14 June 1950; Nick Bodkin interview, Sydney, 12 May 1988.
conscious distinctions in housing arrangements typical of the Board's dam towns. There was also physical impediments to other forms of mixing. A partition divided the wages men and the salaried staff drinking in the wet canteen. The screen made it impossible to see the faces of the drinkers on the other side. While some officers ignored the barrier and drank with the 'men', the barrier was a welcome boost for others and a concrete reminder of who stood where. Notwithstanding the desires of some of the senior and middle staff for more egalitarian social patterns, there was strong peer pressure to maintain distance from manual workers.239

Local union activities began in 1944 at the old township. It was at first known as the dam camp committee as the union's head office did not accord it recognition for more than three years. The most likely reason was an unwillingness to hand over to the branch its share of the dues collected. During the early years, local meetings mainly heard complaints and demands from the three camps. The camps were isolated geographically and had little contact. Each appeared to have its own meetings and they all put up both general demands as well as claims and complaints specific to their particular living conditions.240 No. 3 camp was the largest and had a wild, rough social life.241 Politically, it contained a number of the most prominent militants and usually made the most demands and the biggest threats of action.242

The branch's fortnightly General Meetings were often long and argumentative. There were frequent elections for officers and positions were very fluid during the first decade. In common with other industries in the mid-and late 1940s, the Warragamba branch went through a period of intense militancy and a pronounced shift to the left. Here too, CPA activists among the membership played leading roles which reflected the confident, combative spirit running through the working class base of the party.243 Key CPA figures at the dam from the early days were Bluey Duncan, Sam Ormsley, Alec Hornsey, C.E.

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239 Ray Greentree (and John Palmer) interview, 1 April 1985.
240 E.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 March 1947 (C); John Palmer and Ray Greentree interview, 1 April 1985
241 Warrag. minutes, 14 March 1945; 24 September 1946; 14 January 1947.
242 Eric Allsopp interview, 27 March 1984. This is also clear from the branch's expressions of solidarity and financial aid to major 'communist' strikes, its siding with the FIA officials against the Balmain Branch, and opposition to Chifley's wage pegging and the 'red baiting' within the ALP. ibid, 6 November 1945; 4 December 1945; 2 July 1946; 28 January 1947.
Dempster and 'Old Stan' Crandell. From the mid-fifties, Bob Greentree, Ray's brother was active. Duncan and Hornsey were camp stewards. So was Ritchie, who until his death in mid-1949, was the most prominent of the early pro-Macpherson activists. Camp stewards were often great leaders, bush philosophers and story tellers. As such they were central to the social and cultural life upon which much traditional rank and file navvy union organisation relied.244

Not all the important activists were either camp stewards or CPA members. Ray Greentree, after his transfer from Nepean in 1947 became the most important and effective of the dam activists. An uncompromising rank and file unionist of great integrity, he tended to try to win concrete demands and a greater say for members in their union.245 While he was a good organiser and not afraid of strikes, he was happy to resolve them if workers made gains. His militancy was not part of or linked to a larger political programme. He had little time for the CPA and tended to keep it at arm's length. So did Alf Whitfield, who was also prominent in the early years after the war.246 Similarly prominent until the late forties was Harry Toohey.247

Authority at the dam descended steeply from the Resident Engineer and other senior engineers. It could also be very autocratic. All parties desired to handle industrial grievances locally.248 Differences arose on what happened if there was no agreement. The union's officials wanted the matter referred to them. They could either visit the dam or go directly to the Board's head office. A final option was the Industrial Commission. This

244 Warrag. Minutes, 21 October 1947; John Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview, 1 April 1985. NB other legendary Warragamba camp stewards were 'Old Rube' McKern and 'the Swaggies' Friend.'
245 E.g. Warr. Minutes, 15 November 1950, 6 February 1952.
246 John Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview, 1 April 1985; John Palmer interview, 24 July 1985. NB, Whitfield, though a carpenter, mainly drove the flying fox.
247 George Heulscher was also very active in the early postwar years. He had a background in railway construction and but was now delegate for the fitters' shop. Warrag. Minutes, 26 August 1947. Alf Williams, Maurie Davis, John Brackenreg, P. Davis, Brian Gollan, P. Curran, A. Cowan and J. Bell all played important roles in the early years of the branch. All supported leftwing positions. Curran had been an activist on the NGRS.
248 This had the Industrial Commission's support, MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 February 1957 (C).
rarely led to very much but the local Board officers distinctly disliked the involvement of the Board's head office.

For this reason, local union activists found that backing local negotiation with judicious threats was a good way of winning demands locally. It played on the mechanisms of control which the union's officials and the Board had used for so long. Stoppages got the union's officials up to the dam smartly. Worse still for the dam engineers, it also brought the Board's 'industrial brass .. out of the woodwork.' But these threats were only credible when backed by the mobilisation of members at the dam.

Nevertheless, there were special difficulties at Warragamba. Union activists had trouble getting time off work to organise. Shift work was a major problem particularly when used to control militants. This was important as high labour turnover reduced cohesion. Then there were problems in fighting the union's head office over the question of local autonomy. The officials' resistance on this point reinforced the different forms of intimidation which the Board's officers at the dam directed at militants.

The question of local autonomy was a constant one in the early years. Dam activists were rarely satisfied with the service they got from head office and threatened to withhold the dues they collected. Part of this was undoubtedly political hostility to Bodkin and the other officials. The branch wanted its own full time organiser. After first refusing outright, the constant stream of claims for time lost by delegates at the dam convinced Macpherson to bend. However, he would hear nothing of the branch electing the organiser.

In 1948, he chose Geoff Broome. Broome's task was to take in hand a growing branch which was escaping from the officials' control.

Broome immediately moved on some of the major sources of difficulty for the officials. Initially, he could count on some active local support. As well, officials and

249 John Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview, 1 April 1985.
251 ibid., 13 August 1946; MBWSSEA Minutes, 13 February 1948 (C).
252 ibid., 10 August 1948.
253 ibid., 10 August 1948; MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 March 1948 (C), 10 August 1948 (C). NB the orginal appointment was for six months, with an election to follow. Macpherson then used a technicality to renege and made Broome permanent. Warr. Minutes, 8 March 1949, 5 April 1949; MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 April 1949 (C).
254 Ritchie, Kellard, J. Ransom and D. Crampton.
prominent committee members from head office began to visit branch meetings more frequently in a conscious attempt to bolster Broome's presence and the union's profile. Finally, the local Board officials were only too happy to deal with a nominated representative of the union's head office who would always try and keep disputation within the correct channels.

