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PAPERS IN LABOUR HISTORY

NO.2

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Perth Branch

Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

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Papers in Labour History seeks to publish material of a serious nature about the historical development of the Labour Movement, with particular emphasis on Western Australia. It is intended to carry a balance of contributions from students and veterans of the Labour Movement. Naturally this raises controversial issues and no apology is made for the fact that few readers will be able to agree with all the views expressed here. While the editor has made suggestions regarding each of the contributions these have been of a stylistic nature and have not been intended in any way to interfere with the expression of the views of the authors.

In this edition both the diversity and controversy typical of the Labour Movement are reflected. Naomi Segal's article is a scholarly piece, based on an honours thesis, which looks at the events of the 1981 "education cuts" dispute. By contrast Vic Williams' contribution is an article tracing his ideological development as a communist through his personal experience of events of WA labour movement history and his attempt to bring his insights as a poet to bear on them. Margaret Rear's paper is a reflection on her own long experience as an administrative worker in the Office of the WA Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union. While Fiona McLean has provided another scholarly piece looking at the early attempts to secure provision for retirement benefits in the Nursing profession. Stuart Reid's edited version of an interview with Ted Thompson provides an insight into the activity of one of WA's veteran unionists and is the first of the TLC Oral History Project interviews to be published. Finally we have reproduced Tony Beech's speech at the inaugural meeting of the Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, in which a contemporary union leader reflects upon the relevance of labour history to today's labour movement.

As well as these articles this edition carries a number of "trailers". These are generally shorter pieces which deal with a particular event of labour history from the perspective of the authors' involvement in it. Harold Peden's trailer recalls the 1971 metal trades dispute when a group of unions used innovative industrial tactics to defeat an attempt to cut wages. Larry Graham looks at some of the less publicised aspects of the 1981 Robe River dispute while Dennis Day recalls his own involvement in the events of the Noonkambah Convoy in 1978. We would be very interested in receiving more contributions of this type.

This edition also sees for the first time the inclusion of a selection of "research notes". The two TLC sponsored projects on the Oral and Visual History of the WA labour movement are particularly noteworthy reflecting the growing awareness by the union movement of the need to undertake and fund historical research. Michael Hess's work on the WA Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union also reflects this coming together of scholarship and unionism. Peter McDonald's research on the WA Branch of the Australian Social Welfare Union is a more traditional academic exercise but is noteworthy in that it looks at one aspect of the neglected field of the unionisation of "professional" workers. Vic William's work on Monty Miller will give readers access to the ideas of one of the neglected giants of Australian radicalism, while Phil Thompson and the Deckchair Theatre's production of the life of Paddy Troy provides an insight into the application of theatrical techniques to bring to life, for those who didn't know him, one of the heroes of WA's recent labour history. Research Notes will also be a continuing section of future editions of *Papers in Labour History*. So if you know someone working in this area let us know.

THE 1981 'EDUCATION CUTS' DISPUTE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA*

Naomi Segal†

In mid 1981, a serious dispute erupted in Western Australia between the Minister for Education, W.L.Grayden, and the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTU). The dispute, which arose over restrictions to education expenditure introduced in the middle of the school year, culminated in short strikes in six high schools and in a campaign by parents to have the spending cuts lifted. The dispute was unusual in the union's recent history in its length, in the tactics the union employed and in the co-operation which developed between teachers and parents. This article describes the emergence and overall development of the 'Education Cuts' dispute and explores the nature of the relations between union leaders and members and the constraints these relations exercised on the union's strategy and tactics.¹

The Union

In 1981, the union had been in existence for 83 years. It had a membership of over 13,000, organised into 164 branches, representing 90.86% of the State teaching force. (Western Australia is unlike other Australian states in that principals and teachers from primary, secondary and technical education divisions all belong to the same union). Union dues were collected 'at source', i.e., deducted by the Department from teachers' salaries, and gave the union a budget of \$1,300,000 in 1981. The union was led by John Negus, a primary school Deputy Principal and one of two full-time, paid union executive members.

The Department

Established in 1893, the Education Department in 1981 administered the education of ca. 230 000 children and 115 000 students in the Technical Education Division. It was responsible for 695 schools, 193 pre-schools, 17 technical colleges and 117 specialised schools. Administration was highly centralised, the organisation bureaucratic and policy-making was firmly located in Head Office. In 1981, the Director General was the 64 year old Dr David Mossenson, a historian and teacher educator.

ANTECEDENTS

Apart from a three-week long strike in 1920, a 'Regulation' strike in 1934, a salary dispute in the late 1950s and disputes over teacher housing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, industrial relations in Western Australia's public education sector had been relatively tranquil until 1978.²

* This paper is based on research undertaken in the preparation of an honours thesis in the Department of Education at the University of Western Australia.

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Then, a brief but fierce dispute over holiday arrangements, altered without consultation with SSTU, culminated in a mass meeting, a rally at Parliament House and an attempt to mount rolling one-day strikes. The campaign revealed the union's industrial weakness, of which the most serious manifestation was the lack of solidarity in teachers' ranks. Not only were the union's instructions unclear, but even when they were not, some teachers failed to follow them while others actively opposed union policy.³ At the conclusion of the dispute, the union could not protect striking teachers from being docked a day's pay. Absorbing some of the lessons from the 1978 debacle, the union's 1980 Annual Conference established an Industrial Action Fund and resolved, if only by a majority of two, to 'explore the merits and demerits of close liaison with the Trades and Labour Council including possible affiliation'⁴ and to report back to the 1981 Conference with recommendations for future direction. Members were also searching for some 'imaginative and effective form of industrial action'⁵.

To some extent, these developments and others, such as the union's hiring of public relations consultants, were part of an Australia-wide attempt by teachers' unions to defend teachers' working conditions. A threat to these conditions arose from dwindling school populations, a growing oversupply of teachers, Federal initiatives to reduce expenditure on public education and attempts by State education departments to abandon the consultative styles of the past. In Western Australia, in addition, the union was facing the increasingly militant anti-unionism of the Court coalition government. Relations with the Education Department of Western Australia, which had been in decline since the 1976 appointment of a new Director General, worsened as the SSTU failed either to protect existing Union-Department agreements relating to two union charters for improving teachers' working conditions or to obtain arbitration in areas other than salaries and allowances. Thus, by 1980, the union's repeated failures had convinced some union activists that the union would have to resort to direct action. In a militant mood, the union's 1980 Annual Conference committed the union to industrial action in 1981 on the dual issues of increased non-contact time for primary school teachers, also known as DOTT (Duties Other Than Teaching) time and on improvements to country teachers' working conditions. Both initiatives were attempts to force implementation of aspects of the union's charters. When, within a few weeks of each other, the two campaigns collapsed, the union's main weaknesses - lack of solidarity among the teaching force and a serious communication problem with the rank and file - again stood revealed. The union also failed to mobilise parent support for the campaigns. In May 1981, the union abandoned both industrial campaigns and focused instead on salaries as a priority issue.

SALARIES

In the absence of a salary push between 1974 and 1979 from teachers in New South Wales, with whom Western Australian teachers had a traditional salary nexus, the State's teachers' salaries lagged behind those of comparable occupations. In 1979, despairing of a salary move in New South Wales, the SSTU mounted its own work value case. In the course of

this case, it formally abandoned the nexus, preferring instead to attempt to gain an immediate rise of 6%. The Teachers' Tribunal, however, 'knocked back flat'⁶ the union's demand, arguing that there was no case for a work value award and, significantly for future events, reaffirming the salary link with the East. Ironically for Western Australian teachers, the New South Wales Teachers' Federation launched a campaign of strike action in pursuit of a 20% salary increase one month after the SSTU lost its case. By February 1980, the New South Wales campaign had yielded a 4.3% salary rise. An additional 2.5% awarded in August of that year was followed by another 3.2% rise at the conclusion of a strike. By May 1981, New South Wales teachers had obtained a salary increase totalling 10%, half their original claim. Western Australian teachers received their first flow-on, a 4.3% rise backdated to December 1979 in April 1980, by means of a consent agreement with the Minister. Alarmed at further prospective large flow-ons, the Minister for Education declared that salary parity with New South Wales would end.⁷ The union, now strongly in favour of retaining the nexus, argued that it was traditional for the link to exist and correctly pointed out that the Minister had no jurisdiction in the matter, since arbitration in salary matters was the responsibility of the Teachers' Tribunal.

In mid-1980, the Commonwealth Conciliation Arbitration Commission abandoned the increasingly unsatisfactory wage indexation system. In his Budget speech to Parliament, the Western Australian Premier, C.Court, anticipating salary pushes in the Government workforce, announced that no provisions had been made for wage increases outside periodic indexation reviews and that, if awarded, such increases would be met by adjusting 'staff numbers to keep within the allocation provided'⁸. The SSTU accused the Premier of industrial blackmail, and conforming with New South Wales demands, proceeded to serve a 15.7% ambit claim on the Minister for Education. Following its rejection, the claim was referred to the Teachers' Tribunal for arbitration on December 12, 1980, then was postponed to await the results of hearings in New South Wales.

By May 1981, the nexus with the East gave the SSTU hope of an additional 5.7% increase. Choosing not to mount a full case before the Tribunal, the SSTU, on May 19, 1981, wrote to the Minister seeking another consent agreement. Under the terms of the Act, the Minister was required to confer with the union or serve a written answer to its claim within one month.

BEGINNINGS

May 1981 was also the month in which the Fraser Federal Government's 'razor gang' curtailed Western Australia's financial allocations for the 1981/82 financial year. Returning from the May Premiers' Conference, Court increased State rates and charges, ordered cuts to Departmental spending and set the scene for a tough State budget. In early June, a Cabinet Expenditure Review Committee advised Departmental heads to propose cuts of up to 5% in

current year expenditure. There were public predictions of cutbacks to education spending.

