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

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**THE INVISIBLE GIANT: A HISTORY OF THE FEDERATED  
MISCELLANEOUS WORKERS' UNION OF AUSTRALIA: 1915-1985**

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 these 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

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## 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
FMWU	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
NSWEM	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
QLDBM	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