Sectional disputes arose constantly but Broome's major priority was to deal with larger, organisational challenges. From the beginning, the most class conscious workers at the dam had worked hard at building up horizontal organisation. The most noteworthy early development was the building of links with other major construction workforces — Nepean Dam and Warragamba Pipeline. Attempts to make regular contact with the militant tunnel workers on the distant City Tunnel came to nothing. A parallel, rank and file union of construction workers appeared to be in the making but distance and a lack of funds proved insurmountable.

The Warragamba branch remained active and militant. Earlier demands over occupational health and for transport to and from the dam works continued to have high priority and to provoke stopwork meetings and longer strikes. So did the traditional battles against the overseer's tyranny. However, larger factors strongly influenced the strategic direction of the struggles until the completion of the dam. The first was the existence of large groups of militant carpenters and other tradesmen. The other was a tension between different militant strategies. Both aimed at removing the controls the house union's officials placed on local militancy. The first strategy sought to build an opposition base by concentrating on the local branch of the house union. The other sought horizontal job organisation embracing the other blue collar unions at Warragamba.

By 1947, and much to Savage's horror, the dam branch was participating in a combined unions' or job committee. He had always been hostile to direct cooperation with militant, left wing unions. In this case, each union had two delegates, irrespective of

255 N.B. Savage stressing this point, MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 November 1951 (C).
257 For earlier campaigns, e.g. *ibid.*, 1 July 1947; 14 July 1948. Subsequently, e.g. 22 February 1949; 1 August 1955; 15 November 1956; 30 July 1958.
258 E.g. *ibid*, 22 February 1949; .
membership on site. It was clear that involvement would mean the house union being constantly outvoted.259

Broome's task was to win the local branch away from any such involvement. At first, the plan was to isolate it from the job committee. Broome was to be the union's sole representative at the dam and all grievances were to go through the union's normal channels.260 This appeared to nullify the new branch. It was a sure way of losing Broome local goodwill. Further, given the general atmosphere of working class mobilisation, the officials did not want Broome to appear as a 'splitter' of inter-union unity. But, they would not tolerate losing control of the workforce. Instead, they stressed the rights of representation which should automatically flow to the house union due it having 75 per cent of union membership at Warragamba. Thus they had no objections to Broome and the dam branch officials: 'bringing about a satisfactory arrangement for unity on the job, bearing in mind that this Association must have complete control over all meetings or committees.'261 By the mid-fifties, the general rightward move in society made Savage sufficiently secure to directly block the house union participating on the job committee.262

The branch had previously attempted to win disputes by ignoring the union's head office and threatening local management with industrial action. The Board's local administration refused to recognise the branch's bargaining status. The Board and the union officials in Sydney strongly supported the Resident Engineer. Although there was a number of stoppages, it appears clear that the local branch could not or would not take action appropriate to its threats.263 Linking to craft unionists through a job committee was a way of finding strategically placed allies who were not unused to striking. Furthermore those unions under heavy CPA influence, such as the BWIU, the AEU and the Boilermakers' generally supported their delegates with time off and transport for organising.264 Finally,

259 MBWSSEA Minutes, 10 October 1947 (C). See also Stan Crandell to Savage and reply in ibid., Warrag. Minutes, 17 June 1947; 21 October 1947.
260 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 November 1948 (C); Warrag. Minutes, 16 November 1948; 8 February 1949. Bodkin also played a major destructive role prior to this death. ibid, 1 March 1949.
261 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 October 1949 (C).
262 ibid., 5 March 1954 (C).
264 John Palmer and Ray Greentree interview, 1 April 1985.
by linking horizontally, branch militants had their best chance of keeping even major disputes local and Savage and the others away.

Crucial to the local militancy was the establishment of an organisation for joint action by militant carpenters from the BWIU and the house union.265 The BWIU had never previously been a strong force on dam sites as most carpenters, coming from the labouring ranks, were members of the house union.266 The Board’s desperate need to hire carpenters helped change that. Among them was a youthful John Palmer. A CPA member with recent experience in the militant Victorian power industry, he found Water Board industrial relations to be an introverted remnant of a bygone era of master-servant relationships. A major cause was the house union’s claim to be: ‘the one holy and apostolic union ... and you ought to belong to it.’ and the control that brought with it.267 The union’s introversion played into the Board’s hands. Palmer was keen for Water Board workers to link up with the rest of the labour movement on the broader questions of the day. This could only come if left wing unions provided an alternative to the house union. He began to recruit Warragamba carpenters into the BWIU.

This risked dividing carpenters. Nevertheless, the two groups maintained tight cohesion largely as a result of the close relationship between Palmer and Ray Greentree.268 Their organisation soon underwent a test of fire over the sacking of a BWIU member. The Board and the house union officials tried vainly to isolate the dispute to the BWIU members. In this and other disputes with the carpenters, the Board came off second best. The result was an aversion to provoking the carpenters as a group.269

BWIU delegates had a radicalising influence on some of their house union workmates. There were objective and subjective limits to the spread of this influence among other groups of house union members at Warragamba. One element was that few others

265 Warrag. Minutes, 8 February 1956.
266 Ron McIntosh interview, 29 September 1985.
267 John Palmer (and Ray Greentree) interview, 1 April 1985.
268 Ron McIntosh interview, 29 September 1985.
shared the carpenters' strong market position. Perhaps, more important though, were the responses to BWIU attempts to 'poach' members.270

This strategy concentrated on militant job organisation by avoiding the dead hand of the house union's officials. It meant forsaking an industry union for militant craft unionism and job activity. A number of prominent house union militants, among them carpenters such as Ray Greentree, refused to abandon the industry union. They saw change coming from reforming the house union. Only this would allow an organisation covering some 75 per cent of Warragamba workers to back local members in their struggles. At the same time, they pushed local organisation for both this and on-the-job activism around immediate demands. Their ideas and activism minimised the poaching and kept many loyal to the house union. The irony was that the officials did everything possible to marginalise and demean what Greentree and the others stood for and did.

