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

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Chapter 7: 1960–1970
Mr. T. McMahon stated that whilst the Board's change sheds comply with the requirements of the Department of Labour and Industry they were, nevertheless below the requirements of the men. . .

MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 August 1963.

... conditions now were such that employees expected more in the way of amenities than in the past.

E. Walder, Water Board President, MWSDB Minutes, 12 November 1969.

Introduction

Over the preceding decades, the Water Board had become increasingly integrated into the national economy. For related reasons, officials of the Board's house union had also begun to look beyond the Board's operations and beyond their traditional municipal labourism. Commonwealth authorities played an ever greater role in wage fixation and decisions relating to loan raising and economic management. During the sixties, the union continued to look more to the ACTU for gains from arbitration. Nevertheless, there was little sense of belonging to a broader movement of workers bent on social change. For much of the decade, the Board remained a backwater.

The rank and file of the union had remained isolated from their fellows 'outside'. Where there was some contact or cross-fertilisation of ideas, the Board's employment policies and the union's structure and behaviour minimised the impact. So did the activities of the union's officials. They concentrated on developing reward and career structures which encouraged employment stability and loyalty among maintenance men: loyalty to the Board and the officials of the house union. The presence of longstanding Committee of Management members, many of whom had become salaried officers, was a testimony to this well-oiled arrangement.

Yet, the majority of wages workers, those on construction, had neither permanency nor favourable pay and conditions. As a result, they were less satisfied with the Board and
its union, more likely to have intermittent employment ‘outside’ and to look elsewhere for contacts and reference groups. This threatened to import ideas and practices alien to the well-tested system of industrial peace maintained by the Board and its union.

Two factors had historically served to nullify the threat. The first, consistent high unemployment, cowered the majority into submission and allowed the Board to expel troublemakers. The second was geographical. Much of the Board's construction work had been on remote dam sites.

This chapter examines the pressures which developed as these two factors ceased to operate. It begins by addressing the international economic boom and its profound effects on Australia. Sustained full employment allowed a greater range of choices. These were obvious in the tenor and style of life, in changing attitudes to work and authority and in the forms of political mobilisation used to express them. This environment had a contradictory effect on the Board's construction workers. On the one hand, it encouraged high rates of turnover and absenteeism which reduced workforce cohesion. On the other, it reduced the fears or risks involved in mounting a challenge to the Board and its union.

The second section examines changes underway in the Board's operations. Two major elements stand out: continuing high levels of construction spending and therefore employment; and the reorganisation of the Board's manual workers, ending the previous isolation of construction groups from each other and bringing them into closer contact with maintenance workers. This threatened to destabilise the tidy divisions operating within the workforce and the union.

This section also examines the way the Board's policies had to adapt to changes underway in its workforce and the wider labour market. It then discusses the lack of similar change at the lower levels where traditionally harsh supervisory practices remained the rule, particularly towards the large numbers of immigrant workers working on construction. This was to become less tenable as the labour market continued to offer other alternatives.

Finally, there is the union itself. For reasons of clarity, the chapter considers the record in two chronological sections. The first deals with the years to 1966 and explains how the existing control mechanisms held with little trouble despite conditions favourable for a challenge. The second traces the breakdown of the traditional controls after 1966 in
the face of a mobilisation which joined traditional grievances deriving from the Board's own practices to events and attitudes evident outside.

The perceptions of Water Board workers about their place in the world were changing. An important part of this was their greater awareness of what was happening in the wider labour market. Key groups began to look to a radicalising labour movement outside rather than the Board's fragmented hierarchy of classifications. Yet the union's officials did not see these changes any more clearly than did the Board. They stuck to the methods and rhetoric of bygone decades. By the middle of 1970, the rank and file of the Water Board union had overcome the attitudes and behaviour which had long restricted the lot of the Board's servants. They then entered the broader social drama of Australian society in their own right.

1. The economic and political context

While the Cold War gradually eased, the Bretton Woods system held for another decade, albeit shakily by 1970. With demand and investment increasing at an ever greater rate, the post-war boom of international capitalism surged forward. Massive US military expenditure, particularly on the Vietnam War, created an enormous outflow of US dollars. Inflation grew slowly towards the end of the decade without impairing the constant expansion of production, international trade and flows of capital. Economic growth allowed the maintenance of full employment in the industrial economies and encouraged their use of imported labour.¹

Consumerism became a major factor in social life. Over the decade, and following the US example, it spread down the age ladder. With their own styles of consumption and sociability, younger people throughout the advanced industrial world were increasingly differentiating themselves from their parents' generation in questions of style, attitude and social behaviour.² Raised in a more prosperous world, they had more schooling and greater


personal expectations. This reinforced a growing unease with the values and purpose of the work and consumer cultures which had helped shape them. US intervention in the Vietnam War gradually served to transform unease into political contest and mass mobilisation.

In each place, the movements expressed local contradictions and tensions. Yet in whichever way questions of class, gender, generational difference, race and nationalism mixed, they became part of generalised movements calling for some form of new society based on greater freedom and equality. The uprising of students and young workers in France during May 1968 became the most enduring symbol, but major mobilisations against the existing order also occurred in other parts of Europe and North America. The ‘Prague Spring’ indicates that this process did not stop at the Iron Curtain.

Nor did it stop at the factory gates. Much of the boom in industrial production came from making work faster, more routine and stressful. The production pressures on younger workforces less willing to take orders, continued full employment, higher expectations and rising prices stimulated an international increase in absenteeism, turnover and strike action in the late sixties. Much of this conflict grew out of local level organisation which sometimes built horizontal links, with or without formal union approval. In some cases, the most militant groups involved migrant and women workers, long thought industrially passive. Canada, the USA, Italy and the UK experienced heightened industrial action. Australia’s figure for days not worked through industrial disputes was, in 1969, nearly three times the average for the rest of the decade. In 1970 it rose again.

The Australian economy continued to flourish on the strength of the international boom. The trends were those of the previous decade, but the pace was greater. Investment funds, capital goods and labour flowed in, the latter through the massive immigration programme. These reinforced Australia’s position as a supplier of raw materials whilst providing for continued growth and greater technical sophistication of local manufacturing. The sustained expansion of manufacturing abroad and copious foreign investment also

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helped create a mining boom for export. This in turn greatly contributed to a strong balance of payments. Housing demand and completions also boomed. While there were short recessions during 1960-1 and 1965-6, the decade was notable for its economic stability: full employment was the rule and inflation remained moderate.6

This prosperity was decisive in keeping Menzies and his Liberal Party successors in power until 1972. The coalition was also very successful at a state level. In 1965, R. Askin led a Liberal-Country Party coalition to defeat the longstanding ALP rule in NSW. Federal Liberal-Country Party coalitions continued to promote the goals of economic development and population growth through immigration. Investment and spending by state and federal governments grew strongly, although at a slower rate than private investment. Much public sector investment went to service the sprawling suburbs of the major cities, particularly into road building, electricity supply and sewerage.7

The boom called for an expanding labour force. The entry into the labour market of the 'baby boomers' and larger numbers of married women, both also linked to high immigration, became increasingly important towards the end of the decade. The new jobs continued to be in manufacturing and, particularly, in the tertiary sector. Public sector employment, including utilities such as water supply and sewerage, was an important beneficiary at a national level. By 1970, there were more than one million government employees.8 One result was that some public works construction workforces, such as the Water Board's, remained large notwithstanding heavy mechanisation. Construction remained a masculine province.9

Manufacturing, housing and construction remained the main areas of employment for recently arrived immigrants and this continued to bring them to the major cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne. By 1971, Sydney had a population of 2,800,000. Nearby to its south, the Wollongong-Port Kembla industrial city was spreading rapidly as iron and steel

7 ibid, pp. 126-131. For Melbourne, J.C. Pickett, Public Authorities and Development in Melbourne, Urban Research Unit, RSSS, Australian National University, Canberra, 1973, pp. 9, 12.
production continued to demand high levels of immigrant labour. By 1971, its 1954 population had trebled to over 185,000.  

The metropolitan districts experiencing the highest levels of homebuilding were Blacktown, Fairfield, Liverpool and Penrith in the west and southwest, the northern beach suburbs of Warringah, Hornsby to the far north and Sutherland to the far south. Decentralisation of industry, particularly to the western and southwestern regions of the metropolis, did not necessarily improve workers' chances of living near their workplaces. With government unwillingness to coordinate housebuilding with the provisions of public transport, an ever growing number of workers had to rely on private cars to commute to work.

Rising real wages, the ready availability of overtime and the spread of two income families strongly boosted household incomes. This translated into growing consumption largely centred on the suburban home and the car. Working class families in Sydney's outer metropolitan areas, for example, participated in this new affluence. While it promised security, the long-term mortgages and hire purchase repayments made the families involved dependent on steady incomes. Continued recourse to overtime and high levels of indebtedness reduced leisure activities beyond the home, a trend which suburban isolation and anonymity, the advent of television and the growing advertising industry encouraged. A more privatised suburban lifestyle weakened traditional working class culture and social institutions. In the main, this discouraged industrial adventurousness except where it promised solid gains to earnings.

Nevertheless, by the mid-sixties there were signs that change was in the air. There were bitter strikes at Mt Isa and Melbourne and the decade drew to a close with industrial mobilisation mounting in ever broader areas of industry. Australian intervention in Vietnam in 1965 and, later, conscription, added yet another factor. It transmitted to Australia a muted version of the international wave of youth rebellion and, over time,

13 Connell and Irving, op. cit., pp. 298-301, 303.
stimulated an interaction of dissaffected youth with radicals from the traditional labour movement.  

ALP hostility to the CPA continued within the union movement through attempts to stamp out the practice of unity tickets. For its part, the CPA underwent internal crises and scissions emanating from conflicts within international Communism. One result for the Australian party was a weakened hold within the upper reaches of the unions. From this came a rethinking which weakened party antagonism to and competition with the ALP. The CPA sought immersion in the labour mainstream. Industrially, this meant that party militants were to support ALP candidates and positions almost irrespective of where these stood within the ALP’s political spectrum. This only changed at the end of the decade when the CPA attempted to harness itself to the powerful surge in left wing militancy among students and workers.  

In the meantime, the Commonwealth Arbitration Commission came under great pressure as it sought to remain central to a labour market undergoing centrifugal change. Early Basic Wage determinations during the decade angered each side in turn. Nor did the Commission give way to the growing demands for equal pay for women. However, the main institutional arguments during the decade were not over the size of increases to the Basic Wage and margins. Instead, debate shifted to the restructuring of wage fixation processes and to the controversial matter of penal clauses.  

With profits high and rising, workers looked to increase real wages and their share of national income. Booming demand and full employment made individual employers vulnerable. Many unions, including traditionally non-militant ones, sought to take advantage. While coal mining and the waterfront remained the most industrially active areas, technological change was heavily reducing their respective workforces. Manufacturing was now the pivotal sector of both the labour force and the union movement. From the early years of the decade, metal industry unions in particular continued their pressure for higher wages. With a centralised arbitration system holding down award


increases, unions focussed their demands on overaward payments through collective bargaining at a plant and industry level. Behind the demands lay the ready threat of direct action.\textsuperscript{16} Shortages of labour for key skilled groups in particular proved a powerful bargaining chip. These boom-time strikes therefore tended to be more diffuse and shorter than in previous decades.\textsuperscript{17}

Organisationally too, there were developments which both arose out of and encouraged this process. In particular, and again part of an international trend, there was a re-emergence of shop and district committees which often cut across trade and union boundaries. Composed of job delegates, they were closer to the rank and file and able to mobilise participation. This made them excellent vehicles for organising plant level action and bargaining for overaward wages. Given continued full employment, success in this sphere encouraged confidence and audacity.

At times, they cooperated with existing union officialdom. More often, officials saw them as a direct threat, and mainly a Communist one, and therefore made every possible effort to block or contain the push from below. Some CPA union officials, intent on conciliating their ALP allies and maintaining their role within the industrial relations system, behaved similarly. While the CPA had a strong presence within shop committees, the majority of rank and file activists did not belong to any party and were probably ALP supporters.\textsuperscript{18} Yet what some of these committees represented was not only not a challenge to the officials' positions but an alternative model of union organisation to the vertical unions traditional in Australia.

Metal industry employers resorted to frequent use of penal clauses under the Federal Act to bring the unions to heel. As pressure for improved wages increased so did the


\textsuperscript{17} S. Deery and D. Plowman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 57-8; B. Gordon, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 241-2.

The ACTU tried to gain greater control over industrial disputes. The main target was the growth of shop committee organisation and its key role in local strikes. The rationale was the need to weaken employers' use of the penal clauses. By 1964, some employer groups were also searching for an alternative, non-confrontational strategy which still reined in the trend to overaward bargaining and supportive strike action. The result was a call to the Commission to reorganise wage determination procedures. A single 'total wage' was to replace the separate Basic Wage and margins. It would mean just one major wage hearing instead of two. Unions would no longer get two bites at the wage determination cherry and two chances for a flow-on. In 1967, the Commission formally adopted the proposals. There were now to be a National Wage Case to examine the total wage in the context of the national economy, and a Work Value Inquiry to look at wages for specific industries.