The SSTU, although alarmed at these predictions, initially appeared to accept the cuts as inevitable. It merely requested a role in the decision-making process that would determine where the axe would fall. In a conciliatory spirit, John Negus wrote to the Chairman of the Cabinet Expenditure Review Committee suggesting that '...it is likely that criticism and protest might be lessened in intensity, if we have some choice in where savings should occur'⁹. The Chairman reply was a rebuff:

In the very short time in which a decision will have to be made, we would have some difficulty in seeing all of the people who want to see us during that period of time... . However, I would appreciate it if you would drop a line to me, indicating in which area you believe the expenditure could best be cut.¹⁰

Thus the Government discarded the opportunity to obtain the union's co-operation in the implementation of the economies.

While the union was still considering its response, a public statement by the Minister for Education indicated that most decisions with regard to the education cuts had already been made. On June 19, exactly one month after the union's approach to him for a consent agreement on its 5.7% salary claim, the Minister for Education publicly announced an expected cutback in education spending totalling at least \$25,000,000¹¹. (This was later admitted to have been 'a bit of an exaggeration'¹²). Economies would include not replacing teachers who resigned or retired with new appointees and transferring back into schools specialist teachers currently working centrally on developing or improving educational programmes. On June 21, again publicly, the Minister urged the union to abandon its claim for a 5.7% salary increase, which, according to the Minister, represented \$15,000,000 of government expenditure or 2000 jobs. 'The union must decide which is more important - salary increases for permanent staff or job places for temporary teachers and teacher graduates', the Minister declared.¹³ The union, however, considered its salary claim non-negotiable.

Already incensed by the public manner of the Minister's reply to its request for a consent agreement, the SSTU was not reassured by undertakings from Dr Mossenson that the proposed economies would not damage the quality of education, that no Departmental services or sections would be disbanded nor teachers retrenched. On June 26, the union Executive unanimously rejected the Minister's request to abandon its salary demands. Instead, it resolved to proceed immediately with the claim before the Tribunal. The Executive also resolved that 'members should refuse to accept any increase in class sizes or teaching load which is caused by Departmental instructions for economy' and promised full union support to any member who was disciplined or punished for refusing additional duties. The union also reversed its earlier co-operative attitude to the economies and decided 'not in any way [to] endorse the Government's education cuts by making suggestions as to

where cuts may best occur'¹⁴ but to attack the economic policy that produced them. However, in spite of the resolute language of these decisions, none as yet constituted a union directive to members to act. The union, still imperfectly aware of the magnitude of the proposed cuts, their implications and members attitude to them, merely rattled the union sabre in an attempt to protect its salary claim. It stopped well short of declaring an all-out war on the education cuts.

THE ECONOMIES

As of July 1, 1981, the Department ceased filling teaching vacancies arising from leave taking or resignations with new appointees. It also immediately implemented economies in the use of telephones, lighting and heating in schools. According to the Director-General, early implementation of the economies was necessary to cushion their impact by distributing them across both the 1981 and 1982 school years. The complete list of economies which the Department proposed included a mix of industrially and politically controversial measures, as well as some non-controversial proposals for savings. An example of an industrially difficult proposal was the Departmental suggestion to increase the class contact time of Technical Education Division lecturers and to abolish their time-and-a-half payment for duties performed after 5.00 p.m. and on Saturdays. Examples of politically controversial steps, unlikely to be accepted by the Court government, were the Department's suggestions to abolish interest subsidies to private schools, to reduce their per capita grant and to charge school bus fares to rural students. Suggestions to cut a general school book subsidy and to axe an unsuccessful driver education programme were examples of savings unlikely to be disputed.

Savings in class room instruction, i.e., a reduction in the number of classroom teachers, was an item likely to effect substantial economies but also to be contested intensely by both teachers and parents, especially if introduced in the middle of the year. Teachers' salaries, however, were the largest single item in the education budget. The Department, aware that a reduction in teachers' numbers 'cannot be effected, except to a minor extent, prior to the commencement of a new academic year without drastic disruption to school organisation and totally unacceptable interruption to the educational programme of individual children' concluded that 'any major change to the bases on which schools and technical colleges are staffed will only produce significant savings effective from the 1st of January 1982'¹⁵.

One hundred and five teaching vacancies were expected to occur in mid-1981 through 'natural wastage', i.e. retirements, long service leave and resignations. These the Department proposed to fill by transferring teachers from 'overformula' to 'underformula' schools¹⁶ and from centralised curriculum development and advisory positions back into the classroom. 'Overformula' schools which lost teachers were expected to reorganise timetables and workloads. The Department anticipated that by the beginning of 1982 'natural wastage' would create 300 more vacancies, which could be accommodated by altering the staffing

formulae of schools. The Department advised that any greater reduction would lead to strong political and industrial reactions, cause teaching conditions in schools to decline demonstrably and eliminate all employment opportunities for the 1,000 graduate teachers expected in 1982.

The Department estimated it would need \$486 million in the 1981/82 financial year to maintain existing levels of activity. This figure did not include salary rises claimed by teachers, which, according to the Department, could amount to a total of another \$25 million. Not including these salary rises but considering all possible economies, the Department predicted that it could function on a budget of \$470.7 million (an economy of \$15.3 million), and an increase of 10.5 % over the expected 1980/81 expenditure of \$426 million.¹⁷

RESPONSES

Initially, teachers reacted with confusion and uncertainty to news of the cuts, although several union branches counselled resolute action and one branch even called for a general teachers' strike. Parents, at this stage, appeared 'mute'¹⁸; in fact, however, protests from parents were already beginning to flow into Ministerial and Departmental offices. The union Executive decided to respond to the cuts with a publicity campaign. Newspaper advertisements, television commercials, news bulletins to schools and a stopwork meeting at an unspecified date were intended to convince parents and teachers that the cuts were unnecessary and that they would damage children's education. In order to obtain up-to-date information about the changes occurring in schools, the union established a telephone 'hotline'.

The union Executive's most immediate concern, however, was to maintain unity among teachers by convincing them that the economies constituted a serious problem. At the same time, union publicity sought to mobilize parent opinion using educational arguments and to persuade parents to take up the campaign against the economies. Because of the divisions among teachers, the proven resistance of some to union directives and the conscientious objection of others to industrial action and because teachers generally were vulnerable to parent anger and to Departmental punitive measures, the union did not propose to rely on direct teacher action. At this stage there were, consequently, no union plans to engage in strikes or other forms of militant industrial action.¹⁹ Far from planning an all-out industrial offensive on the issue of the economies, the union was, in fact, considering its fall-back position. The union's Industrial Committee recommended a 'final line of acceptance' based on present Departmental staffing formulae for schools. This involved no more than 32 periods of class contact per week and no reduction in the number of specialist teachers, administrative relief teachers and ancillary staff in primary and secondary schools.²⁰ In spite of union recommendations to members to resist changes in timetables and workloads and its undertaking to protect members who followed these recommendations, the SSTU

appeared prepared to accept a mid-year reorganisation of timetables and the loss of some teaching positions. It would appear, therefore, that initially, the scale, but not the concept, of the economies was in dispute between union and Department.

In early July, however, the union branch at Lynwood Primary School, a fully unionised school, appealed to the union for help in retaining its 'overformula' teacher, upon whose presence the school's remedial and enrichment programmes depended. The Lynwood branch declared that it was prepared to take action over the loss of the teacher. The union promised to make representations to the Department on behalf of the school. Several days after the union gave this undertaking, an angry phone call from the President of the Lynwood branch informed the union's Senior Vice-President that the branch was dissatisfied with the union's performance and demanded 'a lot more from it'.²¹ In response to this demand, the union Vice-President, jointly with the branch, developed a plan for action. If the Minister for Education did not comply with an ultimatum demanding that the teacher be restored as of July 13, the school was to go on a week-long 'supervise but not teach campaign'. On July 3, the Minister received a strongly worded telegram from the school. Threatening, in response, to suspend immediately without pay any teacher at the school who refused to teach, the Minister also warned that, if necessary, volunteers or staff officers would be used to supervise the children.²² Both Lynwood's action and the Ministerial threats received much publicity.

In the 10 days between July 3 and July 13, Lynwood Primary School staff came under both official and personal pressure to abort their plan of action. After visits from Departmental officers, perceived by teachers to be intimidatory, some teachers wavered in their resolve to suspend teaching. Notwithstanding an assurance from one Departmental officer that their action would not result in dismissals, the officials of the Lynwood branch sought guarantees that, should dismissals occur, the union would back them fully. They further obtained securities in writing from two of the union's trustees that in the event that Lynwood staff were dismissed, the union would pay the teachers' salaries for as long as necessary even to the extent of selling the union's new headquarters to meet this commitment.²³ Their confidence bolstered by these undertakings and by expressions of support pouring into their school from dozens of State schools, all teachers at Lynwood Primary School, still with trepidation but also with some elation, suspended teaching for the week beginning on July 13.

As awareness of the economies and of Lynwood Primary School's response grew, spontaneous actions occurred in other State schools. At West Busselton Primary School, the principal refused to accept into his school a teacher transferred from the Bunbury Regional Office. When the Department threatened suspension, teachers in the region prepared for a mass walkout. The union hastily dispatched its secretary to abort the wildcat strike.

At several schools, students organised protest meetings and short strikes. Parents from one

school protested the loss of a physical education teacher by withdrawing their children from school for a day. At another school, teachers adopted a work-to-rule campaign. The campaign against the education cuts, now fully in swing, was developing without union direction or control and in a way not anticipated by the union. As the participants called on the union for help, it became apparent that the union lacked both the resources and the organisation to meet the demands of a broadly-based campaign involving direct action.