Attempts by craft union militants to poach members or to use the job committee to dictate policy at the dam threw a number of house union activists into confusion. Many of the craft unions still had highly selective criteria for membership. Carpenters had some choice in the matter, the labouring majority had none. Even with the Board's practice of promoting labourers into the craftsmen's ranks, many of the designated tradesmen would not have passed muster.271 On the other hand, the house union was open to all and seemed to offer much greater promise for unity. Many of the local house union activists were loyal to this concept and the aggressive attitudes of the job committee threatened that loyalty. As a result, Whitfield and Crandell, the latter a CPA member, ended by siding with the old enemies, Savage, Broome and Bodkin against the job committee and those in their branch, notably Hornsey who supported it.272 This threw the local branch into crisis and made things much easier for the union's officials.

Over time, the activists had a degree of success but less than they would have initially expected. They failed electorally because, distant and isolated, they were unable to make any real contact with other construction groups. On the job, the Board's officers often

270 ibid., 5 April 1949; A similar trend occurred when former house union Branch President Toohey joined the FEDFA and encouraged others to follow him.
272 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 April 1949 (C); Warrag. Minutes, 1 March 1949; 5 April 1949; 28 June 1949
confined them to night shift to make organising more difficult. In particular, they tried to neutralise the effectiveness of Ray Greentree in this way. Massive labour turnover (and absenteeism) sapped the branch's stability and channelled disgruntlement over wages and conditions from union participation to the favourable labour market outside.

Overall, the militants received strong support from the itinerant labourers. The problem was that these workers did not stay long enough to give the branch a consistent, active core and those workers who lived outside the dam area were less available for meetings. Further, while the branch made a much bigger effort to attract the participation of migrant workers than the officials ever did, language barriers still proved a problem. Left wing activists seem to have had a good workplace rapport with some Polish and particularly the Italian members. Overall, though, whatever their feelings on the job, migrant workers played a relatively minor role in formal branch activities. These factors all help account for the relatively small numbers, 40 to 50, who attended General Meetings.

Finally, a major reason for the containment of branch militancy was Broome's arrival as full time organiser. Broome played an effective role for the union's officials by, at least partially, redirecting grievances back through official union channels. Although an industrial conservative in the context of the dam, Broome was much more dogged in demanding concessions than the union's hierarchy in Sydney. He knew how to follow up demands. When lack of success brought complaints from the branch, while not a physical bully, he knew how to use blistering verbal personal attacks. The Board's various Resident Engineers or Supervising Engineers sensibly aided this process of restoration by showing greater flexibility and reasonableness than could ever have been expected from the Board or its industrial advisors in Sydney.

With all the advantages that full time organising allowed, Broome established a role for himself as a conduit between the branch and the Board's local administration. This appears to have earned him and his supporters there, notably McMahon, a pivotal position

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274 One result was the close involvement of A. (Adam) Polowiec and the election of E. Croni, F. Nicasdi, G. Macchione and G. Calvisi to the branch committee in 1955. Warrag. Minutes, 6 July 1955, 1 August 1955.
275 Ray Greentree (and John Palmer) interview, 1 April 1985.
among the less militant. It also helped stop a leakage of members to the craft unions at the dam. This was of major importance to the Board and its union in their attempt to maintain the separateness of their world and, its stability. If militant industrial action was to break out, as it did, it was preferable that this happen from within the local branch. Broome, like Bodkin, was adept at putting out the brush fires. It would have been a different matter had militant craft unions become involved. Finally, although uncomfortable for the officials, outbreaks of militancy within the dam branch were unlikely to spread further. Geographical isolation removed the chance of contamination for the rest of the Board’s workforce and the union’s rules stopped the dam workers gaining control of the union.277

h. Hours, wages and conditions

For the union as a whole, the general improvement in employment and living standards also affected the sorts of demands which arose. The officials’ traditional ways of operating, the Board’s behaviour as an employer and the particular framework of industrial relations in Australia largely determined how and where the union expressed these demands, and their chances of success. Some questions such as appointments and working conditions remained outside the formal arbitration system. They were issues over which the Board and house union’s officials would negotiate, and at length. Wages, penalty rates and allowances on the other hand, fell almost entirely within the arbitration arena.

The question of hours of work became a lesser issue on the union’s agenda. General reductions in hours had for some time come through the NSW government or Industrial Commission. This did not change. However, certain groups of Board employees had long benefited from reduced hours. The 36 hour week for sewer maintenance men and rockchoppers and sewer miners was a recognition that the less time spent in unhealthy working conditions, the better. At the turn of the century, the comparison was 48 or more hours. After 1947, the general standard was 40.

Tunnel workers wanted a proportionate reduction. Macpherson promised that officials would give their: ‘undivided attention for some considerable period of time’ to rectify matters.278 Nothing came of it.279 In the meantime, officials were able to use the

277 Warrag. Minutes, 15 November 1956.
278 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1947;
example of the AWU award to win a reduction in hours for some ancillary tunnel workers.280 On the question of hours, it is clear that within construction, miners were losing their previously pre-eminent position. The same thing was happening to the sewerage branch within maintenance.

A real improvement for construction workers came in the form of a ten minute morning tea break or ‘smoke-oh’. This had been common in some areas of building and construction but the details had been at the employers’ discretion.281 On the Board, the 1945 award formalised a breakthrough from direct action at Nepean Dam.282 Ferguson J. subsequently followed a 1946 variation in the AWU award and inserted an afternoon break into the Board’s award.283

Apart from wages, there were three other areas of particular concern in the years to 1960. The first, the question of appointments, had long been a central issue in relations between the Board and the house union. The others, dealing with working conditions in general, and safety at work in particular, were more especially the fruit of changing conditions in the labour market.

The Board was an expanding, highly hierarchical organisation. New positions were becoming both more available and more accessible, especially as the favourable labour market encouraged many to try more lucrative work outside. As well, both top management and the house union wanted vacancies filled internally. For many who stayed with the Board, one of the attractions was the opportunity for promotion. Given the general freeze on wages operating through the arbitration system, it remained one way of increasing earnings. Gaining ‘A’ Class status was also attractive. While the labour market had improved enormously, short but recurrent recessions were enough to remind many with bitter memories of the importance of security and the much more generous sick leave. The superior annual leave which ‘A’ Class employees enjoyed was another advantage, especially given the growing tendency to define living standards in terms of paid leisure.