Metal industry unions expressed immediate anger at the decision. They had warned members that the total wage proposal was a trick to reduce wage rises otherwise obtainable, particularly for skilled workers' margins. The ACTU attempted to restrain union action for fear of penal sanctions. Before long, however, the questions of penal sanctions and wage fixation became directly intertwined again as a result of the 1967 Metal Trades Work Value Case. The Commission tried to reposition itself at the centre of wage fixation and halt the growing use of overaward payments. It therefore awarded large increases on the understanding that, where they existed, overaward payments were to absorb the new increases. Metal industry unions refused to accept absorption and undertook a campaign of industrial action to win the new increases on top of existing overawards. They won, but during the struggle, employers responded with successful applications for the Industrial

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Court to fine the unions. The unions refused to pay and the Government did not move to collect. 23

Nevertheless, angry opposition was growing among unionists over employers' constant use of penal sanctions. The spread of job committees and the prevalence of overaward bargaining meant that large sectors of industry had unionists who were better informed, better organised, more active and more industrially skilled than had been the case for many years. They knew that full employment was on their side and that they could pick off employers one at a time and win. The simmering question of penal sanctions came to a head in May 1969. The Court gaolled Clarrie O'shea, Secretary of Victoria's tramways union, for non-payment of heavy fines resulting from court orders against the union. The result was an immediate and massive mobilisation of workers throughout Australia in his support. While an anonymous donor paid O'shea's fines, a deeply troubled Federal Coalition Government headed off further union resistance over the general issue of penal sanctions by amending the Arbitration Act. 24

Industrial disputation grew strongly towards the end of the decade with the resulting wage boom lasting until the mid-seventies. Not only did the disputes increase in number, they appear to have lasted longer. Strikes became more generalised throughout the economy and included previously quieter sectors. Wage increases spilled from one sector to another as groups attempted to maintain traditional relativities. Arbitration tribunals subsequently endorsed these industry agreements. Real wages rose strongly, whether through awards or overaward payments. As well, overtime continued to be an important factor in production and in earnings for many industries. 25 The result was that labour's share of national product began to rise markedly for the first time since 1960. 26

During the sixties, union membership continued to rise, particularly among women. This occurred notwithstanding an even larger rise in union contributions per member.

especially towards the end of the decade. Union spending rose similarly.\textsuperscript{27} At the same time, there continued to be a gradual decline in the number of unions registered under the Trade Union Act. In 1960, there were 214, in 1970, 173.\textsuperscript{28}

As before, there was no shortage of inter-union conflicts. In areas close to the Board's workforce, the AWU and the FEDFA maintained their bitter demarcation battles over various classifications. On country water supply schemes under the control of the PWD, the AWU locked horns with the Painters' Union. In most cases, the AWU won in the court what it could not win among the workers involved.\textsuperscript{29}

The Industrial Commission maintained its restrictive role in the realm of wage fixation. In this, it generally followed federal judgements, both for the form and reasoning of wage judgements and the amounts due. This uniformity became more pronounced when, in 1964, the NSW Labor Government abolished the cost of living adjustments to the state's minimum wage. From then on, NSW followed the annual Basic Wage decisions of the Federal jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{30} The Commission also followed the Federal Metal Trades judgements throughout the decade. As a rule, the Commission passed on increases in the federal fitter's margin not only to workers in the metal trades under state awards, but also to building tradesmen. On application, the Commission also passed on these marginal increases to plant operators, tunnel workers and those erecting scaffolding.\textsuperscript{31} The BWIU continued to use this to push up craft award rates under a number of public employers, encouraging flow-ons for Water Board workers.\textsuperscript{32}

As in the federal sphere, employers resorted to heavy use of penalties against unions whose members went out on strike. In NSW, this appears to have reached a peak in 1963. In particular, the BWIU, the BLF, the FEDFA and the Gas Employees Unions — all unions with strong membership parallels with the Water Board union, continued — to face heavy

\textsuperscript{27} 'Report of the Industrial Registrar under the Trade Union Act, 1881, ... for ... 1970',\textit{ NSWPP}, Second Session, 1971-2, Vol. 4, p. 916.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{ibid.}, p. 915.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{NSWIRs}, 1961, p. 232; 1968, p. 449.
\textsuperscript{30} The one major area of difference in wage regulation was that the NSW tribunal did not adopt the total wage prior to 1970.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{ibid.}, 1960, pp. 1, 14-8; 1965, p. 265; 1967, pp. 1-8;
\textsuperscript{32} MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 January 1968 (C).
financial penalties. After sustained union pressure on the ALP, the government slightly eased the provisions allowing for penal sanctions in the NSW Act. Nevertheless, employers maintained a flow of successful prosecutions until the O’Shea case.

Changing community attitudes and pressure from the more militant unions such as the BWIU helped set new parameters. The Commission came to accept the practical implications of workers’ rising expectations as to the amenities and conditions that were their due. One example will suffice. In 1964, Taylor J., the Commission’s President, admonished the PWD for providing substandard accommodation for those working temporarily at some distance from their homes. He ordered that ‘reasonable’ board and lodging was to mean ‘lodging in a well-kept establishment with adequate furnishings, good bedding, good floor coverings, good lighting and heating in either a single room or a twin room, if a single room is not available, with hot and cold running water.’

It seemed a long way from Warragamba labourers sleeping on flea-ridden straw palliates in tents, or the Board worrying that providing blinds and linoleum for salaried officers living in barracks would spoil them. Less than two decades had elapsed but, in that time, almost constant full employment had had powerful effects on worker and union attitudes and behaviour. The result was a strong assertion of the human dignities of workers as expressed in amenities, safety and working conditions. They all but banished the traditional acceptance of hardship which had become deeply ingrained during the years of depression and war.

2. The Water Board

Appointments to the Board’s top positions continued to provide the organisation with a high profile and strong links within the NSW public sector. Nevertheless, they do not appear to have diminished the strong engineering ethos and municipal influence which had traditionally marked the organisation’s priorities. S. Haviland became President during 1960 upon Goodsell’s appointment as Chairman of the State Public Service Board. He had

33 E.g. *NSWIRs*, 1963, pp. 530, 662, 830.
35 E.g. *NSWIRs*, 1964, pp. 446, 649; 1967, p. 293
36 *ibid*, 1964, p. 566.
previously been the Board’s Vice-President as well as heading the Department of Local Government. The new Vice-President was W.G. Mathieson and, from 1963, E.J. Walder. Both held the position while head of the State Treasury. This was important for reasons other than the questions relating to Board finance. Treasury played an influential role in restraining wage and salary rates under the PSB. It was important for public sector wage fixation that rates under the Water Board or other large statutory authorities did not run ahead of the rest of the public service. Walder became President upon Haviland retirement in 1965. The Vice-Presidency became, for the first times, a full time position.37 Significantly, the first incumbent was Eddie Beers, at various times the Secretary to the Board, Staff and Industrial Officer, and prior to that, President of the Salaried Division of the house union. On Beer’s retirement in 1969, E.G. Warrell, previously Associate Commissioner of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority, took his place.38

It was important that Board’s senior officials were so well placed at a time when the Board needed to make priority claims on public loans finance. Since the war, the exasperated pressure for more housing had spread Sydney too far and too fast. This increased the unit costs of, and the time lags for, providing public utilities. Lack of sewerage was the most obvious example. The problem of an uncoordinated rash of subdivisions continued to plague metropolitan planning and supply of amenities during the early sixties. Public housing authorities and private developers clamoured for further access to large, unbuilt tracts of land. Public utilities adopted policies to retard the momentum or at least to ease their financial burden.39

Table 7A gives a good indication of the trends in Water Board construction and maintenance. Total construction spending continued to expand, with 1961-2 posting the first of a number of records. Water supply dominated in the opening years due to the final work on Warragamba. Thereafter, sewerage construction surged ahead, with 1962-3 a

39 One, which the Board adopted in 1961, was to have subdividers pay for the servicing of new areas prior to development. This helped bridge the yawning gulf between demand for sewerage and connections. P. Harrison, 'Planning the Metropolitan Areas', in Burnley (ed), op. cit., pp. 205-6, MWSDB Reports, 1960-1, p. 29; 1969-70, p. 36.
record year. By the middle of 1970, the Board supplied water to a population of some 2,968,000 and sewerage to 2,374,000.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{table}
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\caption{TABLE 7A}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Year} & \textbf{Construction} & & & \textbf{Maintenance}\textsuperscript{42} & \\
 & \textbf{Water} & \textbf{Sewerage} & \textbf{Total} & \textbf{Water} & \textbf{Sewerage} & \textbf{Total} \\
\hline
1960-1 & 19,147 & 13,183 & 32,478 & 8,186 & 4,394 & 12,907 \\
1962-3 & 13,284 & 20,539 & 34,306 & 10,370 & 4,887 & 15,629 \\
1963-4 & 13,469 & 25,431 & 39,446 & 11,556 & 5,586 & 17,534 \\
1965-6 & 18,457 & 21,857 & 41,220 & 12,649 & 6,439 & 19,563 \\
1966-7 & 19,491 & 24,435 & 45,941 & 13,297 & 7,243 & 21,062 \\
1969-70 & 20,123 & 29,450 & 51,888 & 16,864 & 9,607 & 27,255 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Revenues also rose more spectacularly over the decade, reflecting a massive expansion in connections and hence rates collected. These revenues allowed a consequent rise in maintenance and administrative expenditures. The following pages provide information as to where the Board’s employees worked. The most important factors determining location were the major trends in the construction programme, the use of plant and the decentralisation of buildings and much of the ancillary workforce.

The year 1960-1 marked the end of an era. Workers completed the City Tunnel and, if there was still some work left finishing off Warragamba, almost all the construction there was completed and the official opening celebrated. Nevertheless, the demand for Board services increased and, with it, expenditure and the Board’s public profile.

The completion of Warragamba Dam appeared to have solved Sydney’s water supply problems but there were still bottlenecks in delivery. Average daily consumption was climbing rapidly as a result of rising population, suburban development and the boom in

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{ibid.}, 1969-70, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{41} Totals include figures for drainage which were minimal over the period. \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{42} Maintenance figures omit interest and exchange charges and refer only to ‘Operating Costs’ and ‘Administration and Management’ in the Board’s Annual Reports.
manufacturing. Board workers enlarged the existing Warragamba Pipeline as an interim measure. A more complete response was their accelerated construction of a larger Pipeline No. 2, completed by the end of the decade. Further major water distribution works were aimed at boosting the system’s delivery to major suburban reservoirs and, making it more flexible and secure.

The main focus of water supply construction now shifted to the districts. There was an expanded programme of construction of service reservoirs particularly for the Wollongong and outer suburban areas. The construction of pumping stations was also a high priority and by mid-1970, Board employees operated 183 service reservoirs and 112 pumping stations. But more than any other factor, the sixties were record years for mains laying. As well, in October 1969, cement lining gangs completed their intensive programme of lining old mains in situ. All new pipes were pre-lined or coated. Finally, the Board was now placing more attention on water quality control and workers in the Board’s many chlorination plants were growing in number.

Political pressures from within the Board and without had long demanded that sewerage reticulation become the first priority. The outcome was that, for a number of years during the sixties, Board workers connected more homes to the sewerage system than were built. Such was the momentum of the Board’s sewerage works that, in the decade to 1970, the proportion of the population with sewerage available jumped from 67 to 80 per cent, despite the population increases.