Nonetheless, as opposition to the economies became widespread, the union's directions to its members became firmer. By July 13, the union had directed specialist teachers to refuse to transfer back into schools and principals to reject transferred teachers and not to submit to the Department the names of teachers for transfer. It also had instructed all union members in secondary schools to refuse to reorganise their workloads and members in primary schools that were already reorganised to join Lynwood Primary School in its 'supervise but not teach' campaign. The union warned that disobedient members would be penalised. However, cracks soon appeared in the unity the union sought to forge. Some union members did not approve of the action of Lynwood Primary School, describing it as a 'privileged, overformula' school.²⁴ The union was forced to defend the branch's action in public. Some principals, incensed at being placed in the firing line, also hotly and bitterly debated the issues with union officials.

It appears that the SSTU's initiatives were implemented unevenly. The boycotting of intra-school transfers failed, partly because the directive came too late. The success of the 'supervise but not teach' campaign in primary schools is difficult to gauge, since apparently neither Department nor union monitored its progress. Furthermore it appears likely that many schools, which publicly claimed to be supervising, were in fact carrying out the less onerous tasks of teaching. Only a handful of schools apparently firmly refused to reorganise (see below). The union achieved greater success with the directive to members to reject specialist teachers transferred to schools from Departmental offices. While some specialist teachers did not report to work at all, others followed a union directive to report to union headquarters. Most of those who ignored the union and reported to their assigned schools were rejected by hostile and angry teaching staffs or by apologetic principals who pointed to their staff's united opposition. The greater success of this union initiative can, perhaps, be attributed to the relative immunity from prosecution school staffs acting in unison enjoyed, as well as to the concentration of much of the action in the more militant secondary school division. The awareness teachers had of public support for this action, rallied in part by specialist teachers' own vocal and public opposition to their transfers, also played an important role.

Teachers were now defying Departmental instructions openly. The Department had to consider its reaction to the public flouting of its authority. On July 14, Dr Mossenson still believed that teachers in many cases were making a 'symbolic protest' and that 'the situation

will be resolved within the school if left alone'.²⁵ He counselled regional directors and superintendents of education to delay action which could precipitate wide-spread industrial reaction, and not to respond in the first instance to teachers who supervised rather than taught classes or to teachers who refused to accept readjustments of their teaching programmes.²⁶

The union's public opposition to the cuts attracted numerous expressions of support from the trade union movement and from community groups. Even the umbrella body of West Australian parent organisations, the W.A. Council of State School organisations (WACSSO), which, as a matter of policy, opposed industrial action in schools opted, at this stage, to support 'any action the SSTU may take to maintain educational standards in schools for the benefit of students'.²⁷

Aware that if the campaign escalated into a strike, it would not be able to sustain the struggle for long, the union sought other tactics and an overall strategy for the campaign. Following a consultation with Owen Salmon, then an organiser with the Hospital Employees Union, the SSTU and WACSSO resolved to co-operate in holding a one day stoppage to demonstrate parent teacher solidarity along with mass meetings of teachers to occur on July 17. First, however, the union made another approach to the Minister and requested him to reinstate the specialist teachers. As expected, the Minister rejected the union's demands out of hand.

In order to succeed, the planned work stoppage had to involve all schools, including primary schools. The preparation necessary to ensure a high rate of participation was beyond the union's organisational resources. The solution to the problem of the union's weak organisational links with schools was to call on teachers to organise where union resources could not reach. Volunteer 'liaison officers', drawn from the more militant secondary schools were supplied with information kits and dispatched to primary schools 'to assist branches in discussions with parents and other activities.' The Department, which according to Dr Mossenson had its own sources of information within the union, soon learnt of this development and reacted with considerable alarm.

On July 16, the eve of the stoppage, the Minister for Education released amendments to Regulations 31 and 134 and a new regulation, Regulation 31A. Together these made many of the activities in which teachers had engaged, punishable offences. The main target of the legislation was, however, the activity of the liaison officers. The regulations made it an offence for a teacher to encourage or counsel during normal working hours a teacher from another school not to carry out normal teaching duties. It also became an offence for a teacher to fail to carry out teaching duties and to encourage, counsel or incite a parent to withhold a child from school. Penalties could be severe, extending from reprimands, fines or suspensions to demotions or even dismissals. At a press conference at which he announced the punitive regulations, the Minister for Education declared that the education of children was suffering grievously, that the Government was not prepared to tolerate the situation and that

if the union was bent on confrontation, the Government would meet it head on. 'There is no limit to what action we will take, if it becomes necessary', the Minister declared.

The introduction of the regulations was to have far-reaching effects on the teachers' campaign. However, on July 17, the Minister waived their implementation for a week in order 'to provide a breathing space which could allow schools quickly to resume their normal programmes'. Exceptions to the moratorium were teachers 'who visited another school during their normal duty hours to encourage staff to participate in protest action'.²⁸

A majority of parents complied with the union's request and withdrew children from school on July 17. A mass meeting at Perth's Entertainment Centre attracted over 6000 teachers, almost half the State's teaching force. Smaller rallies were taking place in other parts of the State. With this demonstration, some of the union's doubts about the strength of support of its members evaporated. The large crowd at the Entertainment Centre approved 11 motions proposed by the SSTU Executive and in doing so ratified initiatives so far taken by the union and sanctioned a number of new directions for action. The meeting defeated two motions which arose from the floor. The first was to donate one day's pay to the union. The second proposed that upper secondary students, preparing for examinations, be exempted from all previous motions.

NEGOTIATIONS

The first resolution passed at the Entertainment Centre called on the union to seek an assurance from the Premier that the Education budget for 1981/82 would be not less than \$486 million. John Negus, in writing to the Premier, indicated both that the union was willing to enter into meaningful discussions to seek an end to the dispute and that it lacked confidence in the Minister for Education's ability to find a solution. The SSTU's view was that the Director-General rather than the Minister was the source of Departmental intransigence. By seeking discussions with the Premier, the union sought to circumvent both Minister and Director-General and to reach the main decision-maker in the matter of the cuts. Sir Charles Court's reply, however, was an unequivocal rejection of negotiations 'until all teachers [were] back to full teaching duties and threats of disruptive action [were] withdrawn'.²⁹ The Premier also dismissed all criticism of the Minister.

At this stage the dispute promised to be protracted and the union directed its public relations consultants to prepare a blue-print for a major publicity campaign. After its successful stoppage and rallies, the union appeared to be in a position of strength and prepared to run a protracted campaign. In fact, however, concern was growing among its officials at the disruption the dispute was causing to school programmes and especially to upper grade students approaching examinations. The SSTU Executive feared damage to the reputation of the public school system and to staff relations in schools torn apart by the dispute. In some schools, confrontations between principals and staff and principals and union officials had

become openly hostile. On two occasions, principals ordered union officials off the school premises. John Negus, in particular, found the decision to continue to disrupt the school system a difficult one 'for a warm human being to make'.³⁰ Consequently, and conscious that the conflict was escalating, he made a determined bid to reach an agreement with Government. With some difficulty, he obtained an appointment for a 'private, unofficial chat' with the Minister to discuss ways of settling the conflict. Neither the union Executive, nor the Director-General was officially notified of this meeting, although the Director-General promptly learnt of it from a member of his staff who happened to overhear part of the conference, and promptly reported the fact.³¹

In an amicable meeting, the Minister, union President and Senior Vice President agreed on a 'peace plan' according to which the SSTU and the Deputy Director General would meet the following morning to work out a compromise in relation to specialist teachers. The compromise, if acceptable to both sides, would be presented to the Minister and the Director-General and, thereafter, to the union Executive at its regular Friday afternoon meeting. The union officials warned the Minister that they expected it would be difficult to convince Dr Mossenson to make concessions and that the Minister 'might have to remind him who was in charge'.³² The Minister informed the Director-General of the new developments that very evening.

The plan failed when, next morning, a union advertisement questioning the Minister's competence, placed by the union earlier in the campaign as part of a series appeared in the *West Australian*. When alerted to the advertisement by Dr Mossenson, the Minister reverted to an uncompromising position. Although union delegates apologised for the inopportune advertisement, the Minister now refused to negotiate until all threats of disruption had been withdrawn. Predictably, the union Executive now also adopted a hard line and thereafter directed schools into which principals accepted specialist teachers to go on strike. The campaign had reached a crucial stage. The union's decision was likely to force the Department to apply the punitive regulations and the SSTU, in turn, to protect its victimised members. The dispute was heading for a showdown.

THE SHOWDOWN

The issuing of the punitive regulations was a precipitate reaction based on the impression that teachers were using work hours to conduct union business and that the 'more active and radical' high school staff were organising the primary school division.³³ Rash response though they were, the regulations were consistent with the attitudes prevailing in some of the highest echelons of the Department. Dr Mossenson, for example, did not believe that a conflict of interest existed between the Department and teachers and maintained that their relationship was one of trust and care, which made independent arbitrators superfluous. Industrial action by teachers against the Department had no place in this view of employer/employee relations except as the work of outside provocateurs. To deny teachers

the right to strike and to penalise them for taking industrial action was not inconsistent with these attitudes.

The 'cooling-off' period expired on Monday, July 27. On that day, three principals acting contrary to the wishes of the majority of their staffs, accepted replacement teachers into their schools. Also on that day, the Director-General warned teachers that 'the time was fast approaching when more formal steps to resolve the issue of transfers would have to be instituted'. Nonetheless, teachers in the three schools into which replacement teachers had been accepted, prepared to go on strike. They were not dissuaded by a further, individually addressed Departmental letter, which required them to indicate in writing whether they would carry out the Director General's instruction to accept the replacement teacher. On advice from the union's solicitors, teachers changed the form letter provided by the Department to constitute no more than an acknowledgement of the Department's allegations against them. In one school, the principal, in an effort to sabotage the imminent strike, refused to issue a notice about it to students and denied teachers the means to do so themselves. This merely delayed the strike by a day.