279 ibid., 30 July 1947; 25 January 1950; 14 April 1950 (C);
281 ibid., 1945, p. 352.
282 NSWIG, 1945, Vol. 79, p. 763. Ray Greentree, op. cit..
Finally, promotion was an issue with which the union's officials identified. Many on the Committee were salaried officers. The others were almost all 'A' Class. Industrially too, it fitted in well with the Board's special relationship to its workforce and house union. It was an issue which did not encourage stopwork meetings or demands for direct action from among members. On the contrary, it encouraged respectful negotiation with Board officials away from the public gaze. It was just the sort of industrial work that Macpherson and Savage preferred.

As it split the workforce and membership over the question of privileges, it was not any easy terrain for militant opponents. Maintaining solidarity across an enormous number of often isolated groups was hard enough. To do so during a period of falling real wages was particularly difficult when groups and individuals strained for improvements or sectional allowances. As long as the award provided greatly differing treatments for 'A' and 'B' Class workers, promotion remained a burning question.

Once the war ended, members felt no more constraints in demanding more 'A' Class appointments. When pushed, the Board did act, but on an ad hoc basis. From the union's viewpoint, appointments were too slow, too few and often contravened union policy on criteria and manner. This was particularly the case for sewer maintenance workers.284 Members on construction were dissatisfied with their lack of job security. After all, they no longer had to accept any work they could get. There were calls for some general scheme to improve their lot, but this would have meant challenging the Board's whole employment strategy. Instead, the union's officials felt more comfortable requesting the Board to boost the 'A' Class Construction Nucleus to the award level of 400. In this they could count on the support of some Board members.285 But, the Board tardied, again due to the question of control of the construction workforce.

In 1947, Haskins, the Engineer-in-Chief, warned against the granting of permanency to construction workers, particularly during a period of full employment. Unlike for maintenance workers, the advancement ruined them, turning: 'former industrious workers

284 ibid, 4 October 1946 (C); 1 November 1946 (C); 6 August 1954 (C); 8 August 1954 (C); 6 February 1959 (C); 6 February 1959 (C); 9 October 1959 (C)
285 MWSDB Minutes, 12 December 1945; 1 October 1947.
into time servers. This counteracted the very reason — efficiency — for which the Board had agreed to an 'A' Class Nucleus. Thus, while piecemeal promotions to maintenance positions continued — with the local government representatives on the Board pushing their own special or hard luck cases — construction workers had to wait, the Board insisting on the prior need for comprehensive reviews.

Construction workers therefore continued to loudly voice their dissatisfaction. During the early 1950s, Kirkwood, Bowe, Rutty and, in particular, McMahon, pushed the union's office staff to come up with results. As ever, the Board stalled and Savage only ever looked active over the question just prior to the half yearly General Meetings. Brightman finally took over the matter in 1954 and seemed to make more progress.

Both construction and maintenance workers also complained at the lack of information about vacancies as they became available. There was some suspicion that these restrictions were not entirely accidental. Many suspected that support of or involvement in Macpherson's group was a major aid in gaining advancement. Certainly, it did none of them any harm. On the other hand, it was common knowledge that the Board sometimes tried to domesticate industrial militants by offering them access to better positions.

With their jobs relatively safe but their wages frozen, Water Board workers sought to address other problems at work. One response was to seek new or higher rates for working in hot, wet, high or underground places. Another and growing series of demands sought to improve the actual working conditions. There appears to have been a significant change in the way many groups of workers saw themselves in relation to their work — its risks, discomforts and lack of amenities. They were redefining their importance relative to the conditions of work the Board had laid down. They were no longer beasts of burden, grateful for any job.

286 ibid, 1 October 1947.
287 ibid, 8 October 1947; 21 January 1948.
288 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 March 1951; 30 January 1952; 28 January 1953; 27 January 1954; 5 March 1954 (C); 2 April 1954 (C); 5 July 1957 (C); 14 February 1958 (C); 7 March 1958 (C); 2 May 1958 (C); 6 November 1959 (C)
289 ibid, 6 May 1955 (C); 3 February 1956 (C);
290 Ron McIntosh interview; Ray Greentree and John Palmer interview, 1 April 1985.
Overall, the union's officials were largely incapable of persuading the Board to make easy and relatively cheap concessions for key groups. Three such issues took up much of the Committee's time in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Each had at least one Committee member, even prominent ones such as Cuddihy or Hayes, as constant promoter. That they met such an indifferent response from the Board is powerful testimony to the union's weakness. The first request was for some form of wet weather cover for maintenance workers travelling on the back of lorries. The second was for adequate showers and lockers at Crown St pumping station while the third was for hot water at sewerage maintenance sheds. None went beyond reasonable expectations given the award.

The union's weaknesses were glaringly apparent. The Board repeatedly promised the paid union officials and the officials made promises to the Committee and groups concerned. But nothing changed. And time went on. From being disparate requests, the three issues became joined as one litany of protest at Committee meetings — impatient, frustrated and because of their origin in maintenance, increasingly embarrassing for Macpherson and Savage. Yet they were unwilling to do more than seek interviews with Board officers or members. The Board finally agreed on the first and third claims. It refused the lockers. Cuddihy had had enough and had the Committee direct a boycott of the existing facilities until the Board conceded the lockers. The lockers arrived at the very end of 1951. It had been four years.

The same problems occurred with the request for mobile change sheds for sewer maintenance workers.291 Cement lining gangs, who built up a strong spirit of group solidarity, complained loudly and got theirs quicker.292 WSOs, with Kirkwood and Stone to press their claims, generally did well. They and water maintenance men asked for waterproof clothing. Macpherson successfully took it up with the Board's Vice President the following day.293 While clothing may seem an easier demand to win, that was not the experience of sewerage maintenance. It was clear, once again, that sewerage maintenance

291 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 November 1947; 2 July 1948 (C); 1 July 1949 (C); 3 March 1950 (C); 14 April 1950 (C); 5 May 1950 (C); 2 June 1950 (C); 7 July 1950 (C); 4 August 1950 (C); 1 September 1950 (C); 6 October 1950 (C); 3 November 1950 (C); 5 January 1951 (C); 2 March 1951 (C); 1 June 1951 (C); 6 July 1951 (C); 7 December 1951 (C).
292 ibid., 1 November 1944 (C); 6 May 1949 (C); 10 October 1947 (C).
293 ibid., 3 July 1946 (C); 7 August 1946 (C); 4 October 1946 (C); 25 January 1950.
had lost its relatively favoured position within the union. For now, ‘A’ Class conditions kept them in line.