Emphasis on reticulating off existing trunk works did not mean an end to major sewerage construction works. Indeed, it stimulated the need for new ones, particularly for the previously neglected Wollongong area. In general, the trend was for a continuation of the priorities adopted in the fifties. First, there was the construction of treatment works, most notably for the ocean outfall sewers, but also inland, as at St Mary’s and Quaker’s Hill in Sydney’s outer west. Building and extension of major trunk submains allowed for the reticulation of unserviced areas. The most important of these was the large-scale extension

of the North George's River submain and its major feeders. This opened up important and rapidly growing outer areas of southwestern Sydney, such as Fairfield and Liverpool, to major expansions in reticulation. Submain extensions to the NSOOS also opened up the largely unsewered and rapidly developing Warringah peninsular. The same benefits were to come to already settled areas one ring of suburbs closer to the city. The third important support for the expansion of reticulation was the construction of pumping stations. These permitted an extension of the more difficult low level systems.47

Maintenance of sewerage involved dealing with the same problems of 70 years earlier. But, if sewerage maintenance workers still had to rod and dredge 'foul sewers', remove the silt and repair the tunnels and pipes, visible improvements in their working conditions had occurred. One was the forcing of ventilation into 'live' sewers through manholes as a safety measure prior to maintenance workers entering them.48

Decentralisation of construction and an expansion and reorganisation of maintenance and ancillary services depended on the provision of a whole array of new buildings and depots in the districts. There was a thorough transfer of Board field operations and support services from the city and inner suburbs, particularly to the western suburbs. One important focus was the Potts Hill Reservoir complex which the Board had continually expanded and upgraded. In 1961, the main stores moved there from Paddington. So did the headquarters for the General Transport Fleet, this time from Waterloo Garage.49

The most important phenomenon from an industrial point of view was the reorganisation of construction into districts: Central, Prospect, Western, Northern, Southern and Wollongong. Each had its own newly built headquarters, depots and workshops. The Board also had a large number of smaller, more specialised depots built in the districts. But it was the district head offices which were of greatest significance. These complexes were not only bases for the large district construction workforces, they housed garages, mechanical and carpenters’ shops, materials and plant stores and administrative offices. Drivers and chauffeurs, craft workers and their assistants and storemen now came into

constant contact with the full range of construction workers. It had happened habitually on
dam works but these had been too remote to cause problems which struck at the core of the
Board's industrial relations. Reorganisation brought this fusion right into the heart of its
operations.50

Meanwhile, the Board massively expanded its purchase of light and heavy plant for
district work, particularly for the big construction jobs. Even this did not suffice and the
Board hired large amounts of plant from contractors.51 There was also a large expansion of
the Board's General Transport Fleet.52

Mechanisation meant larger numbers of plant operators and drivers of all types
together with ancillary classifications such as doormen and crane chasers. Still, much of the
reticulation work involved labour intensive trench digging with power drills and picks, and
hand shovels. Sewerage reticulation, which dominated construction towards the end of the
decade, continued to be 'labour hungry', particularly for semi- and unskilled workers. As a
result, the construction workforce remained as large as the Board could hire at the pay and
conditions it offered. The enormous workload encouraged a great deal of regular overtime,
including Saturday mornings. In fact, such was the need for more workers, that the Board
once again resorted to contractors for areas where it had trouble recruiting and holding
labour.53

The figures for the number of the Board's wages employees over the decade are given
in Table 7B. The strength of construction activity is evident from the large numbers in 'B'
Class. Also of interest is the growing but still insignificant number of women workers who
mainly worked as cleaners, in the canteen and as guides at Warragamba. By the end of the
decade, the union was of a sizable numerical presence given its restriction to Sydney and
Wollongong.

50 *ibid.*, 1960-1, p. 32; 1964-5, pp. 28, 30.
52 *ibid.*, 1960-1, p. 32; 1964-5, p. 28; 1968-9, p. 33.
53 MWSDB Minutes, 9 July 1969.
Overall, Goodsell and his successors proved less rigid and more understanding of industrial issues than had Upton. They also gradually gave industrial matters a higher profile although this was probably due to the growing level of dispute towards the end of the decade. At a time of such rapid change in so many areas, not least the workforce and industrial relations, the Board became increasingly reactive to pressures from below.

Within the limits which NSW labour market institutions permitted, the Board had always unilaterally set the terms and conditions for its relationship with its labour force. The organisation’s main ethos was an engineering one, its way of proceeding bureaucratic. Surrounding both were the different ways of financing works and maintenance and the political pressures and constraints attached to each. These forces combined or conflicted in different proportions depending on the area of the workforce involved. The engineering and cost pressures acted most powerfully on the majority wages workforce on construction. The stress on engineering priorities in particular placed wage workers’ interests last. Only action by the workers themselves could change this situation.

During the decade, the role of the Board’s tiny Staff and Industrial section began to expand. In particular, with industrial disputes becoming a major fact of life on construction from 1968, industrial relations had to become an important adjunct to traditional engineering
operations. Symptomatic was an administrative reorganisation which constituted an enlarged and separate Staff and Industrial Branch.54

W.N. Clark became Staff and Industrial Officer in 1960.55 Known for spending one hour explaining why a union deputation should gain its claims, and then another why it should not, he invariably ended by agreeing with the latter. He was skilled at pretending that he could not alter matters between awards, that the Board’s policy tied his hands.56 While the Board’s industrial climate remained quiet he and the union’s officials could work amicably negotiating the host of minor claims, fending off demands for greater speed. When the situation became tenser at the end of the decade, he was out of his depth. D.A. Reid replaced Clark in 1968. A former airforce officer, his habit of referring to union deputations as ‘chappies’ did not endear him. Nevertheless, he was a skilled negotiator who realised that the Board had to give when the industrial tide was running against it.57

The Board continued its traditional segmentation of employees. It continued to favour ‘A’ to ‘B’ Class. On the whole, this still corresponded to maintenance and construction. The Board was slow to fill ‘A’ Class vacancies in maintenance but it was even more loathe to bring its ‘A’ Class Construction Nucleus up to the award strength of 400.

The distinction between ‘A’ and ‘B’ Classes had a number of implications. One was the level of immediate supervision required. The nature of much maintenance work meant the Board had to trust its permanent workers to do the job within the Board’s disciplinary code. There were a number of strict rules of behaviour. One, with strong implications for safety, banned drinking alcohol during work hours or drunkenness on the job. During the decade, there appears to have been a rise in the number of such employees charged and dismissed over this and other issues. Whether the increase was due to changes in behaviour or greater surveillance by Board officers is hard to tell. Probably all played a part and certainly the Board put more emphasis on roving observers.58

55 MBWSSEA Minutes, 3 June 1960 (C).
56 Interview with John Collicott, Bill McKay and Frank Rudd, Kensington, 31 May 1985.
At the lower levels of the Board’s hierarchy attitudes to the workforce had changed little. Particularly on construction, there were growing problems with overseers many of whom continued to rule with an iron fist. The continued high levels of construction and the concentration of workers in smaller gangs doing reticulation meant an expansion in the number of overseers. By early 1970, there were 515 confirmed overseers and 72 acting in that position. Many appear to have had minimal training and inadequate knowledge. The Board subsequently recognised this fact by establishing special ‘in service’ training for organisers and doubling to two years the necessary wages division experience they needed prior to their probationary promotion.

Competent overseers were less of a problem; they could plan the work ahead and let the workers get on with the job. Others would not plan adequately and if unforeseen problems appeared to threaten the Board’s output quotas, they would try to squeeze the necessary amount out of the workers at the end of the day, disregarding elementary safety and other procedures. When this meant not timbering deep trenches, the dangers were obvious. Lack of knowledge came to exacerbate the already brutal behaviour among overseers.

Many construction workers laboured in gangs of about ten workers and overseers found it easy to treat their gangs as they pleased. A subsequent study which interviews many veteran employees claimed: ‘that it was not uncommon for overseers to tell new starters not to bother getting off the truck “simply because they did not like the look of them”’. Any questioning of the overseer’s authority usually meant an immediate exit from the Board’s workforce. The same fate befell those who could not keep up with an overseer’s inflexible output expectations, irrespective of terrain or conditions. They often insisted that men work in the rain and ignored safety procedures. For the Board’s field management, construction workers continued to be trench fodder.

59 ibid., 1 February 1970.
60 ibid., 15 and 22 April 1970; Sid Lake interview, Seven Hills, 22 February 1983.
61 Sid Lake interview, 22 February 1983.
As it took time for inexperienced workers to gain the knowledge, skills and strength to master the harder work, it was often new workers who left soon after their start. With migrants from non-English speaking countries now a majority of the construction workforce, the Board did nothing to alleviate this situation either in terms of making information available, supplying interpreters or improving employees’ language skills. There was virtually no information supplied to new workers as to their employment entitlements or as to the working rules of the organisation. Mostly, new workers picked up survival skills and knowledge on the job. They could depend on the close group ties built up in many gangs, irrespective of countries of origin. Some overseers also played a valuable role as a source of information and advice. This did not make them popular among their peers, many of whom displayed aggressively racist attitudes to migrants, with verbal abuse commonplace.

Another sore point was that the Board took little notice of where its workers lived and often sent them to work at great distances from their homes. It appears that despite complaints and appeals, this was the case even if work was available locally. It was not unusual then to have workers living, in say Southern District, travelling long distances to Northern District and vice versa. In this an many other ways, the Board as an institution behaved as if the previous decades of continuous high unemployment among unskilled labour were still a fact of life. Fortunately for the Board’s workforce this was not the case. One result was the continuing high levels of labour turnover. In 1960-1, a recession year, the combined figure for construction and maintenance was 84 per cent. The figure gradually rose but then jumped so that in 1964-5, it stood at 157 per cent. It particularly hampered construction as the maintenance workforce proved much more stable. Turnover again declined, but, in 1969-70, it was still 117 per cent.

64 ibid., pp. 63, 64, 79, 81, 82-3, 97-8, 109-10, 115-7.
65 ibid., pp. 118-9; Sid Lake interview, 22 February 1983; Ludwik Stepek interview, 17 February 1984.
66 Interview with McKay, Collocott and Rudd.
67 Callus, Quinlan and Rimmer, op. cit., pp. 66-8; MWSDB Reports, 1963-4, p. 32; 1964-5, p. 32; 1965-6, p. 27. In comparison, Mundey estimated that building construction, a much more volatile sector than water and sewerage had only about a 50 per cent annual turnover rate during years of full employment. op. cit., p. 64.
The Board remained, on the whole, totally uninterested in the ebbs, flows and composition of its workforce, except where it hindered output in the narrowest sense. There was no labour force planning or personnel strategy. Although faced with the high costs of this turnover, the Board showed little initiative over wages, pay classifications, safety and its migrant workforce. Another example was the provision of primitive job facilities. Sheds continued to serve for both changing and lunch rooms while the only toilet on many jobs was a bucket. Only industrial pressure from a disgruntled workforce or, at times, NSW government initiatives, provoked any reaction.

Much of the turnover obviously included migrants. They had specific reasons for leaving. The Board was not normally interested in the existing skills or qualifications of those confined to construction labouring. As well, although large numbers of migrants were getting overseers’ jobs by the end of the decade, there was still evidence that they faced heavy disadvantages for such jobs and for allocation to preferred jobs such as plant operator or on maintenance. These things seemed to depend a great deal on the good graces of immediate supervisors and migrant workers expressed much resentment over the corruption involved.

Safety was an important area which combined problems with overseers, language difficulties and the Board's attitudes to construction workers. In line with similar trends within the NSW public sector, the Board made an effort to upgrade safety within the organisation from the beginning of the decade. Its appointment of a safety officer and a team of safety inspectors to monitor jobs helped reduce the accident rate. The Central Safety Committee and, below it, the local sub-committees continued to deal with problems as they arose. On both, workers continued to be hopelessly out-voted.

While the Board's senior officers pushed for safety consciousness down the line, the accident rate remained high. In 1968-9, the NSW average accident frequency rate was 96. The Board as a whole scored 58, but its construction scored 98. One problem, noted

68 Callus, Quinlan and Rimmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-5.
69 *ibid.*, pp. 74, 99.
71 *ibid.* . p. 85
72 MWDSB Minutes, 16 July 1969.
above, was that the Board’s insistent demands on output encouraged supervisors to ignore safe working practices. It also created a great deal of overtime work and tired workers were more prone to injury. Driving and negligent overseers made this worse. Finally, language problems and high turnover rates contributed to a lack of knowledge. This compounded the situation. A 1979 study showed that Board employees continued to be most worried by the dangers of trench work.\(^{73}\)

If some safety matters had improved, there was still little provision in the way of rehabilitation. The medical staff believed that only a rapid return to work would allow the injured worker to regain the necessary ‘self respect’ necessary for rehabilitation. However, there were virtually no light duties jobs available on construction.\(^{74}\)

3. The Water Board Union

a. An overview

For the Water Board’s house union, some things did not appear to have changed with the decades. Prior to the late 1960s, in terms of numbers, its membership remained remarkably stable. It was now a solidly middle sized union within NSW and, within the metropolitan context, even quite large. Yet this apparent stability hid the massive turnover if not the effects of the periodic recessions. Table 7C shows the membership figures and financial situation of the union at 31 December of each year over the decade.\(^{75}\) Although female membership was climbing, it still stood well below the union’s overall density rates. It remained a male industry and an even more male union.

\(^{73}\) Callus, Quinlan and Rimmer, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 88.