Visits to the troubled schools by the Minister and Dr Mossenson also appeared to have no effect. On Wednesday, July 29, the majority of teachers and students were absent from the three schools. By then, however, the Department had instigated a series of informal investigations into all allegations of failures to carry out Departmental instructions. In some schools the investigations took place before the union had time to alert teachers to their rights, which included having copies of the complaints against them supplied in writing, complaints served individually and time lapse before punitive action was taken. In three high schools, in which teachers had consistently refused to take on additional teaching loads, some classes had been supervised for up to three weeks. At these three schools, superintendents now questioned teachers, sometimes in groups and at short notice. After reporting to the Director General by telephone, superintendents informed teachers that they would be fined. In this manner a total of 58 teachers had fines ranging from \$40 to \$200 imposed on them. In most schools, however, opposition to Departmental instructions collapsed early in these proceedings. Wherever teachers capitulated, superintendents gave an undertaking that no record of the incident would appear on teachers' personal files. By contrast, teachers in the three schools still resisting reorganization resolved to go on strike. The union directed them to do so as of August 3 for an indefinite period.

On July 28, the union's Emergency Committee, the planner and co-ordinator of the union campaign, still considered expanding the campaign to include new schools and new tactics. Within a few days, however, the union's options became more limited; developments in schools pre-empted union planning as the Government moved to force the union's hand.

BREACHES

Divisions in schools between striking and non-striking teachers were now deep and bitter. When the principal of one school openly attacked his striking staff in the press, some teachers considered taking legal action. Determined though they were, striking teachers were aware that the Department was set to break their resistance. They believed that dismissals and other disciplinary measures were imminent. Apparently spontaneously teachers in all three schools resisting replacement teachers sent anguished pleas to parents for help. At one school, the Acting Principal approached the President of the Parents' and Citizens' Association, at another, a teaching staff committee contacted members of the parent organisation, while a desperate teacher at the third school appealed to a committee member of the P.&C. Association and called him out to the school in the middle of the day. The P.&C. meetings which followed these appeals and in which teachers presented their dilemma to parents were full of pathos and pain. In all three striking schools, parents undertook to run the campaign in order to allow teachers to return to work.

On July 30, the Minister called union representatives together for a meeting. Misjudging the Minister's intentions, the union declared it was prepared 'to sit down and discuss the issue and compromise until a suitable solution had been reached'.³⁴ The Minister, instead, presented union delegates with an ultimatum. A one-page document outlined the Government's demands. The union was to withdraw all directions to teachers to impede the normal administration of schools; to withdraw all threats of industrial action; to urge teachers to return to normal duties; and to give an unequivocal assurance in writing by Friday July 31, 7.30 p.m. that it had fulfilled all these conditions. If the union refused to comply with these demands, the Government would instruct the Department to cease deducting union dues from union members salaries, members of the union executive would not be granted time off from schools to attend union meetings, the Director-General would restrict union officials' access to schools, and the secondment of teachers from the Department to the union would cease, barring two exceptions: the President and the union's representative on the Tribunal. The meeting concluded within 20 minutes.³⁵

It was inevitable that the union Executive should unanimously reject the Minister's threats.³⁶ It was also unavoidable that the ultimatum should further deepen the rifts and divisions in teachers' ranks. One correspondent from a union branch observed that the 'campaign has reached a point where doubt and uncertainty is (sic) being fostered in the minds of members and many need to be urgently reassured as to the pertinent aspects of the issue.'³⁷ Other members declared that the dispute was now outside the sphere of union responsibilities,³⁸ or complained about the inadequacy of consultation between the union and rank and file and testified to the effectiveness of Departmental counterpropaganda.³⁹ When, finally, the respective presidents of the Primary and Secondary Principals Associations publicly criticised the union and demanded that it drop its campaign⁴⁰, the breach within the union's ranks became both publicly obvious and irreparable. More schools called on parents to take

over the campaign.

PARENT ACTIVISTS

Parent organisations in Western Australia have been described as 'peripheral pressure groups'⁴¹ not crucial to election outcomes. Parent action over the education cuts, however, demonstrated that official parent organisations were not necessarily representative of parent opinion, and that on educational issues of importance to the majority of parents, parents could mobilise to express their discontent with devastating effectiveness.

In the early stages of the campaign, parent action was limited to signing petitions, and protesting the cuts to the Minister, to individual politicians and to the Department.⁴² The substantial correspondence in Departmental files reflects many parents' familiarity and involvement with the school system, strong disapproval of the economies and, in the early stages of the SSTU campaign, a majority support for industrial action on this issue. Most parents perceived the union's campaign to be altruistic and teachers to be acting in the interest of their students. The struggle was not considered to be either industrially or politically motivated. Therefore, when Departmental determination to suppress teacher resistance became obvious, and when parents realised that teachers had done all they could do under the circumstances, and that some would, if they persisted in their campaign, suffer permanent setbacks to their careers, they inclined towards taking over the campaign. The fining of 58 teachers in three schools reinforced this inclination. Thus, the punitive regulations and the realisation that the Department was prepared to use them were perhaps the catalyst that brought about large scale parent action.⁴³

In the three schools on strike over the acceptance of replacement teachers, parents now formed action committees and appealed to other parents for help. In one of these schools, as many as 60 volunteers offered managerial and secretarial assistance. In the same school, \$1000 was raised within a few days from a public appeal. These politically sophisticated action groups maintained a credible media presence, produced a substantial number of publications and lobbied politicians, especially those in marginal seats. By August 11, other schools, following the example of the striking schools, had formed a total of 53 action groups, had organised well-attended public meetings, had distributed propaganda to local residents and had staged a variety of media events.

In many cases the forming of an action group was an implied criticism of the official parent organisation and its umbrella body, WACSSO. For reasons of temperament, political loyalties or personal conviction, some P. &C. officials were reluctant to involve their association actively in the campaign and preferred to refer the issue to WACSSO. Many parents, however, had little confidence that the government-funded umbrella body would take any meaningful action against Government policy. Since these parents considered the issue to be of crucial importance, they chose to form their own ad hoc groups.

On August 11, all parent groups actively involved in resisting the economies, convened to decide on a joint campaign. Forming a joint executive committee called PACE, Parents' Action Committee for Education, they resolved to organise parents on a regional basis, to co-ordinate group action and to organise a mass rally on the steps of Parliament House on August 19. The convened groups also expressed 'disappointment and frustration at bodies who (sic) were supposed to be acting on [parents'] behalf'.⁴⁴ Within eleven days of the conference, PACE had collected 16,000 signatures protesting the economies from all over the State. On the steps of Parliament House, on a cold and rainy evening, before a crowd of at least 2500 protesters, the President of PACE presented the petition to the Minister for Education.

The union, 'very, very supportive' of the parents' campaign, contributed in all ways but funds.⁴⁵ Its own situation had become precarious when, after the union Executive's rejection of the Minister's demand to capitulate, the ultimatum came into effect. The repressive measures now imposed on the union, together with the punitive regulations, constituted grounds for strong union action. Members of the union's Emergency Committee considered mounting a general strike. They rejected the idea partly because they believed that a new issue, introduced at this stage, would divert attention from the budget cuts and would affect the parents' campaign. In spite of occasional vacillation, throughout the dispute, the committee had argued for a single-issue campaign focusing on the cuts.⁴⁶ Believing in the importance of parent action and in the overriding threat from the budgetary cuts, the Emergency Committee therefore once again insisted on the need 'for all union action in the campaign to relate positively to the education budget cuts issue and for the union not to be distracted by diversionary Departmental manoeuvres'.⁴⁷

Not all members of the union's Executive displayed the Emergency Committee's sense of purpose. Some, intimidated by the punitive regulations and by the withdrawal of union privileges, had lost enthusiasm for the fight. The approaching annual union Conference, however, held out prospects for further escalation and for an extension of the dispute into the next school term.

RESOLUTION

Intermittent indirect exchanges between the disputing sides had taken place all through the campaign. The President of WACSSO, a prominent member of the Liberal Party with access to the Premier, had acted as intermediary. In early August, a breakthrough occurred. The union apparently had indicated to the Premier its concern about the approaching union Conference and had again sought a meeting. It would appear that word came back from the Premier that the outcome of a meeting with him would be that he would provide detailed advance information about the education budget by the end of the last week of term. The promise to provide budget information to the union before its annual Conference signalled that the information was likely to be satisfactory to teachers. Consequently, the union acted

with dispatch. On August 3, following the President of WACSSO's verbal advice, the Emergency Committee authorized the writing of a letter to the Premier to seek 'meaningful discussions' with union representatives regarding the ultimatum issued by the Minister for Education and to propose that

in return for an offer by yourself to participate in meaningful discussions with union representatives on the topics listed below, at a time and place to be nominated by you, we undertake to direct all striking union members back to work and to issue no further directives calling for industrially disruptive actions, in order that talks may proceed.⁴⁸

The list of topics on which the union wished to negotiate included the punitive measures against the union, the disciplinary actions against teachers, staffing of secondary and primary schools and the question of further vacancies occurring in September.⁴⁹ The Premier, replying, suggested a time and venue but also emphasized that the agenda proposed in the union's letter 'implied no commitment by the Government as a condition of your undertaking to cease strike and other disruptive action.'⁵⁰

Both parties to the dispute sounded warnings to each other through the press. Nevertheless, the union ordered striking teachers to return to work on August 6. Both sides declared that their respective actions in agreeing to meet and to return teachers to work implied no prior undertakings or acceptance of conditions. On August 6, the Premier, the Minister and union representatives finally met. The meeting lasted four and a half hours. In the joint statement issued at its conclusion, the Premier and Minister undertook to 'see if they [could] expedite the required budgetary information to clarify what staffing can be expected for 1982'.⁵¹ They were also to clarify the position which would apply with regard to replacement of teachers expected to go on long service leave in September. An immediate result of the meeting was that union Executive members were again allowed to attend Executive meetings during normal working hours. Some progress was made in restoring to the union its industrial officers but the punitive regulations were not repealed, nor was the Department to resume deduction of union dues from teachers' salaries. The union was to continue to confer with the Minister and the Director-General on some of these matters.

