Exploring Peak Union Purpose and Power: The Origins, Hegemony and Decline of the Barrier Industrial Council

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This paper examines the rise, hegemony and fall of the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC) in the mining town of Broken Hill. Arguably, Broken Hill has been one of the few locations in Australia where the working class has established something like a hegemony. The BIC was the institutional force behind, and expression of, this control. The outlines of the BIC’s role in Broken Hill are well known to many. This peak union body not only presided over a local system of collective bargaining largely outside the processes of compulsory conciliation and arbitration but, for many years, exercised a formidable control of local exchange and consumption as well as social relations more broadly.

The peculiarities of the BIC’s past should not, however, be overstated. Rather, this paper attempts to situate an understanding of the BIC in terms of the wider literature on union peak bodies. We argue that most insights offered by labour historians and industrial relations scholars are of limited help in understanding not only the BIC but other such bodies. A study of the BIC only makes clearer than most the importance of understanding all aspects of the productive and social relations in which such bodies are embedded.

Drawing upon the work of human geographers and political economy as well as some recent work on Australian peak bodies, the paper sets out an explanation for the trajectory of the BIC and posits a framework for the analysis of other peak bodies. We examine the BIC as agency of class mobilization and industrial and social mediation. In so doing, we argue that union power and purpose are not given but are historically specific and are driven by tensions between contradictory pressures towards inclusiveness and solidarity on the one hand and exclusion and parochialism on the other. These tensions are writ large in the case of the BIC but argue that they are applicable to all union peak bodies.