Of all the demands for a better working environment, those to do with occupational safety most clearly stressed the priority of human life. Work on maintenance and construction had always carried heavy risks. What was new was the extent that these problems forced their way into the centre of union deliberations. A large number of occupational deaths placed the question in a dramatic light. The victims came from different areas of the Board’s workforce and they died under a variety of circumstances. Union minutes give the impression of a growing number of serious accidents from the early 1950s. The officials’ usual response to deaths and bad injuries was to sue for compensation or at common law. They ran sweepstakes to finance the costs of litigation.

At first, the officials seemed little interested in active prevention. Only rank and file disquiet in response to particular accidents spurred them to take some other action. There was a tendency to see safety as a subsidiary issue. An example of a different approach appeared in the AWU’s 1946 general labourers’ award. If the dust count in tunnels exceeded a level deemed safe, then all work was to stop and the employer was to have the dust reduced mechanically. The employees in the meantime, while waiting for the tunnel air to return to safe levels, were to continue to receive full pay. This clause, which appeared to be a form of institutionalised job control, was not the type of demand that Savage and the others would have put forward themselves. It smacked too much of interfering in the rights of management. As a result, it only entered the Board’s award when the Industrial Commission applied S. 88A.

The Board established a Safety Committee in late 1949 to formalise this procedure. Savage became the union’s sole representative. It was a very centralised body, well away from workplace problems. Meeting monthly and visiting one job after each meeting, it was apparently in no hurry. Even evidence of excessive dust counts on the Bondi Outfall Sewer works did not create a sense of urgency. The establishment of sub-committees on major

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294 ibid., 29 January 1947; 2 July 1954 (C); 28 July 1954; 1 June 1956; 2 May 1958 (C).
295 MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 June 1948 (C); 2 February 1951 (C).
296 Labourers, General (State) Award, NSWIG, 1946, Vol. 80, p. 474.
works promised greater responsiveness but in many areas the initiative was soon moribund.297

Over time, though, there was a definite improvement in safety awareness on Board jobs: This had much to do with union pressure, not safety committees. Union members preferred to deal with safety as a traditional industrial rather than a managerial question. They wanted, for example, awards to prohibit dangerous working conditions. Even Committee of Management members continued to bring their grievances over unsafe working to monthly meetings rather than to their jobs’ safety sub-committees.298 Long overdue safe working provisions for sewerage maintenance appeared in the 1945 award. There was little advance after that apart from specific allowances for those doing first aid duty.299

Arbitration was a much more complex affair when it came to dealing with the union’s 300 odd award classifications plus a whole array of sectional or special loadings and allowances. In contrast to their usual behaviour, it therefore made good sense for the union’s officials to involve the rank and file in the process of compiling logs of claims.300 While this raised the democratic image of the officials, they set strict limits, baulking at Snashall and Anderson’s attempt to have the rank and file elect the union’s representatives on the conciliation committee.301 As well, there was virtually no decentralised procedure for reporting back. Instead of informing the various groups concerned, the officials merely placed the finalised award for approval before poorly attended General Meetings.

Dependence on arbitration affected the internal life of the union in two ways. The first was over what members perceived to be the general strengths or weaknesses of the system, the second over specific demands. These of course interacted. On the one hand, more militant members and opponents of the ruling group advanced more ambitious demands as part of the logs of claims. On the other, it was mostly the same members who led or articulated general dissatisfaction with the failures of the system as a whole.

297 MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 December 1949 (C); 14 April 1950 (C); 3 November 1950 (C); 2 February 1951 (C); 28 January 1953; 28 July 1954;
298 ibid., 2 March 1956 (C); 4 May 1956 (C); 25 July 1956.
299 NSWIG, 1953, Vol. 110, pp. 574-6. These flowed to the 1953 award from the AWU award.
300 MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 July 1944; 30 July 1947; 30 January 1952;
301 ibid, 30 January 1952;
Anderson, whose work driving around jobs put him in touch with a number of groups, used the rare General Meetings to great effect.

One of the most important sources of dissatisfaction with arbitration were the delays in getting new awards or variations. At the end of the war, a new award was overdue. In April 1945, a special general meeting called on the Labour Council to lobby the NSW Government to make changes which would speed up the process. In the meantime, groups of workers were beginning to talk about stop work meetings to discuss and force the issue. A worried Committee called on Macpherson to do everything possible to halt this trend. The award finally came through in December.

Time and again however, Water Board union members had to wait. Although there were award variations — either through the conciliation committee or through Industrial Commission determination — Macpherson was unable to hurry awards along. The large number of job categories was one reason for the slowness but, the Board's studied nonchalance in dealing with industrial matters was the main problem. Supposedly due every three years, they appeared after four — in 1949, 1953 and 1957. Unlike the key AWU awards, they also brought little retrospectivity. Delays in variations to awards over single rates also continued. Plant operators waited more than two years for an expected wage increase and this only came through following an outside award. It took Assistant WSO's three and half years before the Board finally conceded them WSO rates for relieving WSOs on weekends.

But delays were only one source of dissatisfaction with the system as a whole. They combined with others related to the broader area of national wage fixation. As long as the NSW Industrial Commission followed the Basic Wage and margins of their federal counterparts, Water Board employees had a direct interest in the wider questions. Not surprisingly, they became increasingly disgruntled during the 1950s.

302 ibid, 30 April 1945; 5 September 1945 (C); 3 October 1945 (C).
304 The Engine Drivers-PWD (State) award of July 1948. MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 August 1950 (C); MWSDB Minutes, 9 August 1950.
305 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 May 1954 (C); 6 December 1957 (C).
The officials never let the rank and file push them away from their preferred paths. Someone like Bodkin could cajole or, at worst, punch others to see things his way. Savage too had a series of defences. The first was to maintain that the officials had already taken heed of claims in the new log. If members demanded more urgent attention, he often argued that to re-open the award would leave them open to a Board reprisal on provisions (allegedly) better than those in other awards. When opponents such as Anderson remained unmoved, Savage would try personal denigration. Thus he once claimed that Anderson only made the claims for ‘propaganda purposes’. Savage’s shorthand for a CPA attempt to denigrate arbitration and the union’s conciliation-minded officials.

