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

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Maintaining Control

A History of Unionism Among Employees of the Sydney Water Board

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

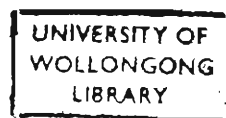
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Peter Sheldon B.Ec. (Hons.)

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY



July 1989

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

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Peter Sheldon

Abstract

This thesis analyses the history of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Union (Wages Division) between its birth in 1909 and 1970. The context is the particular development of a water supply and sewerage industry for Sydney and the patterns of unionisation of construction labourers.

Until 1928, the Public Works Department had responsibility for the major construction works, the Water Board for maintenance. This thesis argues that the nature of the industry's financing and technical operation encouraged the development of a dual labour force and dual union culture. Construction labourers were casuals while those doing the Board's maintenance received permanent jobs. As a result, the former developed an outward-looking industrial culture and formal organisations with traditions of militancy. The opposite was true for the latter, which only survived due to preferential treatment from the employer and the arbitration system. Hence, it was to these institutions that the officials of the house union looked.

The Board aided and used its willing house union's position within the arbitration system to keep less cooperative organisations outside. The union's officials used the Board's concessions to hold the allegiance of the key maintenance groups. In this way, they kept control of the union while maintaining industrial peace. Where the Board failed to compromise, union officials attempted to apply pressure through the the Labor Party.

When, in 1928, the Board took over sole construction responsibility, it imported the traditions of the construction workers into its workforce and into its house union. Nevertheless, the group from maintenance who ran the union maintained control until 1970, despite the numerical superiority and hostility of the construction workers. In the same way, in harmony with the Board, they maintained industrial peace.

Construction workers faced intermittent unemployment which reinforced their casual status, made them industrially vulnerable and hindered attempts to build up any competing organisation. They also tended to live and work in isolated areas. If these two factors did not operate for any length of time, the ruling group faced great dangers to its control of the union. In the same way, the union's comfortable relationship with the Board came under stress. To buttress their dominance, the officials structured the union, its meetings and electoral processes to effectively disenfranchise and marginalise the mass of those on construction. The overall result was a system for maintaining control which used institutions of the state for industrially domesticating a potentially rebellious workforce. As such this is an important case study of the tradition of labourism which has dominated the Australian labour movement.

Acknowledgements

Work on this thesis began, in mid-1982, as the result of a scholarship from the University of Wollongong. Two unions, now known as the Water and Sewerage Employees' Union and the NSW Branch of the Municipal Officers' Association provided the funding. Officials of both unions were very helpful with access to their organisations' records and office resources. Some took a lively interest in the project, even coming to postgraduate seminars I gave at the University of Wollongong. In particular, Joe Fisher, John Tierney, Jack Beecher, Ron Herbert, Warwick McDonald, Ken McDonnell, Bruce Grimshaw and Alf Hamblyn deserve mention. Special thanks to Alf for introducing me to the Upper Cordeaux and to the old Board workers who live there. Thanks also to the unions' office staffs for their assistance.

A special vote of thanks goes to the helpful staffs of the: Mitchell Library, Sydney, in particular to Pat Jackson and Jim Andrighetti; the PWD Library, Sydney; the State Archives of NSW, Sydney; the Water Board's Archives, in particular to Noel Thorpe, Ron Peck and Ron Durnford; the Fisher Library, University of Sydney; the Michael Birt Library, University of Wollongong, in particular, to John Shipp. I would also like to thank the many Head Office employees of the Board who helped me trace material.

I gratefully acknowledge the use of the resources of: the Water Board; the PWD; the Department of Economics, University of Sydney; and, in particular, the Department of History and Politics, the University of Wollongong. Special thanks go to Joan Hutchinson, from the above department for typing tables and corrections and to Gill Churchill and Marion Allen, from the Faculty of Arts office, University of Wollongong for similar work.

My research led me to interview a number of former Board and PWD employees and union officials. I found them all helpful and enthusiastic. I visited many of them at their homes where I received great hospitality from them and their families. Sadly, some have since died.

Leanne Mumford, Jan Robinson, Stephen Sheldon, Lisa Ward, Ruth Walsh and David Vaile helped enormously by reading draft chapters. Extraordinarily special thanks go to

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Writing a thesis can be an isolating and lonely experience. I have been lucky to receive the practical and moral support from a lot of wonderful people. If I list only some here, I hope the others will put their absence down to thesis-induced dementia rather than any lack of recognition. My parents, Walter and Edith and my brother Stephen did all they could to help through the rough and smooth. So did Alan Bensoussan, Sarah Esplay, Leanne Mumford, Lisa Ward, Alison Leitch, Marianne Leitch, Diane Fitton, Sue Hilder, Rosalyn James, Gillian Rawlings, Ruth Moore, Ruth Walsh, Peter Phibbs, Belinda Elliott, Gerardo di Liseo, David Vaile, Ann Mossop, Cesidio Parissi and the other Jurans, Trevor Craft, Steve Ellean, Eddie Fischer, Stuart Rosewarne, Greg Patmore, Malcolm Rimmer, Terry Flew, Frank Stilwell, Joseph Halevi, Phil Moseley and my friends at FILEF. Thanks to all of you.

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my beloved grandmother, Ida Drucker, who always did more than the possible to help and encourage me but sadly did not live to see the final product.