On August 7, John Negus presented a full report on the meeting to the Executive. The motion, both abstruse and ambiguous, which the Emergency Committee proposed to the Executive as an appropriate response to the recent events, read:

When the Emergency Committee is satisfied that the specific school problem situations have been resolved, given the fact that the Premier and Minister have given certain undertakings to this union with respect to the Education conflict, the Executive directs members to observe a moratorium on industrial action until 28/8/1981, in order that the Government may respond to the union case.⁵²

One member of the Executive moved an amendment seeking that the moratorium not be granted unless fines and entries on teachers' records were withdrawn. The amendment failed to receive a seconder.

FULL CIRCLE

Some union members were scathing in their criticism of union performance in negotiating with the Government and accused the President of poor leadership. One branch censured the Executive for imposing a moratorium on industrial action without consulting the membership.⁵³ Now that the emergency appeared to have passed, the mistakes union organisers had made were remembered. Some errors of judgement had occurred. Occasional lack of direction from the Executive and absence of a consistent policy in rejecting replacement teachers from specialist services, especially at the start of the campaign, had created confusion in some schools. At times directions had been contradictory. For example, two principals had been directed, the first to accept, then to reject a replacement teacher, the second to reject, then to accept the new teacher. One school complained that after being directed to refuse a replacement teacher for three weeks, the school was instructed to accept the new appointee. Communication problems had been severe. One school had attempted to fill the gap and had disseminated information to other schools during the dispute. In this school, dissatisfaction with the union ran especially high. However, a protest organised by over 30 teachers from a number of schools achieved no immediate results. At a specially organised meeting, the dissatisfied teachers criticised the union and even discussed forming a secondary union branch. When, however, they reconvened on union premises in order to present their grievances to union officials, the critics found themselves in a minority.

The Premier announced the education budget for 1981/82 at a meeting on August 28, the last day of the school term and three days before the union's annual conference was scheduled to begin. He declared that the education budget would be maintained at a level not less than its real value in 1980/81, based on an estimated 12% increase. This was higher than the 'overall revenue increase'. The Premier further announced that economy measures within the Department would continue to be pursued but that this would be in areas 'other than teaching staff'.

A joint Government/Department/union/WACSSO press release, drafted by the Premier, was issued at the conclusion of the meeting. One of its passages received further attention at a later stage. 'Any salary increases', so the passage read, 'awarded by the Teachers' Tribunal, will make inroads into this budget figure. The extent of this is a matter of conjecture at this time'. In November 1981, the Government School Teachers' Tribunal handed down its decision on the union's salary claim granting West Australian teachers a 5.9% increase backdated to August 27. By comparison, New South Wales teachers had received a 5.7% increase in May, backdated to November of the previous year. The West Australian decision clearly broke the existing nexus between Western Australian and New South Wales' teachers' salaries. The Tribunal justified the break with New South Wales by pointing to the effect parity would have on the State budget. The union newspaper, *Western Teacher*, reported on February 12, 1982 that the decision saved the government \$10 million in back pay.

The 1981 annual union Conference was notable for its decision to seek affiliation with the Trades and Labor Council. In 1980, when a motion to explore the merits and demerits of a close liaison with the TLC was put to conference, it passed with a narrow majority only. In 1981 the decision to affiliate received overwhelming support (350 to 20). A changed orientation was also reflected in the selection of union officials; in 1982, the union appointed Bill Latter, a former TLC President, as its Industrial Advocate and Kevin Edwards, a lawyer and former Acting Secretary of the Union of Christmas Island Workers, as its General Secretary. Both were prominent in the Western Australian branch of the Australian Labor Party.

In the months following the dispute, the union underwent financial crisis, temporarily lost almost half its financial membership, reorganised internally and consolidated its links with the TLC. As the union fought off the attempt to weaken it, relations with Department and Government were at an all time low beginning to recover only after March 1983, when the Burke Labor Government gained office in Western Australia.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Some see in the Education budget crisis a 'carefully stage-managed and cynical exercise designed to confound teachers' salary claims'⁵⁴, others 'an engineered crisis designed to bring pressure to bear on the Federal Loans Council'.⁵⁵ The evidence to support or to refute these and other conspiracy theories may not be available for many years, if ever. Though of burning interest to some of the participants in the dispute, such theories have been neglected here in favour of a focus on factors such as the union's lack of experience, lack of organisation, and most importantly, the constraints on it of an unreliable and industrially unaware rank and file and the effect of all these on the union's strategy and tactics.

The education cuts, first and foremost, represented an industrial challenge to the union - loss of employment opportunities, larger class sizes, a longer and harder working day for teachers, and through the reduction in specialist services a loss of promotional opportunities. Unable to rely on members' support or to expect solidarity in industrial matters, the union felt it had little choice but to seek the support of parents in the fight against the cuts. In order to obtain parent support, the union argued the industrial issue of the 'Education Cuts' in educational terms, appealing to parents to defend the quality of their children's education. The union perceived the majority of Western Australian parents to be unsympathetic to teachers' industrial aspirations. In the process of raising these educational arguments the union also unexpectedly gained unusually strong support from its own members. Reliance on educational arguments and on the alliance with parents, however, made the union's defeat on issues which could not easily be argued in educational terms, inevitable. Thus the union lost the battles over the punitive regulations, over the loss of union privileges and over the salary nexus. Furthermore, the union's use of educational rather than industrial arguments ultimately failed

to generate among union members an improved understanding of the industrial situation and in fact perpetuated the mystification which was at the core of the union's weakness.

The union's tactics throughout the dispute were consistent with its peculiar industrial situation. It did not, for example, attempt united action but, instead, sought to activate a few strong union schools which required little union input or organisation and were 'just as entertaining to the press' as an all out strike. This strategy also allowed the union to provide financial support to its activists. Similarly, the union avoided a confrontation it could not win when mounting the 'supervise but not teach' campaign, which, until July 16, did not infringe a single Departmental regulation.

The union called its arsenal of tactics 'guerilla warfare'. Successful though some of these tactics were, they did not in any way alter the union's industrial situation. In voting for affiliation with the TLC and a new leadership, delegates to the union 1981 Annual Conference acknowledged that a change in this situation was required. Time alone will tell whether these measures will be sufficient to overcome the SSTU's endemic industrial weakness.

Footnotes

1. Unlike the Honours thesis on which it is based, this article avoids discussing the substantial body of theory which could be applied to the 'Education Cuts' dispute. It thus makes no reference to problems relating to the class location of government school teachers as 'unproductive' workers or as State employees, or to the role 'professionalism' plays in teachers' consciousness. It has also avoided all reference to the phenomenon of 'proletarianisation'. For a brief survey of the theoretical approaches to teacher unionism see Ozga, J. and Lawn, M. (1981). *Teachers, Professionalism and Class: a Study of Organized Teachers*, Falmer Press. To sample the theoretical problems which teacher unionism poses for Marxists consult Hyman, R. and Price, R. eds. (1983). *The New Working Class? White Collar Workers and their Organisations: A Reader*, Macmillan.
2. See, for example, Joyce, A. 'The Establishment of Appeal Machinery for Settling Industrial Disputes involving Government School Teachers in Western Australia', M.Ed, thesis UWA, 1979; Mossenson, D. (1962). *State Education in Western Australia, 1829-1960*, UWA Pr; Horner, V. (1961). 'The Influence of the SSTU on the Policies of the State Education Department, 1898-1960', M. Ed. thesis, UWA; Thieberg, E.A. *Industrial Relations in the State School Teaching Service in Western Australia, 1919-1950*, M. Ec. thesis, UWA; *W.A. Teachers' Journal*, Nov. 27, 1979.
3. *W.A. Teachers' Journal*, October 1980, p. 22.
4. *ibid.*, p. 20.
5. *ibid.*, p. 26.
6. *Western Teacher*, October 20, 1978, p.3.
7. The Minister's statement was based on a formal Government decision, presumably prompted by Treasury to try and break the nexus. (*Interviews*, The Hon. W. L. Grayden, MLA, March 16, 1984; D.Mossenson, January 9, 1984.
8. Western Australia. *Parliamentary Debates (New Series)* v 229, pp. 1653-54.
9. SSTU, 89/151 July 16, 1981.
10. *ibid.*
11. *West Australian*, June 20, 1981, p.3
12. *Interview*, The Hon. W.L. Grayden, MLA, *op. cit.*
13. *West Australian*, June 22, 1981, p. 3
14. SSTU, *Executive Minutes*, June 26, 1981.
15. W.A. Education Department, 814/81 (F-15-30).
16. The Department's formulae for staffing schools were: Primary: no class to exceed 35 students, no Grade 1 class to exceed 32 students. Secondary: in lower secondary classes, no classes to exceed 32 students. (SSTU. *Minutes of the Industrial Committee*, July 2, 1981).
17. W.A. Education Department. *op. cit.*
18. *West Australian*, June 27, 1981, p. 8.
19. *Interview*, M. Murphy, August 16, 1983.