\(^{74}\) \textit{ibid.}, pp. 89

\(^{75}\) The membership figures also included the Salaried Division, which would have accounted for between 25 and 35 per cent of the total at any one time. While the figures seem far too ‘rounded’, Brightman gave very similar figures to the Committee during most years. E.g. MBWSSEA Minutes, 30 September 1960 (C), 3 March 1961 (C).
TABLE 7C

Membership and Finances ($)^76

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
<th>Balance</th>
<th>Assets/member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>5,300</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5,318</td>
<td>30,210</td>
<td>22,348</td>
<td>61,274</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>4,890</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4,906</td>
<td>32,354</td>
<td>22,924</td>
<td>70,706</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5,818</td>
<td>40,970</td>
<td>28,556</td>
<td>83,118</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>5,940</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5,958</td>
<td>38,038</td>
<td>26,814</td>
<td>95,640</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6,020</td>
<td>42,434</td>
<td>27,176</td>
<td>109,598</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>5,900</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5,918</td>
<td>41,410</td>
<td>30,460</td>
<td>120,548</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>5,340</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5,360</td>
<td>37,611</td>
<td>29,833</td>
<td>128,326</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>6,600</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6,630</td>
<td>46,534</td>
<td>30,440</td>
<td>144,420</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>6,250</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6,300</td>
<td>46,087</td>
<td>33,868</td>
<td>156,639</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6,560</td>
<td>48,210</td>
<td>42,189</td>
<td>162,659</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other areas, the story of the Board’s union remained true to its past for the whole decade. Despite the rash of demarcation disputes embroiling unions covering neighbouring workforces, the house union retained its splendid isolation. At various points, other unions widened their rules to constitute a potential threat or even sought absolute preference for their categories working for the Board. Each of these threats quickly came to nothing and appear to have engendered no acrimony. On the contrary, officials of the house union continued to have close working relationships with their counterparts in the relevant public sector and craft unions, irrespective of the very different political positions and industrial strategies they held.77 The only threat at job level was an isolated attempt by the FEDFA to poach plant officers as members.78

The house union still had cheap dues. The entrance fee remained a mere one shilling (or ten cents). Dues rose to 15/- ($1.50) per quarter in 1960 and remained at that rate until the end or the decade.79 The union’s funds grew strongly over the decade, with assets per member continuing to eclipse the state average. The union continued to invest heavily in

76 ‘Reports of the Industrial Registrar Under the Trade Union Act, 1881’, NSWPPs.
78 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 June 1963 (C).
safe Water Board loans.\textsuperscript{80} A more speculative investment continued to be the generous donations — sums of $500 and $1,000 — to the ALP.\textsuperscript{81}

As before, maintenance proved the most stable area for collecting dues. The problem of collecting on construction jobs was even more difficult given the massive fragmentation in gangs throughout the districts. With the high turnover rates, the problem of maintaining a network of delegates who collected dues worsened. It was even difficult to keep track of workers coming on and off jobs and many worked some time before leaving without this information reaching the union’s office. Some figures for 1961-2 indicate the extent of the problem faced. In that year some 5,000 new workers started with the Board, for a net gain of 1,200. The union joined up 700 of these of whom 100 were at Wollongong and a smaller number at Warragamba.\textsuperscript{82} To gain control of the situation, the union’s officials repeatedly sought from the Board agreement to automatically deduct dues for ‘B’ Class workers but without success. As a result, collecting fell even more heavily to the union’s officials and particularly to the pay car and other Board drivers, some of whom continued to make large sums in commission.\textsuperscript{83}

The officials’ pay remained generous compared to the union’s membership but still well below the heights reached under Macpherson. The reference group continued to be the Board’s salaried staff. Nevertheless, even one of Brightman’s strong antagonists did not think the officials’ were paid enough.\textsuperscript{84} The Secretary’s rate was set at the level of a Grade 4 Officer of the Board’s Clerical and Administrative Division. In 1967-8, the Secretary earned $4,183, the Assistant-Secretary $3,575 and the Organiser $3,189. In comparison, among craft workers whose wages had just gone up, a leading hand finer welder in charge of between 11 and 20 workers now earned $3,733.60 and a base rate leading hand carpenter, $3,322.80.\textsuperscript{85}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[80] These included one deposit of $10,000 and another of $5,000 in 1968 alone, MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 January 1966 (C), 5 January 1968 (C), 6 September 1968 (C), 7 November 1969 (C).
\item[81] ibid., 1 November 1963 (C), 5 March 1965 (C), 7 October 1966 (C), 6 October 1967 (C), 2 February 1968 (C), 10 October 1969 (C).
\item[82] ibid., 6 April 1962 (C), 29 January 1964.
\item[83] ibid., 6 January 1961 (C), 2 August 1963 (C), 7 October 1966 (C).
\item[84] ibid., 26 January 1966.
\item[85] ibid., 7 January 1966 (C), Water and Sewerage Gazette, May-June, 1968, pp. 2-8.
\end{footnotes}
While there were continuities with earlier decades, the sixties were also years of decisive change. At first this was not obvious as the rupture with the past was not immediate. The challenge to the established order was not monolithic but rather diverse, fractured and uncertain. It took some time to coalesce. As a result, union affairs during the early and middle years of the decade did not differ greatly from the second half of the fifties. True, some of the old stalwarts died or retired from official positions. But, others still carried on and were joined by a new group who looked ready to sit in power much as their predecessors had done. As ever, many were salaried officers. While the change was building from the middle years, it really only became noticeable from 1967 and for this reason the remaining discussion of the union is in two sections.

b. The house union: 1960-66

The decade began with Bill Stone as President, J. McNamara as his vice, A. Munro as Treasurer and A. Hayes and U. Lynch as Trustees. The Committee comprised Charlie Bennett, C. Culnane, J. Fitzgibbons, W. Hewitt, H. Hollingsworth, Tom McMahon, R. O'Neil, Jack Rutty, T. Reardon, Frank Rudd, Joe Savage and A. Thompson.86 Brightman as Secretary provided a link to the pre-war days as did Hayes and Hewitt. Broome easily won the vacancy for Assistant Secretary in 1960 and Rudd outpolled Rutty to become Organiser.87

Rudd, a short, stocky man, had been a ship's carpenter during the war and subsequently retained much of that sense of obedience which military service tends to inculcate. After the war, he worked at Waterloo workshops and then for some time at Warragamba before transferring to the construction of Bondi treatment works.88 A quiet, conservative and sincere man, he had little feel for the hurly-burly of a construction workforce tending towards industrial militancy. Rather, he was too easily overawed by the Board's hierarchy, whether at head office or out in the field. He had little vision and even less industrial fight. Explicitly allowing the Board to dictate the terms under which

86 MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 July 1959,
87 Broome's margin was four to one. ibid., 4 March 1960 (C); 1 July 1960 (C).
88 Interview with Frank Rudd (and Bill McKay and John Collocott), Kensington, 31 May 1985.
1960-1970

industrial relations took place, he was, nevertheless, conscientious in bringing forward the complaints of the groups with whom he came into contact.

Broome was different. A lifetime in construction, particularly on dam works, had taught him how to deal with construction workforces. While not a Joe Bodkin when it came to defusing hostile situations, he nevertheless knew how to deal with foes and aid supporters. He too was quite willing to bring forward the complaints coming from the jobs. Together with Culnane and McNamara, he provided continuity from the early post-war period. Many of the others on the Committee had been around since the early 1950s. Yet, over the following years, one veteran Committee member after another either retired from the Board or died. This was a striking indication of the aging of the Committee at a time when the union’s membership was getting younger.

The new Committee members were a mixed lot. Some played little if any role and vanished quickly. A few others lasted three or four years. The overall impression is of a lessening of commitment to this sort of involvement. Certainly, as the union’s membership gradually began to mobilise, these positions were no longer as comfortable as they once had been. This would help explain why those who stayed on tended to be more critical of the union’s traditional cosy relationship with the Board or more prepared to carry demands and complaints from their work groups. Further, as members retired mid-term, Brightman had the Committee replace them with the runners-up from the previous election. This tended to infuse the Committee with more critical elements.

Hewitt and Lynch retired during 1960. Of the three new members of the Committee only J. Muir made any impact.\(^89\) Retirement forced Culnane and O’Neill out during the following 18 months. Harry Watson from Warragamba gained his place when the Committee’s replaced a mid-term resignation. Those who drew up Brightman’s ‘official’ ticket subsequently accepted him into their team.\(^90\) It was the first of a number of such appointments which integrated opponents or previous independents as a tiny minority within a Committee loyal to Brightman and the traditional pattern of union-management relations.

\(^89\) MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 July 1960 (C), 27 July 1960.
\(^90\) ibid., 26 July 1961, 2 February 1962 (C), 6 April 1962 (C).
I960-I970

on the Board. They generally assimilated the ruling ethos or, if they remained critics, limited their open opposition to Committee meetings.91

In 1962, it was McNamara’s turn to retire. Rutty took his place as Vice President.92 Stone died during the election period. Ray Greentree, as runner-up, claimed that he rightfully should be the union’s new President. For the first time, he had done extensive electioneering over a wider area, visiting the South Coast. Whilst Brightman was not averse to integrating single opponents or critics on an irregular basis, passing over the presidency of the union to someone with as long a history of opposition and with the organising skills of Greentree was too much. Waving a copy of an opinion of the Industrial Registrar on the matter, he had the AGM sanction a special ballot which Rutty won. McMahon was to be his Vice. Another runner-up, R. (Dick) Riley, received elevation to the vacant spot on the Committee.93

In 1964, there was another noticeable changing of the guard. Of the veterans, Joe Savage and Munro retired. Among the newcomers were M.J. (Mick) Gillan, R. Lang and J. Ziegeler. The new Treasurer was Hollingsworth, the Trustees, Hayes and Thompson. During the year, yet another runner-up, J. (Jim) Lock, took office.94 At the following AGM, J. Luke took a place. Rudd became the Assistant Secretary on Broome’s retirement at the end of 1965, and Gillan, Organiser. His position on the Committee went to H.F. Lees and, in July 1966, Crowe’s to Des Melling.95

By the end of this period, the Committee had undergone a transformation. On the whole it looked more alive and responsive. Luke was a job activist who was not afraid to confront supervisors on the job or take complaints to the Committee. Lock, initially from Warragamba Pipeline, appears to have been in a similar mould. Watson and Riley, formerly opponents but not strongly ideological, threw their lot in with the ruling group. They carried the word from active or disgruntled work groups but did not appear to initiate or mobilise.

91 George Brightman interview, Sydney, 31 January 1989
93 Ibid., 31 July 1963, 1 November 1963 (C), 6 December 1963; interview with Ray Greentree (and John Palmer), Bargo, 1 April 1985.
94 MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 July 1964, 5 February 1965 (C).
95 Ibid., 28 July 1965, 1 July 1966 (C); 27 July 1966; WSG, May-June 1968, p. 1.
Even among Brightman's supporters, Rutty, McMahon, Bennett, Lees, Gibson and Ziegeler loosely fitted this description.

The arrival of Melling, an experienced industrial organiser, was a significant development. Being a member of the Committee allowed him, and therefore his workgroups, easier access to Committee and Board deliberations. Melling continually brought forward the complaints of sewer maintenance workers. Nevertheless, he was not an aggressive person. Thus, although a member of a CPA which was once again flexing its industrial muscles, he tended to fit in with other members of the Committee. Active and concerned, he proved to be the cooperative left-wing of the ruling group rather than formenting any real opposition in the early years.96

Among the opposition, the Greentree brothers remained active as did Anderson in the early years, though in a reduced way. They continued to protest against the involvement of salaried officers on the Wages Division Committee, this time with more success. As a result, an AGM agreed to change the union's rules confining membership of each Division to employees within the comparable division of the Board's workforce. The only exceptions were those salaried officers who were financial members of the Wages Division of the union at the end of 1960, some of whom continued to run that Division.97

Overall though, the period until 1966 was remarkably quiet. One indication was the continuing abysmal attendances at General Meetings. Another was the lack of interest in elections.98 The difficulties of the large non-English speaking section of the membership were obviously an important factor in both. While there was some interest on the Committee about having multilingual notices in the Gazette, on the whole, Committee members still tended to look at non-British immigrants with suspicion.99

The only exceptions to the industrial quiet came from Warragamba Dam and a short and inconclusive militant push among other groups in the second half of 1963. At Warragamba, strikes and stopwork meetings continued to mark the few remaining

construction workers and the large maintenance component as the most militant part of the Board’s workforce. Once again, craft workers, whether members of outside unions or the house union, played a prominent role. But issues such as camping and isolation allowances were no longer as important. On the other hand, dam workers articulated and took action over a number of demands which were becoming central to much of the Board’s workforce. In particular, there was the call for weekly hiring on construction to overcome time and wages lost through wet weather.\textsuperscript{100} To the south, the growing workforce in the Wollongong area was also becoming more vocal, if not militant.\textsuperscript{101}

The reason for the general industrial quiet was that the union’s membership showed more evidence of fragmentation than unity of purpose. This was very true of construction where the rapid dispersal of Warragamba workers onto district work broke down the networks built up at the dam. As well, high turnover levels provided an outlet for widespread individual dissatisfaction while high earnings through overtime tempered the complaints of those who chose to stay on. Another factor reducing group cohesion in the early years was the Board’s tendency to move construction workers between districts.\textsuperscript{102} Finally, the large numbers with English language difficulties meant that it was some time before construction workers were to again coalesce into a force for change in the union.