Abbreviations and citations

The full titles of the abbreviations listed below refer to their most common name during the period covered by this thesis. Many have changed name over the years. For example, the MWSDB began with a slightly different title and has a yet another one now. The PWD, CPA, TLC have similar stories. I have use just the one title for simplicity.

I have followed the same practice with measurements. During the period covered, the Board still used imperial measures. As a result, they remain. I have only used decimal currency measures for the period after its introduction in 1966. Finally a number of journals and government publications used have changed between roman and arabic lettering for their volume numbers. For simplicity, I have standardised them in the arabic.

ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
ALP	Australian Labor Party
Archs	Archives
ARTSA	Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Association
ARU	Australian Railways Union
AW	Australian Worker
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
BLU/F	Builders' Labourers' Union/Federation
BWIU	Building Workers' Industrial Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
DT	Daily Telegraphy, Sydney
FEDFA	Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LD	Labor Daily
LN	Labor News
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
MWSDB	Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board

MBWSSEA	Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association
Minutes (C)	Committee Minutes
NSW	New South Wales
NSWGG	NSW Government Gazette
NSWIG	NSW Industrial Gazette
NSWIR	NSW Industrial (Arbitration) Reports
NSWPD	NSW Parliamentary Debates
NSWPP	NSW Parliamentary Papers
NSWLAVP	NSW Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings
NSWLCVP	NSW Legislative Council Votes and Proceedings
OBU	One Big Union
PCB	Press Cuttings Book
PWD	Public Works Department, NSW
RWGLA	Railway Workers and General Labourers' Association
RWIB	Railway Workers' Industry Branch (AWU)
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
TLC	(Trades and) Labour Council of NSW
ULPS	United Laborers' Protective Society
WSEU	Water and Sewerage Employees' Union
WSG	Water and Sewerage Gazette
WW	Workers' Weekly

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Introduction

Society is always seen as something being produced, coming into being and passing away. Even its stability is understood not as the stability of an object like a stone, but as a process of constant reproduction. ... [C]lass analysis is very much concerned with the intractability of situations, and no realistic analysis of power could be otherwise.

R.W. Connell and T. H. Irving¹

In international terms, Australia has experienced a relatively quiet labour history. There have been periods of general working class mobilisation, moments of high drama and deep tragedy, struggles which endured despite unfavourable circumstances. Nevertheless, compared to the USA, to the UK, to much of continental Europe and to Argentina, class relations in Australia have displayed a less overt tension, which has been less intense and has resulted in fewer brutal clashes.² Much of this can be explained by the interaction of the particular political and economic systems within which each labour movement developed and the differing ideologies most influential among workers at the time. In particular, this conditioned working class attitudes to the state and the state's role within industrial relations.

The modern labour movement developed internationally as a formal expression of resistance to the effects of industrialisation and capitalist accumulation on both peasant society and the existing forms of craft production. At each turn, the language and shape of the protest was a product of the particular groups involved, their location and traditions and the ideas which held sway. The most important of these political traditions were variants of anarchism, social democracy, social catholicism, labourism and populism. At any one time, proponents of two or more ideologies competed fiercely for the heart of the local labour movement. The outcome helped determine whether those rebelling against the spread of

¹ *Class Structure in Australian Society*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980, p. 1.

² For Denoon this is perhaps the most salient starting point Australia can offer to comparative historiography. D. Denoon, 'Historical Reconsiderations V: The Isolation of Australian History', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 87, October 1986, p. 254.

capitalism sought a return to a rapidly disappearing past, to find a more favourable accomodation with the new state of things, or to reach for a new and qualitatively different order.

The genesis of Australia's dominant labourist tradition lies in the period between 1850 and 1910. It was during these six decades that the major trends in union organisation developed and the relationships between the industrial movement and parliamentary politics took shape. These elements subsequently conditioned the direction of state intervention in industrial relations, especially for compulsory arbitration.

In most industrialising societies, one main avenue of primary capital accumulation came from extra surpluses forced out of agriculture. Subsequent accumulation came through a massive squeeze on consumption — a regime of enforced low wages. The Australian experience was decidedly different. Capitalism came to Australia in the wake of British invasion. Primary capitalist accumulation was the work of a ruthless circle of colonial officers *cum* merchant s some of whom directed their gains to establishing themselves as large-scale pastoralists. Although there was no pre-existing peasantry, further capital accumulation gathered strength as these pastoralists dispossessed both the indigenous peoples and the new class of small settlers.³

By 1850, the Australian colonies had developed rapidly within the British empire's international division of labour. Britain exported capital and labour to Australia. These, in turn, were fundamental to the development of the colonies' crucial export industries supplying raw materials to British markets. For NSW between 1860 and 1890, the necessary funds for large-scale investment for economic development — export receipts, revenues from the sale of crown lands and large overseas public and private borrowings — were dependent on its particular relationship with the British economy. This reduced the need to force down consumption. Together with the effects of distance on labour supply, they allowed the development of a relatively high wage, short-hour workforce. Outside periodic crises, this was even true for groups of the unskilled and itinerant.⁴

³ K. Buckley, 'Primary Accumulation: The Genesis of Australian Capitalism', in E.L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, Vol. 1, Australia and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1975.