20. SSTU. *Minutes of the Industrial Committee*, July 2, 1981.
21. *Interview*, J. Bateman, October 24, 1983.
22. *West Australian*, July 7, 1981, p.1.
23. *Interview*, J. Bateman, *op. cit.*
24. *Interview*, M. Murphy, *op. cit.*
25. W.A. Education Department. 814/81 (F83).
26. *ibid.*
27. SSTU 151A/89 July 7, 1981
28. *W.A. Government Gazette*, July 16, 1981.
29. *West Australian*, July 17, 1981, p.1.
30. SSTU. Education Cuts Strike. (Minutes of the Special Planning Meeting, July, 14, 1981) *Education Cuts File*, in Sampson Library.
31. *Interview*, D. Mossenson, September 26, 1983.
32. SSTU. Newsletter, July 28, 1981, in Education Cuts File, *op. cit.*
33. *Interview*, D. Mossenson, *op. cit.*
34. SSTU. *Deputations*, July 30, 1981, p. 1.
35. *ibid.*
36. *West Australian*, August 1, 1981, p.1, 7.
37. SSTU 151/A July 30, 1981.
38. *ibid.*, July 29, 1981.
39. *ibid.*
40. Transcript, *Nationwide*, July 30, 1981 (in author's possession); *West Australian*, July 31, 1981, p.1.
41. Gallagher, T. 'The history, structure, strategies and influence of the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations'. Unpublished paper (1978), p. 29. In Research Collection, Noel Sampson Library.
42. W.A. Education Department, 918/81, 682/81, 869/81.
43. The action committees formed at the end of July and in early August were not the first such ad hoc groups in the 'Education Cuts' dispute. As early as July 22, a less publicised parent action group, consisting of representatives of 12 P. & C. Associations, formed in the Wanneroo area to co-ordinate the associations' opposition to the economies.
44. *Minutes of a Meeting held on the 8th August [1981] at 11.00 a.m. at the Westos Motor Inn* (in author's possession).
45. *Interview*, L. Vlahov, August 18, 1983.
46. *Telephone conversation*, G. F. Hawke, December 29, 1983.
47. [SSTU. Emergency Committee]. Report to Executive, July 31, 1981, in *Education Cuts File*, *op. cit.*
48. SSTU, 151A, 4th August 1981.
49. SSTU, 151/A, August 4, 1981.
50. *ibid.*
51. *West Australian*, August 7, 198 SSTU. *Minutes of the Emergency Committee*, August 7, 1981 (Em. 96)
52. SSTU. *Minutes of the Executive*, August 7, 1981.
53. *ibid.*, September 18, 1981.
54. *Western Teacher*, February 12, 1982.
55. *Daily News*, July 17, 1981, p.1.

WHY I AM A COMMUNIST AND A POET*

Vic Williams†

Communists are a decisive force in the world today - none more prominent than Gorbachov. It is difficult to understand present day history if you do not understand the social forces that make communists and communist parties. Communists develop in many different ways under different conditions in many countries, but come to common basic aims and actions. They work collectively for socialism in their own countries by setting out to convince the majority that socialism is in the interests of the vast majority. Communists do not function as individuals; they are part of a national and international collective.

I will try to tell you how I became a communist; the individual experiences, the social and economic conditions; the impact of international events that made me what I am.

My father's mother came to Australia because of the potato famine in Ireland in the late 1840's. She must have had a strong influence on my father because I remember him singing Irish rebel songs - such as "The Wearing of the Green". He was the dominant influence in my early life, so as I learned more of the resistance to the first colonisation under capitalism, I readily accepted emotionally the Irish view of British history. My father had only two years schooling, but he did all things, shearing, timber cutting, farming. He came to the WA goldfields in the early 1890's and stayed there till 1910 when he went farming. As a prospector and mine worker he was strongly influenced by that period; the type of work and social relationships, the developing Australian writing of the *Bulletin* and other sources. He had books by Henry Lawson, Adam Lindsay Gordon and books of poems by Will Ogilvie. One of the first books if not the first he gave me, was Ogilvie's book of verses, with some for children. So from that early age, Irish politics, Australian national feeling and poetry influenced me.

Among the farmers who settled near our farm were goldfield and other workers so the previous relationships were carried on. My father was a self taught skilled blacksmith and neighbours brought him iron work to repair. I don't know if he had any idea of charging them so the visits were also social occasions.

Later I read other books he had in the house - Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin, and The Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reade, so that by the time I went to Northam High School on a scholarship I was an agnostic, if not an atheist. I boarded for three years with a parson of the Church of Christ and had to go to church every Sunday, but what I heard took me further from religion.

At High School I had the experience of scientific method, especially in chemistry of how theories are

*This paper was first given at a Seminar in the Labour History Seminar Series at the University of Western Australia in May 1988

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formulated and tested in practice. My father had contracted Miner's pthisis in the mines. He died of it at the end of my first year at High School. It was a shock to me, though I did not understand the cause of the disease till later. When I did understand, when I realised the social system put mine-owners profits before the health of the mine workers, it took me a further step on the road to being a communist.

In one of his notebooks he had begun a letter calling for the formation of a miners' union. The draft was unfinished. Many years later I wrote a poem, *Unfinished Letter*, to sum up my feelings and my thoughts.

Unfinished Letter

*The gnarled hands of my father, clenched in struggle,
Struggle for breath, for life, as his burst lungs bled;
This I remember, when my world broke and shattered,
Gone was the strong arm on which to lay my head.
In that first lonely night, what could a boy remember
But the white bowl, the bright blood and the long grey road.
In that first grey morning, what had you left me, father,
But the unanswered siren and the unshovelled lode?*

*Slowly dies pain, slow as a ringbarked whitegum,
But green grew your words where memory took hold;
How you had wandered by watercourse and bushland
For the hidden water and the fleeting specks of gold.*

*How your shaft of knowledge sheared through stone and
blackness,
Till the gold blazed back in a red, solid stream;
And then I found the inheritance you left me;
Love of the beckoning search and the mist-covered dream.*

*Your bruised hands had left your words uncompleted.
You wrote from the deep mine, with every hammer blow
Striving to blanket the myriad spears of quartzite,
Straining to timber the roof where men must go.
Against the mine-owner, your voice through the long drives
Drew their lamps from the far ends to make a union team;
Only time could show me the greatest wealth you left me;
The slow-spreading union, the heat-hazed dream.*

*Defiant in the sunlight, they gathered at the minehead,
They stilled the jarring hammer, and the thundering stamp;
"Good air and more timber," they demanded of the owner,
And they stretched in the sunshine above the fear and damp.
And greed was defeated, and a starry night remembers
The white tents, the camp-fires that rang with singing men.
The red flag flames in your unfinished letter,
From the fire-lit dreaming, the unaccustomed pen.*

*Strong flow your deeds through fifty years of struggle,
Hidden in the grey years, and rising through the red.
The death-dust around us, the sky that creaks with bombers,
Call us above ground where we can raise our head.
The deeds of our fathers are a roof for our children,
We'll build our Australia where they have laid the beam.
"Peace for our children" we'll write across the future,
My unconquerable people at the doorway of our dream.*

In 1929-30 the world wide depression hit the wheat industry. Wheat fell to 1/6 pence a bushel. My mother had to pay back money to the wheat buyers because they had advanced more than the market price. She had to sell the farm to a cousin of mine at, of course, a very low price. For me the farm was home, an ideal place to live. The work on the farm, harnessing horses, helping with them, ploughing and seeding, sewing up bags of wheat, rabbiting - was part of the enjoyment of that life - now, with my father, all gone.

The reason for the depression was a great unanswered question, and because it affected my life so much, I kept searching for the answer.

After High School I was unemployed for quite a while, but then was lucky enough to get a job in an accountant's office at 12/6d a week. Later I was appointed a monitor, an apprentice teacher on a very low wage who nevertheless did the work of a teacher.

The first international event that began to turn me towards political thinking was the Spanish Civil War. For me, an elected government should only be charged by a vote of the electors, not by an armed and ruthless military group, supported by foreign forces, such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. I saw the phony non-intervention of Britain and USA, the deceit of France through the cover-up of the newspaper stories. On the other hand they could not hide all of the courageous and selfless support to the Spanish Government given by the Soviet Union. I began to draw conclusions about the fundamental difference between capitalist and socialist countries on the rights of people to decide their own governments. Many others were beginning to see fascism as the destroyers of people, of democratic rights. But I was not in contact with the organised anti-fascist groups, or those critical of capitalism. It was not till late in 1937 that I heard of and went to the Workers' Arts Guild and there made contact with anti-fascists and though I did not realise at the time with a Communist, Phil Harnett. If you saw the film Sunday Too Far Away, you saw her as the old but vigorous barnmaid. As an aspiring writer, I was in the writer's group. Someone lent me or gave me a book *The Nature of the Capitalist Crisis* by John Strachey. The reading and understanding of that book was a turning point in my life. Among other things, the book put very clearly the theory of surplus value and its consequences as first propounded by Karl Marx.

When workers are employed by an employer, say a factory owner, they add value to the raw material they turn into commodities for sale. The employer will only continue producing if he can make a profit; if he runs at a loss he will finally close down or go bankrupt. He can only make a profit if he pays the worker less than the value he adds to the commodity. Karl Marx set an arbitrary figure of four hours value of work to cover wages; four hours for surplus value acquired by the employer because he had ownership of the means of production. In an industrialised country the main market for the goods produced are the wage workers. According to the theory of surplus value their wages will not be enough to buy the goods they produce. Only a proportion of the profits made by the employers are used to buy the commodities produced. Much of the profits are reinvested to build more factories, which, of course, means workers get wages to build them. But there is inevitably overproduction of

commodities for which there is no sale on the national market. Factories were closed; the workers thrown out on the streets, unemployed.

