The invisible giant: a history of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia, 1915-1985

Christopher Sheil
University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

CHRISTOPHER SHEIL B.A. (HONS.)

HISTORY
1988
CERTIFICATE

I certify that this thesis has not been presented for a Higher Degree at any other university.

Christopher Sheil
ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an account of the history of the growth and character of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia from 1915 to 1985. With an emphasis on its New South Wales Branch and the years up until 1955, the argument is pursued in examinations of the union's origins and its periods of major change and development.

It is argued that the union was originally created by craft unionists out of the arbitration laws enacted in Australia during the first two decades of the century. The union's general composition initially derived from the fact that its early members lacked the fundamental sectionalism assumed by craft unionism and those laws.

The major changes to the union over its first 30 years occurred during the period of working class radicalism between 1917 and 1927 and in the aftermath of the Great Depression from 1934 until the Second World War. As a consequence of this history, by 1945 the union reached a point of profound internal contradiction. It had a government that had become philosophically and structurally integrated with arbitration and a membership where sections which had come under militant rank-and-file leadership had developed to the extent that they were capable of taking their own direct action.

Arising from this contradiction, between 1945 and 1955 the union underwent a major period of internal conflict and re-definition that ushered in a new and more radical leadership and generally accounts for the union's subsequent growth and character. Between 1955 and 1970 the organisation developed into one of the largest, more progressive and most effective unions in Australia.

Against the orthodoxy that has defined trade unions primarily as autonomous instruments of sectional economic interests, it is argued throughout that the union's growth and character were determined by a much greater complexity of social relations.

While recognising the special significance of this institution's relationship with the state and the labour movement at large, central to the thesis is the proposition that at least as important to the union's history as its immediate relationships were the wider social relations which these presupposed. Trade unions are evidence as well as agents of change in society and, it is argued, any understanding of their history depends on the extent to which both these aspects of their past and the relationship between them are able to be realised.
"The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence and now seem to live in it in chains, are in truth the causes of its life and the sources of all activity, but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy according to the proverb the weak in courage is strong in cunning. Thus one portion of being is the Prolific, the other the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains; but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole ...

But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights.

Some will say: 'Is not God alone the Prolific?' I answer: 'God only Acts & Is in existing beings or Men'.

These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies: whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence."

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1789-90
CONTENTS

Preface 1

I INTRODUCTION: THE PECULIARITIES OF THE FMWU 7

Part One - The Origin of the Union and the First Thirty Years

II BETWEEN CRAFTSMEN AND THE STATE: THE ORIGIN OF THE UNION 30
III WARRING CAMPS: THE IMPACT OF POST-WAR RADICALISM 105
IV WAIFS AND STRAYS? THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND ITS AFTERMATH 166

Part Two - The Revolution of 1945-1955 and the Second Thirty Years

V PROTEST TAKES OVER: THE MEMBERS 245
VI PROTEST TAKES OVER: THE GOVERNMENT 316
VII CONCLUSION: ORGANISATION UNLIMITED 387

VIII EPILOGUE 439

Select Bibliography 493
Appendix I Membership Statistics 508
Appendix II Amalgamations 510
Appendix III Executive Officials 512
Appendix IV Evolution of the Federal Constitution 523
ABBREVIATIONS

ABL  Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University
ACT  Australian Capital Territory
ACTU  Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALF  Australasian Labour Federation
ALP  Australian Labor Party
ANU  Australian National University, Canberra
ANZAC  Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWU  Australian Workers' Union
BL  Battye Library, Perth
CIR  Commonwealth Industrial Registry, Melbourne
CPA  Communist Party of Australia
DLP  Democratic Labor Party
FCM  Federal Council Minutes
FMUW  Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union of Australia
IWW  Industrial Workers of the World
ML  Mitchell Library, Sydney
NAWU  North Australian Workers' Union
NCC  National Civic Council
NSW  New South Wales
NSWBM  New South Wales Branch Minutes
NSWIR  New South Wales Industrial Registry, Sydney
NSWSA  New South Wales State Archives, Sydney
OBU  One Big Union
QIR  Queensland Industrial Registry, Brisbane
QLD  Queensland
QLD BM  Queensland Branch Minutes
RSL  Returned Solders' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia
SA  South Australia
SU  Sydney University
UNSWA  University of New South Wales Archives, Kensington
VBM  Victorian Branch Minutes
WA  Western Australia