The 1997–98 Maritime dispute may well have been the apotheosis of the neo-liberal project in Australian industrial relations. What began as an apparent assault on the employment conditions of maritime workers was quickly shown to be part of a larger strategy which involved an attack on the Institutional of organised labour, including the unions and the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, and the very idea of a social market with systematic government intervention. In attempting to rupture the often uneasy relationship between labour and the state, the objective was to weaken simultaneously both the remnants of an organised working class and the agencies of the state which helped sustain it. In the process a new set of relationships would be established in which neo-liberal principles would deliver infinitely flexible and disposable labour to a market society with minimalist government.

This paper charts some theoretical and public policy mile posts on the road to Webb Dock, from the early resistance to the post-war Keynesian-social democratic settlement in works like Hayek’s Road to Serfdom, through the economic counter-revolution of the 1970s to the Workplace Relations Act of 1996 and the subsequent ambush of organised labour on the Australian waterfront in 1997-98. The paper argues that this process involved much more than an attempt to displace the Maritime Union of Australia from the waterfront. Ultimately it was an attempt to displace the tattered doctrine of government by the people with rule by the market. It suggests, moreover, that the ambitions which drove that strategy have not been deterred by the popular resistance encountered on the docks in 1998.