In the meantime, maintenance workers, and in particular, those doing sewer maintenance, made their dissatisfaction known. Melling carried many of their complaints to the Committee, Gibson did the same for the increasingly vocal survey field hands who appear to have been in chronic short supply. Chauffeurs and truck drivers also continued to grumble, with Rutty, Anderson and Joe Savage speaking on their behalf.\textsuperscript{103} Cement liners, their task virtually completed and their numbers dwindling, no longer had any force.

At a general level, the same concerns tended to arise. These were often to do with the nature of the industry and of the Board: contract labour; the distinction between ‘A’ and ‘B’ Class employees; and promotion through the Board’s hierarchy. Contract labour again

\textsuperscript{100} ibid., 3 November 1961 (C), 6 July 1962 (C), 5 October 1962 (C), 3 May 1963 (C), 3 April 1964 (C), 4 December 1964 (C), 3 June 1966 (C).
\textsuperscript{101} ibid., 8 January 1965 (C).
\textsuperscript{102} ibid., 2 November 1962 (C).
\textsuperscript{103} ibid., 3 November 1961 (C), 5 January 1962 (C), 25 July 1962, 7 December 1962 (C), 31 July 1963, 1 November 1963 (C), 3 January 1964 (C), 27 January 1965.
became an issue for the union, particularly during the 1961-2 recession. Subsequently, low unemployment levels and, until 1965, ALP government support, eased the union's fears.\textsuperscript{104} The election of the Askin Government again raised the contractors' profile on Board works and, with it, union concern.\textsuperscript{105}

Promotions and appointments to 'A' Class were a more constant concern. Members complained that the Board's distribution of information regarding both was inadequate. Further, there was a growing impatience with the Board's tardiness in filling 'A' Class vacancies and the concomitant rise in the proportion of 'B' Class workers on maintenance. As this created great resentment amongst the 'A' Class, it received frequent ventilation on the Committee of Management.\textsuperscript{106}

Continued full employment reduced the special advantages of the 'A' Class and the labour market insecurity of the 'B' Class employees. This stimulated the expectations among the latter relative to the former. They demanded equal annual leave — four weeks — which they received through state government legislation in 1964, and better sick leave, although parity was only to come to those with five years' service.\textsuperscript{107} By then, the 'A' Class were pressing the officials for higher wages to catch up with what was happening outside.\textsuperscript{108}

Then there were the issues arising from involvement in centralised wage fixation through the arbitration system. In the early years, the question of margins dominated discussion. By 1965, the Basic Wage had again become a bone of angry contention. Most Water Board categories followed the AWU's General Construction Award or the various craft awards.\textsuperscript{109} Others, like the WSOs, were specific to the Board. For its part, the Board continued to deliberately delay the completion of awards. The union officials were

\textsuperscript{104} ibid., 2 December 1960 (C); 2 June 1961 (C); 6 September 1963 (C); 8 January 1965 (C).

\textsuperscript{105} ibid., 1 April 1966 (C), 1 July 1966 (C).

\textsuperscript{106} ibid., 8 January 1960, 5 February 1960 (C), 7 April 1961 (C), 26 July 1961 (C), 2 February 1962 (C), 5 October 1962 (C), 3 May 1963 (C), 29 January 1964 (C), 8 October 1965 (C), 2 September 1966 (C).

\textsuperscript{107} ibid., 30 January 1963; 7 June 1963 (C); 26 March 1964 (SGM).

\textsuperscript{108} ibid., 27 February 1964 (SGM-maint).

\textsuperscript{109} Survey field hands followed the AWU'S Survey Field Hands (State) Award.
unable to alter this or the Board’s refusal to compensate by making the award sufficiently retrospective.

On the whole, there was a growing fragmentation of the types of complaints and claims which arose. With fewer large jobs, these claims and complaints tended to concern smaller groups of members at any one time and remained uncoordinated. There was a plethora of claims for different loadings, allowances, penalty rates, clothing and conditions. The union’s minutes give the impression that each group remained largely unaware of what was happening in other areas of the Board’s works not to mention outside. This of course would have suited Brightman and Broome. In fact, Brightman institutionalised it by introducing sectional negotiations in 1965. Board officials dealt with different work groups over sectional matters while the union’s own officers negotiated over general matters. While in some ways more democratic, it effectively split up the membership.110

With the availability of overtime and the Board slowly following the steady upward creep of outside rates, wages were not such an important issue during this period. In any case, with the exception of the favoured WSOs, the Board usually blocked any changes to wages during the currency of the award. The union’s officials accepted Board thinking on what was possible and attempted to close off any discussion within the union as to testing the Board. For most of this period they were successful.111

Instead, questions of the quality of working life took pre-eminence. This reflected broader changes at work in the world. Union meetings provided evidence of the growing self-image of the workers and their unwillingness to suffer gross indignities. There was a growing intolerance of the unnecessary dangers, difficulties and gross discomforts of the industry, particularly in sewerage work. Thus some of the major demands continued to concern protective clothing, amenities and safety on the job. There were also complaints over overseers’ use of offensive language. Finally, the demand for weekly hiring or some other way of overcoming wages lost through wet weather, continually hammered home the insecurity which construction workers faced.112

110 MBWSSEA Minutes, 27 January 1965.
111 ibid., 4 August 1961 (C), 4 May 1962 (C), 30 January 1963.
112 ibid., 27 January 1960, 7 October 1960 (C), 12 March 1964 (C), 27 July 1966.
The main claims for better working conditions concerned the supply of or improvements to change sheds and toilets on sites and in depots. Many jobs never saw sheds, and in other cases supervisors often used them to store tools and materials. 113 Among safety issues, there was continual concern as to unsafe loading and unloading of trucks, particularly when this involved pipes. As well, there was the problem of supervisors having workers transported on the top of loaded lorries. 114 Rank and file members and some of the Committee repeatedly raised the problem of unqualified dogmen and crane chasers. 115 If unsuccessful in negotiating improvements with the Board, Brightman and the Committee continued to look to the Safety Committees or the DLI as the main avenues of improvement. Then there was the pressure for an upgrading of the Board’s first aid training and officers on jobs. Where preventive measures were not enough to reduce discomfort or risk, there was a series of claims for wet, dirt and height money and, ultimately, use of the union’s solicitors for compensation cases. 116

While pressures had been building in a fragmented way in a number of areas, their scope only began to become really apparent in 1966. 117 Brightman began to face mounting problems both from expected and unexpected sources. There were nagging complaints about delays in receiving sick pay and in getting to see the Board’s medical officers, about restrictions on delegates doing union business at work and about the declining construction workforce and therefore membership numbers. 118

A new crop of activists more forcefully articulated both long-term and new demands. Riley was probably the one with the greatest vision on the Committee. He wanted action against contract labour, a campaign to bring in weekly hiring and to change the union’s name, to the Water Board Employees’ Union. From outside the Committee, D. (Donny) Miller wanted postal votes at elections, Peter Browne called for the Gazette to publish

113 ibid., 27 January 1960, 1 April 1960 (C), 5 August 1960 (C), 6 September 1963 (C), 6 May 1966 (C).
114 ibid., 29 July 1964.
117 This is clear from the minutes notwithstanding that many of the key participants saw it starting over a year later. Interview with George Brightman, op. cit.
more information about the union and S. (Sid) Lake wanted action to have unfinancial members pay up.\textsuperscript{119} They joined Melling, Lock and Luke to make things more hectic for Brightman and Rudd. The tenor of workforce dissatisfaction was such that even McMahon and Watson, representing Warragamba, began to repeatedly express demands and criticisms of the lack of head office action and success.

Brightman did not have the same pull within the ALP as his predecessors. With the fall of the Labor dynasty, even this avenue appeared closed. The union continued to appeal to the Board through ALP alderman D. Sutherland but this too had limited possibilities for widespread industrial improvements. For these, Brightman depended on his close working relations with the Board’s Staff and Industrial Branch. Unfortunately for him, the Board’s officers did not fully appreciate how fast and how far the tide was turning. Nor probably did he. Thus although they would meet some of Brightman’s claims, this happened too rarely and, importantly, mostly far too late. A hard worker and efficient administrator, Brightman was no stump orator in the Bodkin mould. Neither was Rudd. They could not rally disgruntled members around with tough talk or jocular anecdotes. Quiet, modest and conservative men, they could only offer a technical negotiating service. The problem was that this service was not matching the rising demands. They appeared increasingly ineffectual.\textsuperscript{120}

b. The Water Board union: 1967-70

By 1967, insistent pressures from within the union’s membership appeared to be gathering a momentum of their own. These pressures were the result of dissatisfactions with factors arising outside the Board’s service and from within. Some of the external factors, such as dissatisfaction with the outcome of Federal arbitration, were common to other areas of the labour movement.


\textsuperscript{120} An example of the the Board taking the union's officials for granted was its repeated refusals of requests to invite the union's Committee to the large official opening celebrations at Warragamba Dam. E.g. \textit{Ibid.}, 2 September 1960 (C).
Initially, these pressures were not apparent at the two General Meetings each year, the January meetings mostly failing to reach the quorum of 30. Nor did the growing opposition from below have a marked effect on the composition of the Committee of Management. Rather, the experience of the previous few years continued: the replacement of older members who retired from the Board and the attempted integration of critics and opponents. The exception was the electoral defeat of Riley in 1967. As runner-up, Riley replaced Lang, absent for six months from the Board. In 1968, Hollingsworth retired and Thompson became the new Treasurer, Muir a Trustee. Gibson also disappeared along with Lang. Riley and Perry were back with John Glebe, N. Martin and J. Campbell the new members.

Campbell was a strong Brightman supporter. Glebe, an assistant water service operator, was perhaps more ambivalent. Sporadically active since 1964, his main areas of concern were the pay differentials within water maintenance and supervisors' handling of their workforce. As well, he complained of surveillance of mobile maintenance employees by the Board's undercover officers. Thus his involvement on the committee was, for a time, very sectional, in much the same way as McMahon and Watson carried the grievances from Warragamba. Glebe was only to develop a broader critique of the union's relationship with the Board and a strategy for changing it as the decade drew to a close.

Major changes loomed as the decade closed. In part, this reflected what was happening among the rank and file in the districts, in part the continuing forced retirement of Committee members due to age. As they had retired, resigned or were about to do so, Rutty, Hayes, Bennett, Luke and Perry did not contest the 1969 elections. McMahon became the new President but died a few months after taking office. The position then went to Thompson. Muir became the new Treasurer and Watson and Riley the Trustees. The result was the arrival onto the Committee of a larger number of militants from the districts: F. (Frank) Brennan, P. (Peter) Brown, R. (Reg) Grief and L. Jamieson were the most notable.

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121 This changed in 1969 when 101 members turned up to a meeting which doubled as a special meeting to discuss the Board's award offer. *ibid.*, 31 January 1968, 29 January 1969. 
123 *ibid.*, 31 July 1968.
124 *ibid.*, 6 September 1968 (C), 11 April 1969 (C).
Another newcomer was J. Collins. The increased pressure on the union’s head office also meant that there were many more Committee meetings and these tended to last much longer.

Brightman continued to ply his trade, moving between union meetings and the Board’s Staff and Industrial Branch where his patient negotiating skills never won enough concessions. As the pressures mounted, he spent an increasing amount of time and energy on damage control — attempting to isolate and then resolve a series of industrial brush fires in the districts. In this he had the support of Rudd, who moved around the districts listening to grievances and then forwarding them to the Committee of Management. Gillan, the Organiser, did very little at all beyond collecting dues, much as he had while still working for the Board as a paycar driver. Nor did the Committee’s appointment of Riley as Acting Organiser change matters much. For a long time he remained confined to the union’s head office.

Overall, even for a conservative group wishing to survive through a turbulent period, these full time officials were inadequate to the task. Unable to formulate any of their own initiatives, diversionary or otherwise, and having let go the allegiance of key groups, they also had none of the aggression or cunning characteristic of the Macpherson and Savage groups when cornered. Not that this would probably have saved them given the effects on the workforce of sustained full employment. In the end, only major and rapid concessions from the Board might have diffused the opposition. Yet the Board only moved when pushed by an increasingly assertive and locally organised workforce.

In contrast with the earlier years of the decade, there was a decline in the fragmentation of demands. Instead, the large number of different groups and categories tended to support a small number of key demands. This cohesion was partly a result of the greater interaction of construction and maintenance groups. More importantly, it reflected the emergence of organised rank and file organisation which quite consciously advanced demands felt to deeply affect the needs of the bulk of the membership.