⁴ D. Clark, 'Australia: Victim or Partner of British Imperialism?', in Wheelwright and Buckley, (eds), *Political Economy*. This is not to argue that Australia was a workers' paradise. Recent

During these key decades before 1890, Australia had little history of a dispossessed local peasantry nor of concerted wage reductions to amass savings. Further, specialisation in primary production at the expense of manufacturing meant that artisans working in small-scale import-replacement manufacturing and on city building faced little of the reorganisation and intensification of work which had been the lot of their fellows in rapidly industrialising economies elsewhere. As a result, they were able to maintain control of their skills and the relative 'privileges' these allowed. These crucial factors in the development of the Australian political economies brought the Australian working class into existence gradually, rather than through a more typically wrenching process of social transformation. Dependence on immigration to boost the workforce also lengthened the process. This had profound implications for the development of the Australian working class, its consciousness and its organisations.⁵ These in turn influenced working class attitudes to the state and the state's role in class relations.

Divisions over skill were fundamental to the pattern of union organisation in Australia. Most of the colonial unions established by the early 1860s were craft unions, in the narrow sense. Those which were not tended to adopt the exclusivist British craft model. Two important local unions were even branches of British organisations. Many early activists had had union or radical experience in Britain. They transplanted a sense of craft superiority and lib-lab ideology expressed through aspirations for self-improvement and individual and collective advancement. At the heart of this optimism was a positive judgement of the colonies' democratic and egalitarian institutions and mores, and the

historical work has clearly shown otherwise. But, for all the poverty and squalor of working class existence, economic and political conditions were mostly better than elsewhere. This seems obvious from net migration figures which remained positive outside years of depression and war. Cf. S. Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-90*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987; J. Lee and C. Fahey, 'A Boom for Whom? Some Developments in the Australian Labour Market, 1870-1891', *Labour History*, No. 50, May 1986; K. Buckley and T. Wheelwright, *No Paradise For Workers: Capitalism and the Common People in Australia 1788-1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988. For immigration figures, R.V. Jackson, *The Population History of Australia*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Fitzroy, 1988, pp. 27-9.

⁵ B. McFarlane, 'Australia's Role in World Capitalism', in J. Playford and D. Kirsner (eds), *Australian Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Critique*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1972, p. 32; S.F. Macintyre, 'Labour, Capital and Arbitration, 1890-1920', in B.H. Head (ed), *State and Economy in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, p. 99.

potential for extending them.⁶ Coal miners also demonstrated a sense of superiority deriving from their skill, engaged in sectional unionism but did not share some of the traditional craft workers' identification with 'fair' employers.⁷

Outside the craft borders were the masses of often itinerant semi- and unskilled labour. Most worked in the pastoral, transport and construction industries. Without a ready tradition of formal organisation to draw on and with a much inferior labour market position, they relied on individual resistance, spontaneous combination and temporary organisations against employers.⁸ It took time to learn the habits of stable organising, to gain the experience and knowledge necessary to keep an organisation going in the face of employers' attacks. From the 1870s, this experience appears to have aided in their establishment of a number of large unions, the so-called 'new unions'.⁹ Less enamoured of their place under the colonial sun and with fewer illusions as to self-improvement or social mobility within their own industries, they looked to two main avenues for escape or improvement. The first, informed by populism, hoped for independence and social betterment through access to farming land. The second, the product of growing crises in key sectors and rising class consciousness, was a broader and more militant attitude to industrial organisation. This latter trend differentiated the 'new' from established craft unions in rhetoric and union

⁶ H. Hughes, 'The Eight Hour Day and the Development of the Labour Movement in Victoria in the Eighteen-fifties', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 36, May 1961; J. Niland, 'The Birth of the Movement for an Eight Hour Working Day in New South Wales', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol 14, No. 1, April 1968; R. Markey, 'The Aristocracy of Labour and Productive Reorganisation in NSW, c. 1880-1900', *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1, March 1988; K.D. Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852-1920*, Department of Economic History, RSSH, Australian National University, Canberra, 1970; J. Hagan, *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1850-1950*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, esp. chs. 3 and 4; M. Rimmer and P. Sheldon, "'Union Control" against Management Power: Labourers' Unions in New South Wales before the Maritime Strike', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 92, April 1989, pp. 282-3.

⁷ E. McEwen, 'Coalminers in Newcastle, New South Wales: a Labour Aristocracy?', in E. Fry (ed), *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History*, Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1986; Niland, op. cit., p. 78.

⁸ J. Merritt, *The Making of the AWU*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 80-2, 86-7; R. Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880-1900*, New South Wales University Press, 1988, p. 138; G.E. Patmore, 'A History of Industrial Relations in the N.S.W. Government Railways: 1855-1929', unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Sydney, 1985, p. 20; P. Sheldon, 'Job Control for Workers' Health: The 1908 Sydney Rockchoppers' Strike', *Labour History*, No. 55, November 1988, pp. 44-5.

⁹ R. Markey, 'New Unionism in Australia, 1880-1900', *Labour History*, No. 48, May 1985, pp. 19-20.

coverage but, in reality, differences were more of degree than kind.¹⁰ It helps explain why some of the apparently militant new unions became enduringly conservative. A key element of this conservatism has been their deep and exclusive involvement in state compulsory arbitration and the Labor Party.

Compulsory arbitration was one important example of the historical tradition of state intervention in the Australian economy. Another was the fostering of economic development through the state's provision of infrastructure. Important activities such as the railways and water supply and sewerage have been state owned and managed. Under the federal division of powers, these matters have largely remained state rather than Commonwealth responsibilities.