A similar approach was ready for the next, more dangerous problem — stop work meetings. In 1947, O. Cox from Warragamba Pipeline moved that the union immediately serve an eight point log of claims on the Board. Most of these were or extended existing union demands. What was new was the tone. If the Board refused to grant them within one month, the union was to call a stop work meeting to consider further action. Savage cleverly let the demands lie. They were popular. Instead, he concentrated on the stopwork meeting. Not only would it achieve nothing, it cost members a day’s pay. Further, it penalised those with no voice in the decision. Finally, Cox’s move was: ‘part of a new industrial technique, being set up by certain individuals whose political beliefs were opposed to those of the Australian Labor Party.’ He did not attack the CPA by name. In 1947, it was not the moment to do so. Alleging that these were enemies of the ALP was enough for this loyal labourist union. Even more clever was that Savage made the ALP synonymous with his leadership.

It is possible to trace award changes for individual groups both in comparison to other groups of Water Board workers and to outside awards. ‘A’ Class Water Board workers fared particularly well on the question of annual and long service leave. On the other hand, and despite their officials’ rhetoric to the contrary, the house union followed rather than led on the question of wages. For labouring wage rates and overall award working conditions, the officials had long placed their union’s award in the slipstream of the much larger,

306 *ibid*, 7 March 1952 (C); 6 March 1953 (C);
307 *ibid*, 26 July 1950;
308 *ibid*, 29 January 1947.
wealthier and more arbitration-skilled AWU.\textsuperscript{309} Tradesmen’s wage rates followed some of the more militant craft unions.

Arbitration trailblazing meant heavy legal costs, direct action around key demands or both. Instead, the union’s officials preferred to try for comparative wage justice through long conciliation committee negotiations. Where this failed, they could always appeal to the Industrial Commission. In both cases, use of S. 88A of the Act proved sufficient to get improvements. This clearly suited the Water Board which was ever hostile to any suggestion that its employees become wage leaders (and even loathe to pay comparable wages to those prevailing in outside awards).\textsuperscript{310}

To avoid becoming enmeshed in too much detail it is necessary to choose certain groups for examination. Obviously, the large, industrially active and historically significant groups rate a mention. So do those which, for reasons related to time and place, found that their demands flowed into some larger dynamic internal to the union’s workings. Finally, certain groups enter the story briefly only to indicate that they were beginning to bestir themselves after decades of quiet. Evidence on hours, conditions and activity of the union’s officials indicates that two main tendencies were at work. First, maintenance workers continued to do much better than those on construction. Second, there had been a continuing shift within maintenance so that the WSOs now appeared to gain greatly. The once pivotal sewerage maintenance group was suffering a series of rebuffs. A final, though less marked shift was the declining fortunes of rock miners and those working machine drills and picks. A similar picture emerges from the wage data.

Wage fixation through the the conciliation committee had an uneven effect on internal relativities. It is difficult to know to what extent certain rates were the result of agreement and when the conciliator played a deciding role and, in whose favour. Certainly, the trend in craft rates often ran counter to those of labourers or of categories specific to the Board’s award. This had much to do with the timing and outcome of the various craft union awards which the Water Board award followed. For the other groups, there were contradictory shifts between one award and the next. Overall, though, an analysis of the fate of key

\textsuperscript{309} The union followed the AWU’s Laborers, General (State) Award.

\textsuperscript{310} MBWSSEA Minutes, 6 May 1955 (C); 25 May 1955.
classifications between the 1945 and 1957 awards provides a number of trends, not all of which are open to interpretation.

First, maintenance generally did no better than construction. In fact, in many ways it did slightly worse because construction could benefit from advances to the AWU award. On the other hand, it is likely that they benefited most from the repeated rises in penalty rates for dirt, wet, height and underground working as well the improvements in overtime and meal allowances. Within both maintenance and construction, there were certain key classifications which advanced by exactly (or almost exactly) the same amounts in money terms although starting from different bases. This flattened differentials. Thus, over the three awards, low level oilers (station attendants), water and sewerage maintenance men and head office chauffeurs all received an increase of 210/2. Cement liners, who had mostly followed these, got 207/9. On construction, timbermen, machine men and pipelayers all received 215/8.\textsuperscript{311}

While there was a great deal of rigidity between certain classifications, other sub-plots internal to the union's historic dynamic are clearly visible from the data. WSOs gained mightily compared to other maintenance categories. A rise of 277/9 brought their wage to 412/-. The next highest wage rate in the 1957 award was 383/- for a leading hand electrical mechanic — a foreman in a well-paid trade. Ordinary water and sewerage maintenance workers were only receiving 326/11. Yet, their wage increase of 180 per cent was above many others. The WSO's wage improved 207 per cent. Clearly, they had emerged into a class of their own.

The opposite process was happening to rock miners in relation to most other construction groups. Their increase of 213/- meant an increase of only 160 per cent. It left them with a wage of 346/5. It is useful to have a look at how these changes affected the union's internal workings between awards.

Macpherson claimed that the 1945 award restored much of what had been lost due to wartime wage pegging. As ever, the officials had achieved this without any form of direct action. Never one to hide his light under a bushel, he claimed that not only was the house union the first to do so, but that it provided members with: 'a wage, together with working

\textsuperscript{311} In comparison, the basic wage rose 173/-. 
conditions, superior at the moment to any award for workers in the Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{312} Given that few of his members closely perused comparative awards in the \textit{Industrial Gazettes}, he had little to fear in the way of contradiction.

The Board's award largely followed a 1942 AWU award which offered better overtime rates, wet pay, paid travel time, camping allowances, crib time, rules on dust testing and ventilation in tunnels, provisions for camping and change sheds, and provisions for union reps to deal with grievances. Many of these differences were substantial. As well, the tighter level of regulation limited employers' actions or bound them to provide services or conditions.\textsuperscript{313}

To the extent the house union's award was superior at all, it was for some members rather than others. Macpherson alluded to this by mentioning that there were always grumblers. Although he did not specify whom, it was clear construction workers had missed out again. Wartime wage pegging had adversely effected those on maintenance. On the other hand, many construction workers had been the 'fortunate recipients' of war loadings which flowed on from the general trend in CCC wage fixation — not from the efforts of Macpherson and Savage. Now these loadings disappeared in exchange for a better deal for maintenance workers.