Dissatisfaction over appointments to ‘A’ Class and promotions became less important as the decade closed. Ventshaftsmen and sewer maintenance workers, in particular,
complained bitterly through their representatives on the Committee of Management. The Board mostly appeared oblivious to their claims although, at times, it seemed to realise that it could not stall indefinitely. The Board also maintained its tradition of ignoring the award and the union over the ‘A’ Class Construction Nucleus.

The real areas of rank and file cohesion concerned the Board’s employment practices. The demands continued to be those of the previous period: particularly amenities at worksites, occupational safety and weekly hiring. One problem was protection from the elements. Workers on construction and maintenance continued to argue for the supply of protective clothing and footwear. The Board’s lack of action on this matter led maintenance workers to place it high on their section of the 1968 log of claims for the new award. Then there were insistent demands for better standard change sheds. Condensation in the unlined change sheds ran down the walls soaking the clothes workers left hanging. Workers wanted their sheds lined.

Improvements to sheds went beyond mere protection from the elements. Construction workers wanted them made more comfortable and convenient for having lunch. One aspect was the supply of flyscreens to keep Sydney’s notorious fly population at bay. Another was the request for a power point, fridge and kettle for each shed. Finally, and more to the Board’s inclination, there was the demand for toilets to replace the buckets and pans issued on jobs. Similarly there were demands for more than rudimentary comfort on transport lorries.

Sydney’s harsh sun was also a problem. Union pressure gained a number of concessions from a more compliant and aware Board. The saga of sunvisors for vehicles continued. It is worth relating briefly as an example of the Board’s thinking. After

126 ibid., 1 September 1967 (C), 31 July 1968.
127 ibid., 3 November 1967 (C), 7 June 1968 (C), 5 July 1968 (C). The Board finally appointed an extra 118 in 1969. All had at least nine years’ service. MWSDB Minutes, 2 July 1969.
128 See special meeting of maintenance workers, MBWSSEA Minutes, 20 February 1968.
129 The Board had a good understanding of the problem, MWSDB Minutes, 12 and 19 November 1969.
131 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 December 1969 (C), 6 March 1970 (C).
132 E.g. umbrellas for drivers of back hoes. ibid., 11 April 1969 (C).
much lobbying, the Board finally agreed to have the visors fitted but then changed its mind. There were differences of opinion among senior Board officers and Board members. Some claimed that the visors detracted from a car's performance. As a result, a Board committee dealing with transport matters ruled out what appears to have been a reasonable and inexpensive request. The only exceptions were to be cars driven by chauffeurs. Clearly, car performance was less of an issue when it concerned the Board's higher echelons.133

Safety questions continued to be important in generating claims and as a cause of action. A constant demand was greater safety in unloading trucks and on cranes and other large plant. There were also complaints of the use of jack picks without water to keep down the dust.134 Moreover, there were complaints that the safety sub-committees were ineffective. The true causes of accidents were often not reported due to fear of disciplinary action against the supervisors concerned.135 Another problem was that engineers and the lower-ranking supervisors saw safety as a managerial prerogative. They resisted interference as Luke discovered when pointing out safety violations at different jobs he worked on. Each time, he suffered transfer to another job.136

Perhaps the most insistent demand arising out of construction was for an end to hourly hiring, an issue which remained unresolved during this period.137 Members wanted full weekly payment which made no concessions for wet weather. Dissatisfaction over the Board's response threatened to overflow. Two hundred members at Granville Depot stopped work in mid-1967 in protest over wage losses due to wet weather and the lack of protective clothing. They called on the union to hold stop work meetings throughout the construction section of the Board's workforce. This dispute provides a litmus test of the changes underway in the union. The officials' traditional conciliation strategy now had to coexist increasingly with direct action from below. One outcome was that Brightman, while trying to halt the progress of this challenge, had to lend it a degree of legitimacy.138 On

134 MBWSSEA Minutes, 1 March 1968 (C).
135 ibid., 31 July 1968.
136 ibid., 1 September 1967 (C), 6 October 1967 (C).
137 ibid., 18 May 1970 (C).
138 A similar pattern emerged with regard to recurrent strikes by members of craft unions. The Board's sacking of six boilermakers due to a lack of work led to a strike by members of that craft
this occasion, he argued that extensive stoppages would unnecessarily antagonise district engineers. In the meantime, he was taking up the issue of lost time with the Board's senior officers. Unable to stop the Granville workers, nor could he avoid further stoppages in other areas where wet weather had caused heavy losses in workers' pay. Instead, he desperately tried to isolate these from other districts less affected through wet weather.139

The greater cohesion of maintenance and construction workers was clear when they put forward remarkably similar demands for the new log of claims in early 1968. For a change, sectional demands almost meaningless to most other groups of workers did not fragment the union's bargaining position. Maintenance workers at their own special meeting only advanced a series of demands for one sectional group, the survey field hands. Perhaps this was because the small number present were the most strategically sophisticated. The rest of the demands were similar to those coming from construction and sought to level up rather than maintain inequalities and differential treatments. The claims represented a push against the Board's traditional divisive workforce strategy and annoyance with Board stubbornness and the weakness of the union's officials over award negotiations. There was the call for automatic 'A' Class appointment after 12 months continuous service, for automatically making awards retrospective to the end of the last award and/or a general $12.00 increase.140

An even smaller meeting of construction workers continued to make demands for improved protective clothing, wet weather pay and weekly hiring. They also called for work as close as possible to employees' homes. The main sectional group to have their claims advanced was the certified dogmen, a group with growing industrial muscle on building sites. Also indicative of the awareness of better conditions available elsewhere, there were demands for improvements in sick pay similar to that operating on the Maritime Services Board, service payments following those in the transport industry and meal allowances equal to those Salaried Officers received.141

union in 1969. Brightman ordered members of the house union not to blackleg. ibid., 6 September 1968 (C).

139 ibid., 1 September 1967 (C).
140 SGM of maintenance men, ibid., 20 February 1968.
141 SGM of construction workers, ibid., 5 March 1968.
For water maintenance, the big question seemed to revolve around the position of WSOs and their relationship to their Assistants. WSOs felt that classification under the Wages Division award placed an artificial ceiling on their wages relative to supervisory groups in the Salaried Division. The Board had already promised to keep them in line with overseers, much to the overseers’ annoyance. Nevertheless, this was not sufficient. As a result, the WSOs sought absorption into the Salaried Officers’ award and reclassification on par with Third Grade Inspectors. The AWSOs, on the other hand, felt left behind in the wake of large wage increases going to the WSOs. As well they felt aggrieved that the Board refused to pay them WSO rates for periods when they relieved WSOs. Brightman continued to maintain that the wage rates for maintenance workers and AWSOs were in no way related to the WSOs’ rate. This was not an argument that was going to bolster his support.

Militants sought to tie workplace organisation to similar tendencies at work within the wider labour movement. One question was the ACTU campaigns over the National Wage Case. The house union, as an ACTU affiliate, had always paid the levies to cover the ACTU’s legal and other costs. What people like Lake and Melling wanted was to link these broader campaigns to rank and file activity. As such they could urge that the union support the ACTU case by holding job meetings which Melling, it seems, did organise. At the same time, they could criticise the ACTU and the Labour Council for not calling a national strike: ‘as recommended by a meeting of job delegates from all industries.’

By 1968, workers on water and sewerage maintenance as well as district construction were increasingly expressing their dissatisfaction. At an individual level this meant ‘sacking the boss’ for better jobs elsewhere. High turnover posed no threat to the union’s ruling group. Collective responses did. Maintenance workers, many of them with long service and therefore too much to lose, were less likely to leave. Their impatience and resentment was growing. They were the key to the long-term stability of the ruling group and to the Board’s

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142 ibid., 8 December 1968 (C).
143 NB Special Meeting of WSOs, ibid., 7 December 1967.
144 ibid., 1 November 1968 (C).
146 ibid., 31 January 1968.
peculiarly quiet industrial relations history. Once a sizeable number coalesced in opposition, the officials were in for a very hard time.

This outbreak of opposition activism was not without aim or direction. There had been upsurges in disaffection before. It had sometimes broken out as rank and file direct action. As well, there had been a long line of electoral challenges. On only one occasion, 1929, had these elements come together to change the formal and informal face of the union. On that occasion, with hundreds of dam navvies and sewer miners pouring into the union, the takeover had been impulsive, rapid and seemingly cathartic. This time it was different. The linking of rank and file disaffection and action was a slow process which only expressed itself in a gradual but continuous changeover at the level of elected officers. It was the result of hard work and solid organising by a number of militants who gradually formed two groups, each behind an aggressive and determined leader, Sid Lake and John Glebe. Of the two, Lake was perhaps the more coherent and militant rank and file organiser, Glebe the more likely union official. Before moving to take it over, each worked hard at changing the union to conform to their wishes and those of the workers they represented.

Glebe, after a brief earlier stint in the meter branch, had rejoined the Board in 1960 and worked on water maintenance. For three years from 1966, he worked at the service centre. This job and time he spent driving for a chief inspector (water maintenance) widened his contacts within and outside his immediate section. Then a young man with a rather brash charm, he had a large, burly frame and a powerful voice. Hailing from inner city Surry Hills, he was a prominent member of the local Labor Party where he came under the influence of party leader, Pat Hills. Hills was of the party’s right wing machine. Over time, and as he was experimenting with and then leading a growing tendency in the union towards direct action, Glebe was to move into a series of alliances with the left. But, his initial strategy, no doubt with Hills’ support, was to try to improve the union’s responsiveness from within the Committee. One element was his suggestions for improving the union’s boring and uninformative journal, still called the Water and Sewerage Gazette. One aspect of this improvement, the publication of the Minutes of General Meetings

147 Interviews with John Glebe, Vaucluse, 1 and 20 August 1985; Ron Marriott, op. cit.
148 MBWSSEA Minutes, 31 July 1968.
allowed the thousands of members who never attended meetings information of the issues raised and, importantly, the names of the people advancing them.\textsuperscript{149}

For all his access to wider union issues, Glebe’s focus remained remarkably narrow: water maintenance and, in particular, the pay grievances of his own category of AWSOs. As a result, he developed a strong following within water maintenance but remained relatively unknown in construction districts.\textsuperscript{150}

Lake’s base was in construction, particularly where he worked in Central District. A small, wiry man whose father had been a rock miner and activist on the SWOOS in the thirties, Lake had spent many years as a rural worker. Already towards the end of a long working life, in many ways he represented that rapidly disappearing figure, the mobile construction navvy. He carried something of their attitudes to politics and authority — a strong commitment to some form of industrial socialism born of radical rank and file activity. Nevertheless, and while Glebe later categorised him as an ‘old Wobbly’, Lake remained an ALP member.

Starting work for the Board in Southern District in 1962, he was shocked at the poor wages and conditions. He began to organise locally in the mid-sixties. His gruff demeanour and lack of conventional social polish hid a keen tactical brain and ability as an organiser. As a result, most of his opponents and allies greatly underestimated him. In particular, a lack of sophistication as a public speaker masked his effectiveness at communicating with rank and file construction workers, whether or not they came from an English-speaking background. He offered solidarity and activism around their grievances and, importantly, honesty. They were inclined to believe him.\textsuperscript{151}

His broad appeal was his vigorous assertion of the dignity of construction workers, irrespective of their background. He demanded that they be treated as human beings. To this end, he fought the endemic racism among many supervisors. With migrants making up the vast majority of labourers doing the worst jobs on construction, he found a ready public

\textsuperscript{149} E.g. WSG, Nos. 1 and 2, January and February 1969 p. 1; Nos. 3 and 4, March and April 1969, pp. 1-2.

\textsuperscript{150} MBWSSEA Minutes, 29 January 1969, 2 May 1969 (C), 10 October 1969 (C), 5 December 1969 (C).

\textsuperscript{151} Interviews with Mick Tubbs, Sydney, 27 January 1989; and with Ron Marriott, Sydney 23 February 1989.
brimming with pent up resentments. He took the question further, complaining of those overseers who exerted arbitrary power over workers' rights, and: 'treated their men like dogs'. In all, his campaign to raise the standing and self-esteem of construction workers struck at the very heart of the Board's traditional authority at the gang level. In line with this campaign over better treatment from supervisors, he was remarkably consistent in the demands he forwarded and raised at the twice yearly General Meetings and delegates' meetings: safety issues especially for trench work; improvements to change sheds including lining the sheds and supplying fly screens; and better toilet facilities.

Local organisation was not merely to provide a powerbase for a tilt at union leadership: Lake believed in rank and file organisation as an end in itself. Initially, he sought official union support for an extension of the principle, but Brightman, continuing in the shoes of Macpherson and Savage, strongly opposed any potentially competing structure to central control.

Lake began holding weekly meetings of dissatisfied groups such as plant operators. As well, he began to seek and receive advice and support from other rank and file militants living in the outer western and southwestern suburbs of Sydney. With the rise of rank and file groups in a number of unions and industries, an unofficial network of activists had grown up in the area. They often met when striking workers would go around major jobs seeking financial and other support. These relationships also developed on a social basis, providing forums for fundraising and the discussion of political and industrial matters. In particular, the cross fertilisation of ideas on strategies and tactics was obvious during union election campaigns.