Extensive state intervention was another factor contributing to the labour movement's conservatism. On the one hand, state ownership itself was a key demand. It also raised hopes that, with Labor Party electoral successes, the trend might widen. A Labor government could also regulate existing state enterprises and activities to benefit its union supporters. The same was true for reforms to the arbitration framework. As a result, a number of public sector unions developed a close and exclusive involvement in the party and arbitration. In return for strong financial and organisational support, Labor governments provided a sympathetic administration. Perhaps no NSW union was more tied to these practices during the first half of this century than the Water Board's house union, the subject of this thesis.

This thesis breaks new ground in the sense that it is a history of what was essentially a union of construction labourers, a neglected group within Australian labour historiography. At the 1891 Census, construction and general labourers made up some 14 per cent of the NSW workforce, the third largest occupational-industrial category.¹¹ Construction lost its relative position over the following decades, but the national percentages for 1910-1 and 1920-1 were approximately 10 per cent. In 1949-50, it had climbed to 11.5 per cent of a

¹⁰ Craft unions were not anywhere as 'selfish' as often claimed; they shared unilateral regulation methods with some of the new unions and were often no less militant. Differences of degree and emphasis were mostly due to relative control of the relevant labour market. Niland, *op. cit.*, p. 85, Markey, 'New Unionism', pp. 21-33; Rimmer and Sheldon, *op. cit.*.

¹¹ Cited in N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861-1900 (IAED)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964, p. 196, (Table 42).

much enlarged workforce.¹² Clearly this is not just a question of filling in gaps but of advancing a still embryonic union historiography into key areas. It also adds to a still scanty literature on blue collar public sector unionism.¹³ Apart from Patmore's study of railway industrial relations and Walters' of the postal workers' union, the main and growing areas have concerned white collar workers.

More importantly though, it provides a different perspective on the peculiarities of Australian labour history. This is the story of the Sydney Water Board's house union, one of the most conservative blue collar unions from its birth in 1909 until its militant transformation in 1969-70. The theme is the maintenance of this stability over time through its position within the public sector and involvement with arbitration and the Labor Party. As such it is also a pioneering case study of labourism, long the dominant tendency within the Australian labour movement.¹⁴

With the exception of Hagan's work on printers and O'Brien's on teachers, traditional Australian union historiography has rarely concerned itself with the question of unions as agencies of labour control.¹⁵ In both these cases, well-placed minority groups dominated their respective unions as a means of retaining sectional privileges. Nevertheless, both unions responded to influences outside their industry and, in particular, to changing currents within the labour movement. This at times stimulated conflicting strategies to the traditional quietism. On the other hand, the Water Board union's strategy was derived from the employer's strategy for minimising problems arising from the structure of its industry. The policies of the union's officials merely entrenched the existing divisions.

¹² M Keating, *The Australian Workforce 1910-11 to 1960-61*, Department of Economic History, RSSH, Australian National University, Canberra, 1973, pp. 352-3.

¹³ Patmore, *op. cit.*; F. Walters (D. Murphy ed), *Postal Workers and Politics: A History of the Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union of Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1978. Cf. B. Mitchell, *Teachers, Education and Politics: A History of Organisations of Public School Teachers in New South Wales*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1975; J. O'Brien, *A Divided Unity: The Politics of NSW Teacher Militancy since 1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987; M.E. Gardner, 'Women Workers, Trade Union Government and Strategies: The New South Wales Nurses' Association and Teachers' Federation', unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1983; J.S. Baker, *Communicators and Their First Trade Unions: A History of the Telegraphist and Postal Clerk Unions of Australia*, Union of Postal Clerks and Telegraphists, Sydney, 1980.

¹⁴ J. Hagan, *The History of the A.C.T.U.*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981, ch.1.

¹⁵ Hagan, *Printers*; O'Brien, *Divided*.

Wanna has contributed another important case study of control and quietism, this time for the South Australian union movement.¹⁶ This has the advantage of working on a larger canvas and relating it to the particular pattern of economic development in that state. However, there are important differences between this study and Wanna's. Perhaps the most important is that while institutionalisation and the acquiescence of union officials were not designed to tame a militant South Australian labour movement, this was the central purpose of the Water Board's mutually dependent relationship with its house union.

Outside these studies, the dominant tradition has been to chronicle, celebrate or analyse union growth as a force for progressive change. Thus, for example, where industrial conflict gives way to state intervention, in the cause of industrial peace, or to involvement in Labor politics, the explanation is one of working class victory within the state sphere.¹⁷

The question of control as a key to understanding the conservatism of the Australian working class has been an important consideration for 'New Left' historians. It has also been a source of some of their criticism of the 'Old Left'. Much of this critique has missed the essential political purpose of the celebratory model: a reaffirmation of the radical roots of much of the Australian experience, and its nationalism in particular.¹⁸ One of the traditional paths for this celebration was through the writing of institutional histories of unions. In turn, the New Left criticised and then, with the notable exceptions of Markey and Merritt, largely abandoned an institutional focus for 'social history'.¹⁹

¹⁶ J. Wanna, 'A Paradigm of Consent: Explanations of Working Class Moderation in South Australia', *Labour History*, No. 53, November 1987.