There is therefore a drive for overseas markets in the less industrialised countries. Each major industrial country sets out to more fully control and exploit the markets of such countries, by making them colonies. England destroyed the Indian home production of cotton goods by the competition of the much greater production per hour per worker in the Manchester cotton mills and so found a new market. When they built cotton mills in India, using the much cheaper Indian labor, they wrecked the market of the Manchester mills, and closed them down.

Capitalists and capitalism has found ways out of each crisis of overproduction, either by finding new markets, wars, or other means. But the crisis of overproduction in the long run cannot be overcome - it is an incurable cancer that grows and grows. It leads to colossal destruction of goods, either by dumping in the oceans or by war production or war. It has led to the scaling down of production and to millions put out of work. I read The Nature of the Capitalist Crisis in 1938, just as the crisis that began in 1929 began to deepen again. I saw particularly where it hit the price of wheat and wool, and disastrously affected the WA wheat belt that I knew. Wheat was 1/10d a bushel in 1939. This explanation of the theory of surplus value made immediate sense to me. I accepted the conclusion that the capitalist system must inevitably move from crisis to even deeper crisis; that unemployment so rife in 1938-39 was inevitable, that capitalism had no permanent cure for that.

I accepted that under socialism wages paid would be adequate to buy the goods the workers produced; that a proportion of the value produced would be used for replacement and increases in the means of production and distribution; mines, factories, ships, railways. I accepted that the ownership of the means of production would be by the socialist government - there could then be planned and organised control of the volume and direction of production and the opportunity to avoid underproduction and overproduction. I was certain then as I am now that capitalism must and will be replaced by socialism - that Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism is correct. Experience of the last fifty years have confirmed this belief.

After the war Australia had a period up to the 1970's when there was close to full employment and no great overproduction. However, there were short periods of unemployment; wheat farmers were put on a restrictive quota. On a world scale, the rebuilding after the devastation of the war meant a great deal of employment; the demand for food, clothing, housing was not fully covered.

The first major crisis of overproduction was in 74-75. It brought a big increase in unemployment, and was one of the factors in bringing down the Whitlam Government. The crisis of 1982 was even deeper. It brought down the Fraser Government. Today Australia is faced with a world wide glut of coal, iron ore, alumina, meat and wheat. The crises of overproduction as predicted by Karl Marx are continuing and intensifying. Unemployment, world wide is growing. From 1979 to 1986 registered unemployed in OECD countries rose from 16 million to 29 million.

The exploitation of the workers has become more intensive, and the proportion of the employers' share of the surplus value is growing. Australian Year Book 1986 figures for 83-84 in manufacturing show value added \$34.2 billion wages and salaries \$17.4 billion - 51% of value added. Mining value added \$8.8 billion wages and salaries \$2.1 billion nearly 24% of value added. On these figures no wonder capital is moving from Australian industry to Australian mining.

But to return to my own story. The question facing me was what organisations would change capitalism to socialism? The Labor Party had a platform that was vaguely socialist. Early Labor Party Governments had set up Government enterprises; railways, abattoirs, butcher shops. Australian capitalists at that time did not have the money to set them up, and they were not immediately profitable, but were needed for the better functioning of the economy. But the capitalists, particularly the British capitalists profited. They lent money to build the railways and got a regular and sure interest payment. In the sense of income, they owned the railways; it was not in any way a move towards socialism. When these enterprises became profitable, capitalists wanted to be in them. The Labor Governments sold them out.

I believed and still believe that socialism is being created in the Soviet Union - the type of socialism I want to see in Australia. I read what I could about it; how it was achieved, what organisation was responsible. Because the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - the Bolsheviks organised and led the revolutionary change, I looked for the Communist Party of Australia, and joined them in 1938. I was convinced theoretically by what I had read.

My first experience of activity in the Communist Party was in the country side, in the struggle of the wheat farmers against evictions, against crippling prices for wheat and wool, culminating in the wheat strike against the Menzies Government.

In 1939 wheat was 1/10d a bushel. At the outbreak of war the Menzies Government took over the whole wheat crop at 2/3¹/₂d a bushel, wool at 13d a lb. The price was below the cost of production of smaller farmers. A mass meeting of farmers in November 1939 voted to hold their wheat until the price was increased. The Wheatgrowers Union, with communists in some of the leadership and influencing the decisions, organised the hold-up. It started in the north and pickets came from all over the state to prevent farmers delivering wheat to the sidings.

I wrote articles for the paper of the Wheatgrowers Union and for the *Workers' Star*, the Communist paper. I wrote a Living Newspaper *Hold your Wheat* on the wheat strike. This is a form of dramatised documentary created in USA in the thirties by progressive writers and journalists. They are plays which quote from speakers, statements of individuals and leaders involved in a particular struggle to highlight and dramatise different aspects. They also use stage symbolisms to visualise situations and economic relationships - in some cases the little man confused by the clash of events. In the USA at that time they drew a bigger audience than the legitimate theatre. I am Work the play based on

Essington Lewis recently put on in Perth, has some elements of the Living Newspaper. One big advantage of the Living Newspaper is that when dealing with a current struggle it can keep the action right up to date.

My Living Newspaper was put on by the Workers' Arts Guild. I was in the country at the time but I was told it was a success.

At that time I began working on material that became Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 of the Communist Party pamphlet Farmers Way Forward issued in 1943. I read as widely as I could of Marxist and Leninist material in examining the world, the Australian and West Australian position of agriculture and its relationship to the struggle for socialism. I had little to go on from material previously published by the Communist Party of Australia, though the general line was that the poor and small farmers could become an effective ally of the working class in the struggle for socialism. I tried to make the proposition more specific. The reading, the consultations and discussions with other communists, and the thinking out and writing of that material brought me to a deeper understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory, and began to consolidate me as a communist. For the first time I was not writing as an individual, but as the vehicle of a collective.

But I was also a poet. In November 1940 I put my feelings about the wheat strike and the situation of the poor farmers, thinking and feeling as a farmer (really a farmer's son) into a sonnet.

Human Drought

*I've seen the green hopes wither in young eyes,
Work-heavy days drag on the eager hands;
I've seen the sapling brains, fresh with surmise,
grow gaunt and barren in these barren lands.
I've seen the old staunch settlers shrink and shake
As debts tread down the sap from every root:
Dead leaves, dead wood, then they decay and break;
Drought upon men, when will they come to fruit?*

*The storm is rising. Gusts of questioning
Stir tongues to whisper, anger lights the eyes
Weary with watching the deceitful mists.
Thunder of voices to the deaf skies ring,
And from the fields, swept bare by tricks and lies,
Springs up the challenge of ten thousand fists.*

The Living Newspaper is lost, Farmers Way Forward is out of print and dated, but the poem is still used and still up to date.

World War II was a turning point in the politics of the whole world, and of course for individuals. In that period many millions realised the utter ruthlessness of imperialism, of the capitalist classes, especially when they turned to fascism, in their efforts to suppress any movements that challenged their position and the ownership of the means of production. They also saw the decisive defeat of fascism,

not at the hands of capitalist countries, but primarily at the hands of a socialist country, the Soviet Union. Before the war the Soviet Union had struggled hard for collective security against fascism. The agreement between Germany, Britain and France made at Munich led to the dismembering of the key country of central Europe, Czechoslovakia. I knew that Britain, USA and France had built up the Nazi German war machine, hoping and planning that it would attack the Soviet Union. They wanted Hitler to carry on the task of overthrowing the socialist state that the armies of fourteen nations had failed to do in 1919 to 1922. The imperialist states maintained their determination to destroy the socialist state by any means they could find; economic, political, ideological and military as the situations made available. The Soviet Union, on the other hand called for the peaceful coexistence of capitalist and socialist countries, but was determined and prepared to defend itself.

The Soviet Government prepared for the Nazi onslaught. It won time by making a non-aggression pact with Germany when it was very clear that Britain and France would not join in collective security action against Germany and Italy. The Soviet Union had agreed to the independence of Finland soon after the revolution, for it had been an independent nation. The fascist government of Finland, under Mannerheim, the butcher of hundreds of thousands, had forced their border very close to Leningrad. The Soviet Union tried to negotiate exchange of territory so that Leningrad had a buffer to the north. Mannerheim refused, backed by Britain and Hitler. The Soviet Union, to protect its second biggest city, took the buffer by force of arms. When Germany attacked Poland, destroyed its army and over-ran half the country, the Soviet Union moved in and took the eastern half of Poland that had been taken from Russia in the 1920 war. This had not been part of the Polish kingdom, and was peopled with Byelo-Russians.

I agreed with these moves of the Soviet Union. The Communist Parties support the right of nations to self-determination. They support the proposition that socialist countries defend themselves and to give help, including military support, to other socialist countries attacked by imperialist states. It is the duty of Communist Parties to do what they can to defend socialist countries, as did the British dockers who refused to load arms for Poland's attacks on the Soviet Union in the early twenties. The British ruling class knew that Germany had intentions of regaining her lost colonies, and had the plan of driving south through Eastern Europe, to the Middle East and taking India from Britain. British war plans up to June 1941 were to defend their colonial possessions. In that way the war was an imperialist war for colonial possession. Communists opposed that war. But with the Nazi overthrow and occupation of Poland, Holland, Belgium and France, resistance to the Nazi's began in those countries, organised and led by the Communist Parties. That was a war of national liberation and Communists in Australia supported that war.