While most members of this unofficial network were ALP members or supporters, there was a small core who belonged to the CPA. From them, Lake not only received advice and support, but the use of branch facilities for printing leaflets and of portable loudspeakers

152 MBWSSEA Minutes, 31 January 1968.
for getting his message across while driving around gangs in Central and adjacent districts. Through the CPA he also came into contact with Melling, Bob Greentree, and in 1969, R. (Ron) Marriott. While he was open to help from all quarters, it was Lake himself who put in most of the necessary work needed to focus generalised rank and file opposition to the ruling group. He spent evenings travelling the districts to listen to and speak at local meetings and later used his annual holidays and time taken off work to travel the Board’s far-flung works speaking at gangs and depots. Ultimately, Lake fostered the formalising of rank and file organisation into district committees, also known as disputes committees. Local work groups elected members to the committees. At first, they mainly received and channelled grievances to the Board’s local hierarchy or to the union’s head office. Over time, they were to play an increasingly important role as they began to initiate campaigns and mobilise the local workforce around them.

To give space to Glebe and Lake is not to forget the others, many of whom had done solid rank and file organising for more than a decade. The most important in this respect was Melling, who had continually argued on behalf of his fellow workers on sewerage maintenance since the early sixties. He was particularly concerned with safety issues and amenities. Prominent among maintenance workers, R. (Reg) Grief was another important activist. R. (Reg) Turner, the Secretary of the Prospect District Committee, L. Jamieson on the South Coast, D. (Don) Cowan, M. (Mick) Sexton, S. (Stan) Steadman, D. (Donny) Miller, J. (Jim) Gore, M and (Mick) Mulvey were also important.

The major organisational opposition came from the Central, Western and Prospect construction districts. In particular, the use of stopwork meetings became the main form of self-organisation and opposition to the policies of the Board and the officials of the house union. The Board’s field officers did not stand around idly: victimisation was rife. For example, once elected President of the Western District Committee, Gore suffered regression from plumber to labourer for his troubles. For others like P. (Peter) Brown,

156 ibid.; Ron Marriott, op. cit.
157 Interview with Sid Lake, Seven Hills, 22 February 1983.
158 A meeting of maintenance men chose Grief and Miller as their representatives in award negotiations. MBWSSEA Minutes, 20 February 1968.
159 ibid., 7 June 1968 (C); 31 July 1968.
160 ibid., 28 January 1970
activism meant being transferred to a distant job. This level of victimisation continued to discourage construction workers from volunteering to become delegates.

Harry Watson, a maintenance worker at Warragamba, was in another category. Originally supportive of Brightman, he nevertheless remained independent enough to constantly voice the dissatisfaction of Warragamba members, including casual women workers there. This sense of Warragamba being apart even carried to Tom McMahon, who as the union's vice president, also continually brought up complaints. In fact, he had no problem reporting that maintenance workers at the dam held a successful stop work meeting to discuss the log of claims. Riley was another in Watson's category. After spending some time on the union's Committee, he appeared to be a faithful, if critical, Brightman supporter. By 1969 he was an Organiser and, together with Watson and McMahon, he opposed the way district committees were developing their autonomy in calling stoppages. They wanted all such decisions to come through the Committee of Management. Within a few months, Riley and Watson had changed sides.

The turning point came in September 1969. Lake's workplace campaign against the arbitrary authority of supervisors erupted on 28 August 1969 when an overseer and inspector sacked him for refusing to carry out a different task. From Lake's point of view, the problem grew out of the much wider one of unsafe working of contract plant. A spurious assault charge complicated matters. The Central District Disputes Committee called on the Board to reinstate Lake and sack the offending overseer and inspector. A meeting of construction workers in Prospect District pledged their support for Central. On the 3 September, a meeting of hundreds of Central District workers called a two day strike: 'in spite of a direction ... by Mr F. Rudd, an official of the Employees' Association to return to work'. The union's executive then unsuccessfully called on members to stay at work

161 ibid., 1 August 1969 (C).
162 ibid., 6 June 1969 (C), 9 January 1970 (C), 3 April 1970 (C).
163 ibid., 1 March 1968 (C).
164 ibid., 5 April 1968 (C).
165 ibid., 6 June 1969 (C).
166 The estimates ranged from 300 to 900. MWSDB Minutes, 3 September 1969. Interview with Sid Lake, Seven Hills, 22 February 1983.
167 MWSDB Minutes, 3 September 1969.
pending Brightman's attempts to resolve the case through the Crown Employees' Appeal Board.168

Having failed at the first hurdle, the union's officials together with the Board's industrial staff attempted to move the dispute into conciliation procedures under the Industrial Arbitration Act. Both wanted Lake to approach the appeal board against his sacking and also, to get the men back to work. Lake refused. In the meantime, workers at both Central and Prospect District had held further stopwork meetings which presented the Board with demands, a deadline and, if they were not met, the threat of further strikes.

Behind the scenes, the Board's President, Vice President and Staff and Industrial Officer continued negotiating with Brightman in an effort to contain and, if possible, resolve the dispute. As Walder pointed out to his Board: 'it being fair to say that all present were fully aware of the difficulties and dangers inherent in the situation.'169 One problem was that through the efforts of Glebe, the strike threatened to spread to water maintenance.170 The difficulty was how to intercede, given that the strike had broken out and continued against the recommendations of the union's officials. In the face of a situation threatening to get out of control, the Board showed unprecedented flexibility in reopening the dismissal case and offering to re-employ Lake given certain conditions. Central District refused the offer as it entailed Lake apologising to the supervisors concerned. Further, they directed him not to appeal whether through the appeals system or through the conciliation committee. Instead, in the face of Conciliation Commissioner Dunn's calls for a return to work, they called a strike with a mass meeting at Belmore Park in the City for Friday 5 September. After the meeting which Melling chaired, there was a march on the nearby head offices of the Water Board and the Conciliation Commission. This represented a massive change for a workforce which had previously been downtrodden and mostly passive.

168 MBWSSEA Minutes, 2 September 1969 (Exec).
169 MWSDB Minutes, 10 September 1969. The dispute also revealed the inadequacies of the Board's industrial management. Lake had received his marching orders on a Friday morning. The Board's head office knew nothing about it until Brightman approached the Board's President on the following Monday afternoon for a conference on reinstatement. Ibid.
170 MBWSSEA Minutes, 18 September 1969 (SC), 10 October 1969 (C), 7 November 1969 (C), 5 December 1969 (C).
Up to that point, the strike had spread from Central and Prospect Districts, with the transport fleet and others closely involved. On the day some 2,500 workers went out, and other as yet untouched areas began to join in. Such were the Board’s trepidations and the more liberal atmosphere of the time, that Walder thought that it had been a: ‘model demonstration with no clashes of any type’.171

Ultimately, feverish negotiations forged a settlement. Under urging from supporters, Lake agreed to participate, accepting a compromise which allowed his reinstatement in Central District. With the danger past, the Board expressed appreciation for the sophisticated manoeuvring of its Industrial Officer (Reid), and then spent some time ominously discussing: ‘the personalities and past records of the main figures involved’.172

Victory fundamentally changed many perceptions about what was afoot and where it was leading. The Board suddenly realised how far the situation had escaped its control. Under Walder’s prompting, it began to authorise heavy spending for providing or upgrading amenities in the field. For example it ordered the provision of 600 urinals and the lining of sheds. As well, directions went out to senior engineers to systematically review safety, amenities and use of plant. From early 1970, the Board began to quicken the pace and broaden the range of its concessions.173 It also began to redefine its industrial relations processes. This had much to do with the effects of the ‘Lake Strike’ on the pressures from below.

The success of rank and file action spurred its escalation among those sections of the union which had led the strike, and encouraged imitation among less active groups. Among the former, workers in Central, Western and Prospect districts increased the number of stoppages. These developed a pattern of their own whereby a high level of local democracy and the growing militancy reinforced each other. A key element was the process of ‘reporting back’. Stopwork meetings would establish demands which an elected deputation would take to the Board, with the union’s officials in tow. An essential part of the demands was a deadline by which the Board had to provide a satisfactory answer, on pain of further

171 MWSDB Minutes, 10 September 1969.

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The extent to which control of the situation had swung into the hands of the district committees is clear from the way the union and the Board minutes recorded the large number of stopwork meetings. The district committees merely notified union head office that, on a certain day, work was going to stop in a district for two or maybe four hours. Mostly, the Committee blandly sanctioned the action and Brightman passed on the information to the Board which duly noted it. Such was the momentum that the district committees even won official recognition from both the union and the Board.

Macpherson and Savage had always opposed the formation of branches where they felt a challenge might arise. It would have meant handing over autonomy and money to opponents. By late 1969, things had changed. Always more reasonable than his predecessors, Brightman was now also tired, his resistance flagging. He could count on little support to stiffen his resolve. Seeing the end in sight, he had to accept a number of highly symbolic demands or situations. For example, Turner had the union agree to pay the rent of rooms at Penrith for the Prospect Committee.

For its part, the Board was aware that it could no longer count on Brightman and Rudd to stem the tide of direct action. Walder and Reid continued to get support from the Board for their flexibility in an effort to minimise stoppages. They were also increasingly aware that the wage explosion underway outside the Board was about to arrive, with potentially devastating consequences for the Board’s control of its operations. This suggested an alternative strategy. It was not enough to recognise the district committees and accept their stopwork meetings. Walder and Reid decided to actively co-opt them into a process of collective bargaining which could rapidly deliver on a number of key demands and at the same time diffuse the speed of the mobilisation among the rank and file. Reid began to meet large groups of rank and file delegates accompanied, for what seems

175 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 November 1969 (C).
176 ibid.
appearance sake, by the union's officials.\textsuperscript{177} However, it was all too late. The mood of rebellion was rising.

The international strike wave appeared to have reached the Board. As elsewhere, local and wider issues intermingled. In this case, whilst Water Board workers had longstanding grievances over safety, amenities and discipline, strong dissatisfaction with the 1970 National Wage Case caused a further flurry of denunciations, stopwork meetings and general agitation. Agitation in the districts spread from the core western suburbs districts to Northern and Southern, Wollongong and Warragamba. Ultimately, the Committee had to endorse these stoppages and the demands for overaward payments.\textsuperscript{178}

Among groups not directly involved in organising the Lake strike, those in maintenance began to forge their own area-based disputes committees.\textsuperscript{179} In the case of water maintenance, Glebe had clearly learnt a couple of important lessons from the strike. First, the union's officials and the Board had lost their traditional control over the workforce. Second and more importantly, construction workers were quite willing and able to act to force change.\textsuperscript{180} One result was that he more openly fermented opposition within his bastion of water maintenance. Then, he sought out an alliance with the main activists on construction, as well as beginning to openly court other groups. Finally, he came out in open opposition to Brightman. In this, he worked together with Riley. Riley had been a critic but an integral part of the Brightman group. He was now convinced that the old regime had no future and abandoned ship.\textsuperscript{181} Together with Lock and other supporters on the Committee of Management, they began to force the pace against Brightman and his group. Things had changed so much that by March 1970, Riley and Glebe were issuing

\textsuperscript{177}NB Walder spoke of a 'difficult and potentially explosive situation'. MWSDB Minutes, 22 April 1970. Also \textit{ibid.} 6 and 13 May 1970.

\textsuperscript{178}MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 January 1970, 6 March 1970 (C), 26 March 1970 (SC).

\textsuperscript{179}For sewerage maintenance, \textit{ibid.} 26 March 1970 (C), for water maintenance, \textit{ibid.}, 5 May 1970 (C).

\textsuperscript{180}Interview with Bill McKay and Frank Rudd (and John CoUocott), Kensington, 31 May 1985.

threats through the Committee to those, whether wages or salaried employees, members or not, who continued working through stopwork meetings.  

The main leaders of the upsurge began planning how to capture the union from above. Glebe, leader of a ‘Better Deal’ team sought out Lake, who for some time had headed a ‘Rank and File’ group. To avoid splitting the opposition vote, Lake agreed to join forces and a meeting of the two groups at Blacktown Workers’ Club drew up a joint ticket. Glebe was to challenge for President, Lake for Vice President. They found a position for Watson who was also moving to dump the Brightman team and could count on solid support from the large Warragamba maintenance group. Riley, also found a prominent place. Most of the remaining positions fell to Glebe’s supporters on maintenance. It was a coalition of convenience. Glebe and Lake, both proud and, in different ways ambitious men, did not get on personally. Others, such as Riley and Marriott, were also experienced, tactically astute and ambitious. There were also differences of opinion among some ALP members about being involved in a unity ticket with CPA members. However, for the moment, they cast aside their differences to take over the union’s head office. A crucial moment was the January 1970 general meeting, the last such prior to the elections.