¹⁷ Cf. B. Gollan, 'The Ideology of the Labour Movement', in Buckley and Wheelwright (eds), *Political Economy*, Vol. 1, pp. 207-9; Markey, *The Labor Party*, p. 171; N.B. Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism. The Labor Movement in New South Wales, 1870-1900*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1973.

¹⁸ J. Merritt, 'Labour History', in G. Osborne and W.F. Mandle (eds), *New History: Studying Australia Today*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, pp. 116-7, 119, 121-2, 136-7; Markey, *The Labor Party*, pp. 8-9; E. Fry, 'The Writing of Labour History in Australia', in E. Fry (ed), *Common Cause*, pp. 146-9; A. Wells, 'The Old Left Intelligentsia 1930 to 1960', in B. Head and J. Walters (eds), *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 221 and *passim*.

¹⁹ Both Markey (*The Labor Party*) and Merritt (*The AWU*) brought some of the New Left theoretical concerns to their writing. H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970 offers an analysis of an institution, the Labor Party, in the making. Nevertheless, it is not an institutional history but rather an argument about the class consciousness which formed the party. See also H. McQueen, 'Australo-Marxism: Reactions to a New Britannia', *Politics*, Vol 7, No. 1, May 1972.

While this choice opens up rich areas for research, reflection and writing, it also brings a number of problems. Perhaps most obvious is its lack of comparative focus. To draw out the racism, sexism, systematic inequalities, state paternalism and other agencies of social control is important for providing a more accurate picture of our past and explanation of the present. Nevertheless, these processes and relationships were not unique to white Australia. Rather, with the exception of the wilful destruction of aboriginal society, they appear to have been less brutal and systematic than in many other societies. Social historiography has therefore tended to concentrate on what is not unusual about the Australian experience, albeit giving it a strong local flavour. It allows for no real comparative focus nor does it explain the particular evolution of Australian society and, in particular, its political conservatism.²⁰ The few exceptions are those historians who use their social history to develop a broader class analysis which explicitly examines key institutional relationships.²¹

The irony here is that an intellectual movement presenting itself as a left critique cannot explain certain unique relationships which have helped shape the Australian experience and, particularly, its working class. What is unusual about the Australian (and New Zealand) experience is in fact the early institutional prominence of the union movement and of its labor parties. This prominence coexisted with and encouraged a specific form of interaction between the working class and the state. While these institutions gained a number of important reforms, the form and process of this interaction was at once subtly controlling and conservatising. An important institutionalisation of this process was the growth of compulsory arbitration. At a theoretical level, the expression of these institutions and processes was labourism. The unique importance of all this is clear from the comments of contemporary visitors and commentators overseas, irrespective of their political starting point or judgement of the worth of the Australian experiment.²² The New

²⁰ A good example of this failure to look up and out is V. Burgmann and J. Lee (eds), *A People's History of Australia since 1788*, 4 Vols., McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Ringwood, 1988.

²¹ McQueen, *Britannia*; J. Rickard, *Class and Politics*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1976.

²² A. Metin, *Socialism Without Doctrine*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative, Chippendale, 1977; J. Tampke (ed), *Wunderbar Country: Germans Look at Australia, 1850-1914*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1982. It is also clear from the work of perhaps the most comparative and travelled of an older school of liberal historians, W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, Australasian Publishing Co. Ltd., Sydney, 1945.

Left, in its grasping for sophisticated imported theorising has paradoxically stimulated a return to provincialism.

The house union which has covered the vast majority of employees of Sydney's Water Board was never a craft union, nor did it arise during the heady days of the new unionism. Rather, it arrived later, as the child of the arbitration system and employer preference. Its founders chose its name — the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association — to reflect their desire that the new organisation should closely mirror the Board's operations and ethos. The union retained that name until 1970, long after the Board had changed its. This story of the name provides a first insight into the organisation: a conservatism, not only in the ideology it expressed to the outside world, but in its disinterest in, or resistance to, change within its own sphere of operations.

This does not mean that large numbers of union members did not at various times want change or that they did not subscribe to a more radical view. Rather, the operation of the organisation itself functioned as a conservatising force. Even as it grew to be a middle-sized Sydney union, a single dynasty maintained control for the entire period. There were no union-sanctioned strikes until 1969. Given that most of the membership were construction labourers, a group with a reputation for industrial militancy, this is even more extraordinary. The key problem this thesis addresses lies here. It concerns the way the very operation of the house union prevented the development of solidarity among the Board's workforce, successfully sought to limit militancy and, not least important, perpetuated itself. It is a story of the reproduction of stability. This explains the Board's hegemony in quite different terms to Connell and Irving. Here it was the union, 'a product of class mobilisation under hegemony', which mobilised: 'to resist the process of class formation on the part of the labour force and especially resist the development of a heightened class consciousness.'²³

Obvious questions arise. Why did the turbulence so common in the rest of the labour movement not engulf the Water Board's workforce? What was the source of the officials' extraordinary control? What mechanisms did they use? Why was opposition so unsuccessful? In the end, what sort of union was it and what were the likely avenues for any change?

²³ *op. cit.*, pp. 23 and 30n.

Employer preference and arbitration remained crucially important to the ideology, posture and practice of those who ran the union, yet the nature of its birth is insufficient to explain this conservatism. It is necessary to look at the environment within which the union operated, in particular the nature of the industry and broader management policy. These conditioned a dual labour market within the workforce. Differences went beyond terms of employment to condition separate workplace and industrial cultures. One group, the maintenance workers, functioned as a form of aristocracy of labour although it enjoyed none of the traditional controls of skill and apprenticeship.²⁴ Its strength lay in the maintenance workers' intimate knowledge of complex water distribution and sewerage systems. Management consciously bought their collaboration through security of employment and 'privileges'. The majority of workers, those working on construction, lay outside and gained neither.