There was another more serious change. In previous awards since 1936, 'B' Class workers getting hourly rates had earned something like 6/- per week more than the 'A' Class. This was to help compensate them for earnings losses due to wet weather and was common outside the Board.\textsuperscript{314} According to the Board, there had been growing dissatisfaction among permanent labourers working alongside better paid casuals. Also, the latter had been gaining slow improvements in other employment conditions. Although the rainfall had not changed and similar loadings remained in outside awards, the 1945 award removed the loading for wet weather. Nor was there any provision for payment for time

\textsuperscript{312} In \textit{ibid}, 30 July 1947;
\textsuperscript{313} Cf Water Board award, \textit{NSWIG}, 1945, Vol. 79, pp. 758-74 to Laborers, General (State) Award, \textit{ibid}, 1946, Vol. 80, pp. 474-81. The more explicit regulation in the AWU award may have been due to the Commission's reticence to formalise 'privileges' which public employers conceded. For example, De Baun, J. thought these employers: 'can be relied upon surely, to deal fairly with their employees'. \textit{re Bridge and Wharf Carpenters etc.}, \textit{NSWIR}, 1952, p. 374.
\textsuperscript{314} There was also a traditional loading for wet weather and 'following the job' in the building trades. See e.g. \textit{ibid}, 1951, pp. 713, 729-83.
lost. In dry weather ‘A’ and ‘B’ Class would now earn the same rates. As a result of these changes, key maintenance wage rates increased by between 21 and 25 per cent above the 1940 award levels. The Basic Wage had increased just under 20 per cent in the same period, but most key construction rates went up by less.

Macpherson feigned irritation as to the fuss over the loss of what he claimed were merely anomalies. He also felt aggrieved that construction workers: ‘permitted criticism to dominate their fairness of outlook’, both to the previously disadvantaged maintenance workers and: ‘Union officials, who apparently were expected to maintain in perpetuity, those extended margins.’ Once again, he got away with it.

The Board was also happy with the 1949 award and the: ‘harmonious manner in which both parties had dealt with the matter’. This is not surprising given what was happening to industrial relations elsewhere that year. The union’s officials had managed to keep the process within the conciliation committee.

From 1952, Anderson led the complaints and formulated demands flowing from the Basic Wage freeze and Galvin’s margins decision. With impatience building within the Board’s workforce, he could use these issues to illustrate the failure of arbitration. Typically though, while his resolutions called for all workers to support the unions affected by Galvin, or for the ACTU and Labour Council to intensify their campaigns, there was no mention of any action from the Water Board union. In the general mood of anger within the union movement, Savage and company could let it pass.

By the mid-fifties, members were increasingly directing their complaints towards the officials. Savage was at pains to explain the officials’ activity and predicament. Neither the NSW Industrial Commission nor the Board were making concessions on margins. He could do nothing but pin his faith on the NSW Government making appointments to: ‘gear up the machinery of conciliation and arbitration.’ The continued failure to deliver threatened to detach the union from reliance on this pillar of labourism. It especially posed the danger of

315 MWSDB Minutes, 12 December 1945.
316 MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 July 1947.
317 MWSDB Minutes, 23 November 1949.
318 MBWSSEA Minutes, 25 May 1955.
identification not with the Board, but with an increasingly frustrated union movement outside.

Anderson and Melling wanted more push and more involvement. They pointed out that members’ real wages had dropped to the bottom end of the public sector scale. As a result, the Board was having increasing problems getting and holding labour. On their resolution, a special general meeting elected five members to join the officials and a Warragamba representative as an ongoing committee to campaign for improvements.319 There was also talk of direct action but with the Commission freely displaying its repressive powers, they probably felt there was little chance in that direction. Instead, the idea was to force the officials along a harder line. Their first stop was the Board President.

Goodsell pleaded the constraints of government wages policy but the campaign committee’s perseverance eventually brought results. The Board increased margins for plant operators and all designations peculiar to the Board’s work. Savage and his supporters were well pleased but Bert Anderson noted they still had a long way to catch up. Members from a number of groups such as survey field hands (chainmen) and sewerage maintenance felt they were doing especially badly.320 Nevertheless, concessions had allowed the officials to keep the union within the ambit of municipal labourism and dependence on the Board.

The second way in which arbitration influenced the internal politics of the union was over the grievances or demands of specific groups. These arose within the overall award framework or between award declarations. The more specific demands operated in two ways. There were the particular demands of ‘A’ and ‘B’ Class workers and then those from specific work groups or areas of employment.

At different times, both ‘A’ Class and ‘B’ Class workers pushed for and won better employment conditions. Especially once the war appeared won, ‘A’ Class workers wanted a variety of improvements. These included questions of sick, long service and annual leave as well as travelling time and expenses.

320 iMBWSSEA Minutes, 5 August 1955 (C); 2 September 1955 (C); 28 November 1955;
Although, in the early years, Anderson appeared much taken with the importance of safeguarding the privileges of the ‘A’ Class employees, he later pushed for all workers to have ‘A’ Class conditions.\(^{321}\) The Committee’s response was to have Anderson and supporters of his motions form sub-committees to study and report on proposals or join deputations to the Board. This removed them from the rank and file, took up time and tied them into the final decisions.

‘B’ Class workers had a number of important claims and, again, it was often Anderson who voiced them at General Meetings. There was a consistent demand for payment for time lost through bad weather.\(^{322}\) Although Savage warned of possible repercussions on the labourers’ base rate, a subcommittee of Stephenson, Anderson and Clifford came out in support of a claim for wet weather pay. As action was slow here too, members in Enfield District called for a stop work meeting. Union and Board officials hastened into conference.\(^{323}\) The Board refused to pay a minimum four hours for each day workers were on call even if it rained but promised to do all possible to find them other work.\(^{324}\)

‘B’ Class claims sought similar employment conditions to those which the ‘A’ Class enjoyed. They wanted more paid sick leave. They began the post-war period with only four days per year, the ‘A’ Class with four weeks at full pay, four weeks at half pay and a further period at the Board President’s discretion.\(^{325}\) In 1959, the ‘B’ Class still had only five days. They also claimed an extra week’s annual leave to bring it up to the three weeks of the ‘A’ Class.\(^{326}\) Those with more than five years’ continuous service finally achieved this under the 1957 award. The 1958 Act liberalised this precondition. By the end of 1955, the ‘B’ Class had also won long service leave similar, but slightly inferior to the ‘A’ Class, with all service to count. Although, the ‘B’ Class no longer had their wet weather wage component, general improvements in their conditions of employment began to upset those

\(^{321}\) *ibid.*, 31 January 1945; 27 June 1956.