Lake had complained about irregularities in the 1969 ballot in which he had failed to win a position. As a result, he set in motion via petition steps to have the Committee removed from office. Together with Glebe, he had the January general meeting pass a rule change making all union officers face elections every three years. It was a major turnaround for a union which for 60 years had had paid officials elected for life.  

The combined opposition also forced through rule changes governing the conduct of elections. Many firmly believed that the ruling group manipulated membership lists and the postal voting procedures. As well the provision that most metropolitan workers had to vote

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182 It was acceptable for those involved in emergency services or other important tasks to donate the equivalent hours' pay to an accredited charity. MBWSSEA Minutes, 26 March 1970 (SC).
183 Interview with John Glebe, Vaucluse, 1 August 1985; Sid Lake, Sydney 25 February 1985 and 27 March 1989. Dick Riley cancelled an arranged interview and declined to organise another one.
185 MBWSSEA Minutes, 28 January 1970, Interview with Sid Lake, Seven Hill, 22 February 1983.
at head office on certain days discouraged a large turnout, generally to the benefit of the ruling group. The rule changes and new ballot regulations were to democratise procedures, minimise irregularities and, in the process, maximise the opposition's potential vote. Glebe and Riley were active in pushing the changes through the Committee and joined Lake, Marriott and Thomas in doing the same at the January meeting.

The most important changes were that all members would receive a postal vote; that information about this and on the ballot papers was to be multilingual; that all candidates were to have free access to the roll of financial members; and that information as to their classifications or areas of work would follow candidates' names on the ballot papers. Finally, they forced through acceptance that the Industrial Registrar conduct the ballot, an unusual ploy from a left wing opposition.

Throughout the campaign, Lake in particular worked unceasingly at job-level organising. Glebe and Riley worked hard too, taking care of printing the campaign literature. The rising tide of job militancy gave a further boost to the campaign as it mobilised large numbers of workers to take action within a strategy largely framed by the electoral opposition. In particular, during 24 hour strikes on May 5 and 12 called over working in the rain, Glebe enhanced his new status as a leader of rank and file militancy throughout the Board. Like Lake, he was sensitive to the need to make contact with migrant members and to provide them with information in their own languages. He was also able to knit together a majority within a disintegrating Committee to formally call the strikes — for the first time in the union's history. This was still illegal according to union rules.

At the same time, Brightman was reduced to following proceedings and acting as an intermediary between a union totally out of his control and the Board. The strikes gained widespread support, with large stopwork meetings at Wentworth Park on each day. Such was the feeling among wages employees that there were insufficient volunteers to maintain

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186 John Glebe interview Vaucluse, 1 August 1985
188 Interview with, John Glebe, Vaucluse, 1 August 1985; Ron Marriott, Sydney 23 February 1989.
189 The second was a 'report back' 24 hour strike. MWSDB Minutes, 6 and 13 May 1970; MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 May 1970 (SC). Shortly before, there had been a failed attempt to have the Industrial Registrar delete Rule 24 (g) which declared strikes 'misconduct'. ibid. 9 January 1970 (C).
essential services during the first strike. The Board’s historic nightmare of the consequences of losing the loyalty of the maintenance workers had finally come true.

The election of 1970 brought to a cathartic climax the pressure which had been mounting from below over the previous few years. The Glebe-Lake coalition won all positions, leaving the Brightman forces vanquished. Yet, only the unpaid positions had been up for election. Brightman, Rudd and Gillan still held their jobs under the old rule giving them lifetime tenure. The question was whether they would or could work with the new group.

Some of the new group had considerable experience on previous Committees of Management. Among them were Glebe, the new President, and some of his supporters. These included the new Treasurer, Jim Lock, Watson, who remained a trustee, Riley and Melling. Others from Glebe’s team, such as Brennan, Brown and Grief, had won election the previous year. Gore, J. De Kroon, Mulvey and W. (Bill) Tumeth were new to the Committee. All of Lake’s supporters had won election for the first time. Lake himself was Vice President and Marrriott was the second trustee. The others were Miller, Adrian Gralton and Donley.

In terms of their job classifications, the areas they worked in and their recent history, the 1970 Committee reflected the forces of opposition gathering over the previous years. Construction was heavily represented with a good spread over the districts. Sewerage maintenance too did better than previously. More particularly, there were fewer drivers, chauffeurs and carpenters than in the past. From construction, Central District had Lake a dump truck driver, Gralton, a truck driver, and boilermaker Marriott. Carpenters Lock and Donley came from Southern District, Gore was a labourer/plumber in Western District and Tumeth was from Northern District. Glebe, an Assistant WSO, led the representation from water maintenance: Watson from Warragamba and Brown from water treatment. From sewerage maintenance, De Kroon worked in Wollongong while Miller, Grief and Melling

190 MWSDB Minutes, 6 and 13 May 1970. Interestingly, however, while Glebe wanted salaried officers to fill in on these essential services, Brightman successfully claimed it was against union policy. MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 March 1970 (C), 1 May 1970 (C).

191 ibid., 29 July 1970.
were from the metropolitan area. Finally, Riley was a meter exchanger at Moore Park Depot and Brennan a wire rope splicer at Waterloo Workshops.

At least four — Watson, Lock, Brown and Mulvey — had worked on Warragamba Dam or Pipeline. Melling had had experience as an organiser in the FIA during its more militant period. Marriott had been active in the Boilermakers' union prior to his years as organiser with the CPA. De Kroon, the Dutch Secretary of the house union's South Coast Branch, had been a delegate in the Miners' Federation. Marriott, Donley and Melling were CPA members.192

The new Committee took its place amid-understandable euphoria and some confusion. Glebe wanted Brightman to stay on, at least for a time, to ease likely problems of administrative transition. Brightman, physically and mentally exhausted and facing the daunting task of working with a largely hostile Committee, declined. He, Rudd and Gillan resigned immediately the results were tabled.193 Glebe who had sought to move from an honorary to a paid position, wanted to be Secretary. Lake's team rebuffed him and Glebe subsequently refused Melling. As a result, members at the AGM voted in De Kroon, a compromise candidate.194 Riley took Rudd's position as Assistant Secretary. This situation lasted a matter of minutes.

At the time, truck drivers in Prospect District were involved in a protracted and bitter dispute over an overseer's autocratic and abusive behaviour. They had self-managed their rolling strikes and meetings over the previous two months with a notable level of spirit, participation and internal cohesion. They now called for help from the new Committee. De Kroon proposed they return to work and the Committee institute a work-to-rule for the whole district until the drivers' claims were met. The proposal lost.195 Feeling he lacked sufficient support, De Kroon immediately resigned. Riley defeated Grief in a vote for his

192 Interviews with, John Glebe, Vaucluse, 1 August 1985; Ron Marriott, Sydney, 23 February 1989.
194 Interviews with Ron Marriott, Sydney, 23 February 1989; Sid Lake, Seven Hills, 22 February 1983.
195 MBWSSEA Minutes, 5 June 1970 (C), 29 July 1970. A successful amendment from Marriott and Lake supported the drivers, suggested they return to work but if there was no improvement, there was to be wider strike action.
job and Melling became Assistant Secretary, beating a large field. Gore was the Organiser, Lake and Marriott filling in as Acting Organisers pending those positions becoming formally established.196 Over the following months, there continued to be a large amount of personal conflict within the Committee and between Marriott as Organiser and key activists in Prospect District. As a result, within six months, an ailing Riley, unable to withstand the mounting pressure, had swapped positions with Melling.197 The more retiring Melling, with the position somewhat thrust upon him, lasted no longer, succumbing to Glebe at the 1971 election. Whatever the internal wrangling, rank and file activity had contributed largely to the ending of the Macpherson-Savage-Brightman dynasty after 62 years. A new era had begun.

Conclusion

During the sixties, the conditions which had for so long operated to keep the Water Board's workforce divided between construction and maintenance were no longer operative. Sustained full employment was the rule and the Board embarked on a high level of construction activity. Moreover, as this largely occurred within the metropolitan area and the Board's own organisational policy was to decentralise operations to district level, large numbers of maintenance and construction workers came into more constant contact for the first time.

Developments in society and the wider labour market were having an increasingly important impact. Until about 1966, the large number of different groups remained individually dislocated. As a result, they expressed their dissatisfactions through a bewildering array of fragmented sectional grievances and claims. This allowed the union's officials to play their traditionally conservative mediating role. Nevertheless, unwilling to confront the Board's criteria of what issues were negotiable and when, they were largely unsuccessful. Awareness of large gains being won outside the Board, helped transform impatience into resentment and anger. Once organised, these attitudes allowed for a retreat

197 MBWSSEA Minutes, 7 December 1970 (C), 27 January 1971, Interviews with John Glebe, Vaucluse, 1 August 1985
from sectional fragmentation towards general claims which could unite and mobilise disparate work groups.

As the pace of change gathered outside, comparisons with conditions within the Board became more invidious. For many, and particularly the Australian born, it was no longer good enough just to have any job. Doing hard, dirty work for low wages was no longer the only option. For those on maintenance, the better pay and the security which full employment provided in outside jobs began to make a mockery of their previously prized positions. While awareness of these changes was dawning among the workforce, the officials of the union continued to illude themselves that all was well and that Water Board awards really did guarantee superior conditions. Nevertheless, when pushed from below, they were largely ineffectual on a number of key, deeply-felt demands which touched the core of the way Water Board workers were beginning to redefine their place in the world.

These workers were less willing to accept brutal or autocratic supervision, lack of amenities, dangerous work practices or losing pay for wet weather. The migrant majority among the workforce and membership, in particular, quietly suffered constant indignities due to the more limited job choices available to them. Yet, their quietness did not mean acceptance and, as events proved, they were ready to support someone willing to fight for their essential human dignity as workers.

Given these conditions, the Board’s resistance to long-overdue and inevitable change cut both ways. On the one hand, it stimulated growing resentment among Board employees in all areas. On the other, the state of the labour market meant that the majority of its wages employees voted with their feet. For the traditional focus of militancy, construction, turnover undoubtedly reduced the intensity of any challenge. Continued communication difficulties among a largely non-English speaking workforce did not make rank and file organisation any easier. It was only towards the end of the decade that militant construction workers began to build a concerted organisational challenge which sought to address both these problems. In this, Sid Lake with his strong grasp of and sympathy for the problems of migrants working on construction, played a decisive role. It was largely Lake who promoted the development of district organisation and its promotion of the popular campaigns over working conditions. In turn, it was this district organisation which
mobilised previously passive workers and provided a structure within which to develop skills and contacts. The result was the rapid escalation of strikes characterised by democratic, participatory features such as the report back meetings. It was these structures and this activity which laid the basis for the final electoral victory.

Turnover was much lower in maintenance where ‘A’ Class employees still enjoyed a number of employment conditions not readily available elsewhere. These began to appear less favourable as union militancy ‘outside’ won overaward wages and conditions in excess of what the Board was prepared to offer. Still, the union officials remained unwilling to more directly confront the Board’s tightfistedness in support of insistent rank and file demands. As a result, impatience and finally resistance grew among previously quiet or even loyal sections of maintenance. Thus, significantly, John Glebe could build a nucleus of support and then electoral opposition among water maintenance, the most conservative section of the wages division over the previous decades and the source of much of the ruling group’s support. With Des Melling mobilising activity among the long disgruntled sewerage maintenance workers, it would have taken remarkable activity from the union’s officials together with the Board to have headed off the challenge.

By the time the Board had realised the danger, Brightman’s group had become powerless before events and the growing self-confidence and audacity of the district committees. For the Board, limited damage control was all that was possible. Even this did not slow the push of a union rank and file which had finally perceived itself as such after decades of division and which had thrown up its own coherent platform and set of coordinated militants. The result was that in their mobilisation from 1967, construction and maintenance workers together decisively changed the nature of their union and industrial relations on the Water Board. A new era was beginning and things were unlikely to ever be the same again.

Epilogue

Spending on the Board’s district reticulation programmes grew enormously under Whitlam’s Federal ALP Government. This provided a helpful environment for those who now sought to use direct action to pressure concessions from the Board. At the time of the
takeover, the wages and conditions of Board workers lagged behind the rest of the public service.198

Glebe imparted an aggressive and confident public persona to match the activity continuing among the rank and file. Despite continuing and bitter rivalry among the officials, they proved highly responsive to both sectional and general demands. Within a short time, a further series of strikes had won for the Board's workers superior wages and conditions than those operating elsewhere in the public sector. Confronted with threats of strikes, the Board time and again conceded demands it had long denied the overly patient Brightman. Clearly there was a great deal more to negotiation than the Macpherson dynasty had ever acknowledged. Continuing internal strife, Glebe's growing personal ambitions and a disastrous five week strike in 1975 contributed to him losing his position to Lake.

198 Information from Bill McKay, formerly Staff and Industrial Officer.