The two distinct sources of Board finance — steady revenues from rates for maintenance, and fluctuating loans for construction — went to the heart of this choice. If the financing of economic development contributed to the quietness of Australian labour history, the pattern of Board financing reinforced it for the maintenance workers. They not only remained largely cushioned from cyclical downturns but benefited from the chance of upward mobility through the Board's hierarchy.²⁵

This story of division will not be new to those familiar with labour historiography. Sectional exclusiveness has not only been the strategy of the labour aristocrats. Employers commonly use a strategy of 'divide and rule' where they seek maximum wage cost flexibility to accommodate an uncertain product market. It was, for example, a major tradition within the NSW Railways, an organisation with relatively strong parallels with the Water Board.²⁶ Small, key groups receive favoured treatment to win their loyalty. This has a

²⁴ Lee and Fahey, (*op. cit.*, pp. 24-5, 27) make a general point as to the division being between permanent and casual labour. Cf. the British gas stokers who however acted to promote solidarity. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1968, ch. 9.

²⁵ Unlike the pastoral and wheat industries, the further the Board's operations expanded, the further they moved from the economic margin. (See Ch.1) Nor like the railways did it suffer competition or dependence on export-reliant industrial customers.

²⁶ Patmore, *op. cit.*; Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers*, p. 196. Also Lee and Fahey, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-7.

number of advantages. In a period of full employment, this loyalty may reduce labour turnover. More importantly, there is also a control function. If key protected groups identify with management and the success of the enterprise, they are less likely to side with others suffering employer attack. This reduces potential workforce resistance. More generally, splitting a workforce reduces the potential of combination among workers and inhibits their ability to contest control of the production process and other management decisions.

At various stages one side or the other has sought to divide the workforce; at other times there has been collusion. Most accounts of Australian craft unions tell the tale of sectional union organisation following and institutionally entrenching such divisions. When faced with the threat of technological change and therefore inter-union competition, some unions opened to the previously spurned, less skilled groups.²⁷ Other accounts tell of management using favouritism to keep key staff out of unions and therefore available to maintain production during strikes.²⁸

The story of this thesis is different. The house union did not discriminate between the core and the peripheral workforces when it came to enrolling them. In this and in their tenacious fight for monopoly access to union preference, the union's officials had the full support of the Water Board. Nevertheless, the union had an integral role in the maintenance of workforce divisions, the development of dual work and union cultures and the maintenance of industrial peace. This apparent paradox — the existence of an open, industry union which cooperated with management in perpetuating the division between a small group of favoured workers and the dispossessed majority — is the core of the thesis.

²⁷ Hagan, *Printers*; McEwen, *op. cit.*; Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers*, *op. cit.*; T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-1972*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975; A. Coolican, 'Solidarity and Sectionalism in the Sydney Building Trades: the Role of the Building Trades Council, 1886-1895', *Labour History*, No. 54, May 1988; T.A. Cutler, 'The History of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union: A Study of the Internal Dynamics of an Organisation', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of NSW/Wollongong, 1976. Some became genuine industry unions. Others took on the name but continued to behave as craft unions.

²⁸ T. Sheridan, 'A Case Study in Complexity: The Origins of the 1945 Steel Strike in New South Wales', *Labour History*, No. 41, November 1981, p. 90.

It is the analytical key to explaining the control mechanisms the officials adopted to maintain the union's conservative profile and their own remarkably long hold on office.²⁹

But this is not a static analysis. As the thesis unfolds, the internal tensions as well as the forces of stability become apparent. That challenges were rarely threatening does not minimise their importance. What is important is to examine the conditions which weakened or strengthened each challenge. In doing this, the thesis shows how workforce divisions and stability were linked to management behaviour within a changing political economy.³⁰

Stability and this management of division depended on consistent unemployment or recurrent recession to heighten the importance of job security for the core and peripheral groups. During full employment, maintenance workers would find job security less important and seek other advantages in return for loyalty. This would cause problems for union officials unused to testing the Board industrially. Construction workers, on the other hand, could enjoy more secure employment. With their much improved labour market power, they would have less to fear, and raise their expectations, demands and levels of resistance. Under such conditions, any combination of disaffected maintenance workers and a more aggressive construction workforce would provide a major threat to the system of control which the Board and its supportive union officials had created. As evidence to support this counterfactual argument, the thesis introduces an account of 'outside' groups with similar characteristics to the Board's construction workforce.

The general economic, political and industrial conditions are therefore the starting points of each chapter. But this thesis is not an exercise in economic determinism. A range of other factors strengthened, weakened or countered the trend. These need careful elaboration, whether they were due to geography, engineering imperatives, organisational design, or a host of other factors, including the particular personalities of some of those involved.

²⁹ A useful contrast is the experience on the NSW railways where the house union, the ARTSA (ARU) and its 'all-grades' philosophy was a major challenge to management's divisive strategy. Patmore, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³⁰ On the question of counterfactual theorising in institutional history, P.D. McClelland, 'Cliometrics Versus Institutional History', *Research in Economic History*, Vol. 3, 1978, pp. 376-7; L.E. Davis, "And It Will Never Be Literature", *The New Economic History: A Critique*, *Explorations in Economic History*, Second Series, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1968, pp. 83-6.