\(^{322}\) *ibid.*, 31 January 1945;

\(^{323}\) *ibid.*, 31 January 1945; 7 March 1945; 5 September 1945 (C);

\(^{324}\) *ibid.*, 1 November 1946 (C).

\(^{325}\) *ibid.*, 5 March 1948 (C).

\(^{326}\) Even Broome pointed out in mid 1951, that as casuals on the NSW railways received three week’s annual leave, there was no reason for Water Board employees not getting it. MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 June 1951 (C).
who stood by the old divisions. There were calls from among the ranks for rapid improvements in ‘A’ Class leave provisions.327

There were also a large number of often quite unrelated demands coming from very specific and often isolated occupational groups. Narrow sectionalism had always been an obvious feature of the way much of the membership, and particularly those on maintenance, approached the union. Not that this was a problem for the union’s officials; quite the opposite. Dealing with specific problems allowed them to keep disgruntled groups apart, or appease them over time on an almost rotating basis.

Conclusion

Sustained full employment for most of the period between 1944 and 1960 redirected the emphasis of the Board and its house union. Pleading for more loan funding was no longer high on the agenda. On the contrary, the Board was now pleading with governments for more migrant labour. With their membership in constant expansion, the union’s officials did not have to worry about incursions of contractors. In any case, with Labor in power in Sydney and a few sympathetic Board members, there was never any real danger on that front.

Continued prosperity and the boom in manufacturing had other effects. Even with an expanded workforce, the Board was, in relative terms, no longer an employer of its pre-war dimensions. Nor did any and every Board job appear a desirable safe haven. For the same reasons, while growing rapidly, the union became numerically less significant within the labour movement. This was true in other ways too. While the officials still tied the union closely to the NSW Branch of the ALP, it was suffering a gradual decline in direct personal influence.

Overall, the ruling group was growing old and tired. Its sluggishness began to frustrate even prominent supporters. That the number of paid officers declined with Macpherson’s retirement, notwithstanding a growing membership, was testimony to his inactivity over the previous years. There was no real attempt to improve or extend the services offered. After Bodkin’s death, and with Broome full-time at Warragamba, there

327 MBWSSEA Minutes, 4 March 1955 (C); 4 November 1957; 29 January 1958;
was not even one organiser for the metropolitan area. This was a problem. While Broome gradually got the measure of the Warragamba militants, there was no one of Bodkin's calibre to defuse conflict closer to head office. Brightman and Savage shared the administrative and other head office burdens and the organising duties. As Savage was by then tired, sick and happier among his colleagues at the Upper House, it was Brightman who was running the organisation. A quiet, conscientious man, he was not the stuff to win over rebellious labourers.

Nevertheless, the house union continued to function much as it had since its birth. There was the same dynamic between the Board, the union and the membership. The same organisational structures of both the Board and the union kept representatives of the maintenance workers in control. At first, these were mostly the same men who had dominated the union prior to the war. When they left, similar people took their places. As a result of the organisational preferences of the Board and the union, 'A' Class workers continued to do substantially better than their 'B' Class fellows. The entry of large numbers of migrants from continental Europe did not challenge this set-up. If anything, their lack of participation — for a variety of reasons — reduced the potential challenges which the ruling group faced at the rare General Meetings.

Still, there were a number of potential dangers to this state of affairs. While the union's rules helped isolate large groups of construction workers from organisational power, these workers could always prove a threat, especially during a sustained period of full employment. For the officials, there was also the worry of industrial 'contamination' from militant members of craft unions. Some members joined craft unions. This reduced the area of control which the house union exercised. A different problem arose when members joined with those from other unions in job or site committees. This threatened Macpherson and Savage, and behind them the Board, with alternative industrial organisations which proved difficult to control. Both these difficulties arose, particularly at Warragamba. Ultimately, questions of loyalty to industrial unionism and the combined efforts of Broome and the local Board officers blunted the challenge.

On the other hand, full employment could help dampen the threat from construction workers. Many of the disgruntled left to find more attractive jobs elsewhere. They did not
have to stay and struggle. Those who did, and particularly the activists at Warragamba, faced the problem of trying to knit together common action in a context of massive labour turnover, continuous shift work and a high proportion of fellow workers who spoke little English. Nevertheless, activists at Warragamba such as the Greentree brothers, Duncan, Whitfield, Bilton and Crandell were able to mobilise enough support to make substantial gains in both their living and working conditions.

In the long run, disgruntled metropolitan maintenance workers posed a more dangerous threat. This was particularly true when they came from among those sections which had always been Macpherson’s key supporters. Stirrings of this kind grew stronger during the fifties. There was the general disappointment they shared with much of the Australian workforce over real wage losses from the arbitration process. The officials’ lack of success with apparently reasonable demands as to working conditions created sectional frustrations, especially among groups such as sewer maintenance who recognised that they were falling behind other areas.

Nevertheless, the threat did not crystallise before 1960. The fifteen years since the war had not been sufficient to weaken, among many older members, the caution and insecurity resulting from much harder times. ‘A’ Class still meant security in an unknown future. They could still approach the union’s Committee and hence the Board through influential and prominent representatives. More importantly, they remained isolated from the vast mass of construction workers geographically locked away at Warragamba. This was to change dramatically during the sixties.

There were potential difficulties elsewhere too. Full employment took the desperation out of much of the opposition from construction. It also encouraged new demands, particularly from maintenance. As these remained largely unsatisfied, a new feeling of frustration built up. Wage restraint was due to the federal tribunal’s policy and therefore well beyond the house union’s immediate sphere of influence. Macpherson and Savage’s traditional avenues into NSW politics no longer sufficed. They could provide no ready solutions to those who wanted effective action. Finally, after decades of arbitration, the Board was less prepared to provide wage and other ‘privileges’ which could then enter awards. Important groups among the ‘A’ Class were beginning to feel left behind. This
chapter tells the story of start of the slow breakdown in the consensus which had so long supported a by now aging and tired ruling group.