Most importantly, the nature of the Board's industry and the pattern of its development help explain why the Board sought to maximise its cost flexibility through a strategy of divide and rule. Therefore, each chapter also addresses the development of the industry. In particular, Chapter One traces the character of the industry in its vital formative years and its relationship to broader economic development and political choices. The key to these choices for the union's officials was their forging of a close relationship with conservative elements in the NSW Branch of the Labor Party. This not only improved their chances in the chosen terrain of compulsory arbitration, but promised gains on behalf of their employer-industry. While such close political involvement more firmly knitted the officials to the Board, it brought them and the union's members into close and potentially destabilising contact with the often turbulent labour politics in NSW. In each chapter, separate sections examine these elements to properly frame and explain the operation of the union's officials and membership.

All these elements contributed in various degrees to reinforce the central collaborative dynamic between the Board and the union's officials and their supporters. They also contributed in different ways to the tensions and challenges which arose from within the union's ranks. It is in working through this dynamic of stability and tension, the way in which the union reinforced the divisions management had created, that this thesis contributes new insights into the domestication of sections of Australia's unionised workforce.

The thesis concentrates on the six decades 1909-1970; the treatment is chronological.³¹ The major divisions reflect changes within the industry and the union. Chapter One introduces the industry, the forces which generated its rapid growth prior to 1910, the institutional divisions which marked it and its behaviour as an employer. Examination of important groups of water and sewerage labourers then gives way to a discussion of the different unions they joined and founded. In particular, the final part of the chapter concentrates on the way the Industrial Court, the Board and the officials of the nascent house union colluded to ensure the survival and growth of the Board's house union.

³¹ The year breaks overlap as both the Board and the union worked on financial years.

Chapter Two concerns the consolidation of the new union's ruling group during the decade to 1920 within a context of societal upheaval and important changes in the contours of labourers' unionism outside the Board. Chapter Three continues this story to 1929, by which time the Board had become the industry employer, and the house union had absorbed the construction labourers. The officials of the house union continued to consolidate their network of influence in favour of industrial stability. However, rank and file dissatisfaction became apparent within the Board's union — and, organised among outside labourers.

The result, on the eve of the Depression, was temporary defeat for the ruling group, discussed in Chapter Four. Their resurgence was complete during the period of recovery from 1934 as were their attempts to reinforce their hold on power. Chapter Five discusses the renewed *status quo* within the context of a war economy. Chapter Six examines the effects of full employment on the behaviour of the membership between 1944 and 1960. In particular, there is discussion on the methods by which the ruling group easily retained power, their continued ability to keep peace within the industry and the failure of challenges to both these phenomena. As an important case study, the chapter examines the experience of Warragamba Dam. Finally, Chapter Seven analyses the forces which at first stymied effective opposition. After 1966, the traditional defences no longer worked and the march to change became a rush. The outcome was the end of the dynastic ruling group in 1970.

This thesis began as a history of both the Wages and Salaried Divisions of the house union. The two divisions functioned quite separately for the entire period under examination.³² They had their own officials, meetings and awards and a number of specific rules. While officials of both divisions met infrequently over questions relating to the union as a whole, prior to the late 1960s these deliberations produced almost nothing of interest to labour historiography.

Both divisions identified heavily with the Board, but operated in quite different fields. The Wages Division was part of the labouring world; the Salaried Division of that of white collar public servants. There are certain superficial similarities in their history, particularly

³² They are now different unions. The Wages Division has become the Water and Sewerage Employees' Union. It is still a house union, albeit one with a very different political and industrial profile than prior to 1970. The Salaried Division, after leaving the Board union, has become an important part of the NSW Branch of the Municipal Officers' Association.

in the duration of their paid officials in office, but the dynamics were different. So was the historical importance of each experience. The maintenance of stability and industrial peace in a white collar public service union was not novel prior to the 1960s. The opposite was the case for construction labourers.

To examine the maintenance of control in the Wages Division means coming to terms with the lives and choices facing different groups of labourers. This sheds light not just on the Board's workforce, but on a large, important and neglected segment of the Australian working class. To treat the story of the Salaried Division with adequate depth would have involved a similar account of white collar and public service work and unionism. There was no room for thematically integrating the two stories. Token discussion of one would have weakened the argument relating to the other. Questions of space and coherence demanded a choice.

The Wages Division accounted for between two thirds and three quarters of the combined membership. It therefore dominated unionism among employees of the Sydney Water Board. There was no existing study of this body. The Salaried Division was much smaller, less important and less instructive in the lessons it offered. As well there was already a research work on the topic.³³ The choice was relatively simple. This thesis concentrates on the Wages Division and, henceforth, all discussion of the 'house union' or the 'MBWSSEA' refers to that division only.

The writing of the history of labourers' unionism provokes a number of important methodological considerations. Labourers, particularly itinerant ones, leave few written records. This to some extent accounts for the lack of scholarly attention they have received to date. As unions create and often preserve records, an institutional approach can provide an important window onto the labourer's world. This is particularly the case for studying those working for the Water Board as the quietness of their industrial history determined their absence from more general sources. The Water Board's house union has left a fairly complete set of minutes of union meetings. It also began producing its own journal 30 years after its birth but, on the whole, it is singularly uninformative.

³³ I. McAndrew, 'The Background, Structure and Government of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage Employees' Association — Salaried Division', B. Comm. (Hons) Thesis, University of NSW, 1968.

Reliance on union records carries with it obvious problems. First, those who make the records set the parameters of discussion. Uncritical use of these can mean accepting the same terrain, possibilities and criteria for alternatives. This notoriously favours the officials who write the minutes and often monopolise information and activities.

There is also the question of the quantity of alternative perspectives available. For much of the period examined in this thesis, the union held only two General Meetings each year. Therefore, most of the minutes reflect the decision making of the Committee of Management, a small, closed and largely unanimous group. The thesis examines those forces working to reproduce the stability of this ruling group. Some are apparent but the Committee Minutes themselves are often short on important detail. Rank and file perspectives appear even less frequently yet these are vital to any understanding of the ruling group's remarkable hold on power, problems of mounting a challenge and the reasons why outside events impinged so little on the Board's workforce.

Minutes of General Meetings provide certain insights. Yet attendances at meetings were usually poor and unrepresentative. The result is a bias to those groups whose work made it easier to attend or who had one or more enthusiastic members. A useful source in this regard are the Minutes of the Warragamba workers who tended to participate more at their frequent local meetings and who appear to have expressed a broader range of perspectives.

Though apparently an immovable object, the ruling group was in constant motion, shoring up its defences and undermining its opponents. The motion was so slight and slow as to be often indiscernible without close and detailed scrutiny. For this reason, the thesis works closely from the union's records. The Board's own records, particularly their 'Minutes of Confidential Meetings', were also useful in this regard. So too were a range of official records where members of the ruling group and the Board's representatives faced detailed cross-examination. This allows a more complete, less distorted picture particularly where, as during the Industrial Court hearings between 1909 and 1912, representatives of competing unions did the cross-examining or put up opposing evidence. Finally, the author has conducted a large number of interviews with a variety of people closely connected to the Board or the union. These include people who have held senior supervisory or industrial

relations positions with the Board, past union officials, their supporters and their opponents. Those who had worked in other industries were very useful in providing comparisons. As a result, this thesis pays close attention to those voices from below which periodically made themselves heard.

There is also the problem of the bias of those who produced the records. The Water Board was a very parochial organisation, and its union very introverted. Neither were comfortable with dissent. This raises two responsibilities. The first is to situate the narrative and analysis in the wider world and wider scholarship; the second to establish some checks and balances for more accurately weighing evidence.

In researching and writing this thesis, the author has been constantly aware of the need to see the contrasts with other areas of the labour movement as well as the parallels. Secondary sources have been useful for context but, with the exception of a small number of works, much of labour historiography has too different a focus for ready use.

The celebratory nature of much union historiography identifies officials with the unions they head. The officials become the 'union' in the interests of a membership (who are, however, often jurisdictionally captive due to judicial discretion). There is little room for separate rank and file positions except during faction fights or open rank and file revolt. If much union historiography is materialist in its treatment of the birth and development of unions, the same perspective does not stretch to union officials. There is room for power struggles at the top but these largely remain within an idealist perspective.³⁴ At other times, the identification of officials with organisation is such that the former are almost invisible except for particularly colourful personalities or during power struggles.

The union which is the subject of this thesis, with its early establishment of a well paid Secretary for life, provides a counter to this tradition. It also provides an analysis of the

³⁴ This is, not surprisingly, much more common among participant histories by former union officials than academic studies. e.g. Walters, *op. cit.*; Baker, *op. cit.*; E. Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, The Australian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation, Sydney, 1970; W.J. Mitchell, 'Wharf Labourers, Their Unionism and Leadership, 1872-1927', unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1973; B. Fitzpatrick and R.J. Cahill, *The Seaman's Union of Australia 1872-1972: A History*, Seamen's Union of Australia, Sydney, 1981; R. Murray and K. White, *The Ironworkers: A History of The Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1982. Recent welcome antidotes include J. Merriitt, *The Making of the AWU*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986; M. Bray and M. Rimmer, *Delivering the Goods: A History of the Transport Workers' Union in New South Wales 1888-1986*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

bureaucratisation of parallel organisations, and the resistance this at times engenders. In this, where possible, full rein is allowed to the advancement of alternative perspectives and to the specific industrial cultures of different groups of metropolitan water and sewerage labourers.

This is possible due to the thesis itself being internally comparative. On the one hand, its focus is the development of unionism among the Board's workforce. On the other, it traces the history of unionism among those labourers on the construction side of the industry who worked for other employers prior to their absorption by the Board in 1928. This second group of workers also left union records as well as featuring more prominently in the capitalist and labour press, the records of the Labour Council of NSW and official reports. These sources allow for a comparison of the activities of and constraints upon construction labourers inside and outside the house union. They also provide a useful way of placing the house union within the wider field of labourers' unions and the union movement in general.

These sources too, obviously suffer from bias, some notoriously so. One antidote was to use a range of contemporary sources from differing viewpoints. This was particularly instructive for the labour press during the period when Jack Lang dominated the NSW Labor Party. The result allows a close examination of the interaction of unions and the Labor Party. In doing this, it brings the Water Board's house union, a quiet, introverted and parochial organisation, into the broader currents of labour historiography.