When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, and the British Government supported the Soviet Union, the whole nature of the war changed to an anti-fascist war. The British people demanded it; the imperialist war aims of the British ruling class had to be put under wraps, but not forgotten. Communists supported the anti-fascist war. In many countries, and especially in the colonies, people strongly supported the anti-fascist war, and looked beyond that victory to the liberation from imperialist

domination and colonial suppression. The Australian soldiers understood something of this. There were many Communists among them and in Army Education and the Australian Labor Government made a lot of promises to returned soldiers. I express this hope in my poem *Song of New Britain*.

Song of New Britain

*Here a new people grows, a defiant tree:
for we who fight this smothering tyranny,
tear through this matted antiquity, now we will grow
a nation with our place within the sun,
and men put on a new maturity.....
Our roots are fed with the fires our freedom lit,
and the rising sap is a flame that burns to ash
foreign and native deadwood; it is the flame lit by
miners who died for the Southern Cross,
strengthened by men who sweated for liberty,
fanned by Port Kembla men to a beacon light;
it is flame in the minds of determined men.
For all of the power within this unbridled land,
all of the men, made steel by this vast machine,
will become the arms and the aim of the revolution,
will become a furnace to forge in a molten world
the liberty of man.*

When the Japanese, in their desire for greater imperialist expansion, attacked USA and Britain in the Pacific, new forces were drawn in. In the Philippines, the Philippine Communist Party organised armed resistance to the Japanese invasion, and by the time McArthur returned, had control of much of the country. The USA war aims of retaining colonial control became apparent then, for they set out to attack and weaken the Hukbalup, the people's liberation army. In Malaya and Indo China the Communists also organised strong resistance to the Japanese. When Japan surrendered, the British, French and Dutch and US Governments set about recovering their colonies from the revolutionary peoples. China, Malaya, Indo-China Indonesia, Philippines, Greece became now areas of war with imperialists trying to regain military and political control.

I was in Rabaul after the surrender. We were impatient to go home. The Dutch wanted ships for the reconquest of Java from the Indonesian revolution-ships that should have been taking us home. The Dutch wanted to use Australian troops for the reconquest, but the Chifley Government, well aware of the feeling of the Australian troops, and doubtful of the way they would turn their rifles, refused. While I was waiting in Rabaul I wrote:

Letter from Rabaul

*Our doors are blocked by empires tumbling down,
and we are halted by a snarling fence
of greed uncoiled and striking for its prey.
The Dutch bare fangs at Java.*

*But now her people force the dangerous passage
far into freedom against the envious past;
now they are strong.
As many months as days the Japanese
took to dismember her, as many months
tides of old empires wrench at her front in vain.*

*Her ship is in.
 the ship to take us out
 past wars, past death, past inhumanity
 must be our own construction.
 Hate wars, hate death, hate inhumanity,
 and it will sail.*

*Too long by rotting hulks we have been moored ;
 fly the Blue Peter upon the liberty ship
 that bears our name, the name of common men
 cut the old ties, mankind has come aboard.*

When I came back from the war, I did not go back to the countryside. I worked in different industries, and in 1952 I was employed on the wharf till I retired in 1975. In this period, I changed my class. As we put it, I was proletarianised. The contradictions, the conflicts with capitalism were sharper and more direct than in the countryside. The working class struggle was a day to day issue; each fight, each step forward, each minor reform was more concrete. My previous vague ideas of how socialism would be achieved as I expressed it in poetry had to be revised.

My personal position changed, I married and had a family, and needed to stay in one place, and if possible to have a permanent job. Before the war I had moved from job to job, from place to place as the opportunities offered. For the first time I was in a regular party branch, then when working on the wharf in the most valuable of party organisations, an industrial branch. I had many new things to learn, many adjustments to make if I was to become a more consistent and effective communist. I had the advantage of a very helpful home life, with a wife who was an experienced communist and journalist.

Also I had a problem of where to go with my poetry. What should its content be, I wondered. I had written my poetry of the countryside, based on my sensuous and emotional and intellectual reactions, using the imagery that was before me. In some cases it was work experience as in the long poem *Harvest Time*. A short excerpt shows what I mean.

Harvest Time

*I drove around the paddock with the team
 plodding with solid patience in the heat
 to conquer all the limitless ears of wheat.
 That day the dust was bitter in my eyes,
 that day the chaff pricked at my sunburnt skin;
 hot oil and hot iron stung my hands,
 till my temper clashed with all the clanging gear.
 That day I worked for wages, time without taste,
 with only hope of escape dancing before my eyes,
 as futile as the heat haze shimmering in the skies.*

I set myself the task of writing the poetry of the working class, their total experience in industry and the class struggle - not just verses, but poetry, sensuous, personal and emotional, that could take its place in the class and political struggles. History had shown its value and it was one thing that I thought I could do that other communists did not do.

The times set several difficult tasks before me: to learn to work in the union movement as a communist; to learn to adjust to the party collective among which were different experiences, different views; to learn to write the poetry of the working class - and the task that would influence and help me in the carrying out of all these other tasks - to learn and apply Marxism-Leninism, the theory of dialectical materialism, historical materialism to practice. My attempts to carry out these tasks were interwoven. The experiences in carrying out one influenced the ability to carry out others and the total experience made me a better, more experienced communist.

I will try to deal with each task independently, but they are interwoven and will overlap.

Many of the wharfies in 1952 still had traces of IWW thinking. It showed in their attitude to the foremen. Although foremen at the time were all members of the WWF, a common feeling of the wharfies was that foremen were the class enemy. The way to show militancy was to annoy, frustrate, and where it was safe, to abuse the foremen. This even penetrated some of the thinking of the communists on the wharf. I had read and re-read Dimitrov on the United Front. Where he emphasised the need to isolate the main enemy, whether it was fascism or for the WWF, the Conference Lines that owned the main shipping lines and controlled the stevedoring firms for which we worked.

When I was elected a delegate on a job, I set out to make the main confrontation that with the supervisor on the ship, and if possible with the stevedoring company. I found that some foremen appreciated my attitude and gave me useful information and advice about issues that arose.

The first main confrontation in my experience on the wharf was in 1954 when the Menzies Government, in alliance with the Conference Lines, set out to provoke a wharf strike and smash the union, with an act to take from the WWF the right to select new members. The Fremantle WWF leadership was slow in mobilising the rank and file when the national strike started. The Party branch took the initiative, brought out a leaflet to put the WWF case to other unions and to the public and called for the setting up of strike committees. The communists were well represented and active on these committees. I have written up the overall tactics and result of the strike in my book Years of Big Jim.

The January 1956 strike for wage increases was well organised by the national office, led by communists. In Fremantle, the Party branch had prepared for it. We led the strike committee. I was secretary of the Publicity Committee and organised teams of leafleters to go to the work places and factories every day. When Bunning attacked us in the West Australian newspaper, that dinnertime we sent out teams to all his factories. They walked right through, gave out leaflets and talked to the workers. When the gold mining companies said they were running short of explosives and would soon have to sack miners, the union said they would unload explosives at Woodman's Point. We immediately wrote and issued a leaflet, telling of the union decision. Through our team of four wharfies stationed at Kalgoorlie we took the leaflet to the miners and people of Kalgoorlie. We gained, not lost, support at Kalgoorlie.

The press and the Liberal MLA called for farmer vigilantes to come to Fremantle to break the strike. We wrote leaflets pointing to the role of the Conference Lines in robbing the farmers by charging freights to the limit the industry would bear; that the WWF was in conflict with the Conference Lines and that the best solution for both parties was an Australian national line to carry our goods overseas. We had teams of wharfies taking the leaflets to the farmers, sent out speakers to explain our case and we won support in the countryside. The vigilante groups were still-born. Communists played a key role in these activities. At the next union elections in the port a Communist who was secretary of the strike committee was elected senior vice president.

The experience of the 1956 strike, the way the mass of wharfies responded, their drive, their initiative, their power, showed me in life what I had only read before. It showed in low key, in miniature, the forces and method to carry out a revolution. It consolidated my confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class if correctly led in situations of crisis. A communist must have confidence in the working class of which he is a part or he cannot be a real communist.

I will give one example of industrial relations in which I was involved. In 1968 the employers were able to get legislation that gave us a guaranteed wage of \$53 a week, but gave the employers the right to permanent labor, with the pool of SEAL labor they could call on if they needed more. When not working any day Monday to Friday, that time was paid for and called idle time. We had to nominate which company we wanted to work for, and I nominated for Fremantle Stevedoring Co because I thought no delegates would be going there. This company had much of the work, a lot of it dirty, particularly through the Bakke line. We got a great deal of work, overtime and weekends, with pay well ahead of the rest of the port but no idle time off. This caused conflict among the union members. I led the campaign for sharing of idle time and for efforts to equalise pay throughout the port. I was treasurer of the WWF branch at the time but could get no support from the rest of the port committee. Finally I organised a mass resignation from the company, which we had a right to do individually. Fremantle Stevedoring had other fish to fry, they wanted more men, and they rocked the local WWF and the National Council of the WWF by accepting all the resignations. Panic! We had idle time and equalisation within a very few days. One of the weapons was a set of humorous verses *The Bakke Boat Convicts* with marks of the convicts. It was roneod and went around the port like wildfire and got into shipping offices all around Australia. Humour can be a weapon in the class struggle.

A key role in developing party influence was the issuing of a party bulletin SMOKO. It included issues and incidents on the wharf, national industrial issues, peace questions, work-farmer unity and about the activities and policies of the Communist Party. It became so popular that non-party wharfies would take a bundle from us at the pick up as they were going to a ship. They brought us information for SMOKO. We commented on industrial and political struggles, and put the analysis of the party to the wharfies.

For most of the time, from 1953 to 1970, I was the editor and main writer of SMOKO. In discussion and arguments at the branch meetings, by comments from wharfies about articles, from varied

responses to different issues of the bulletin, I learnt a lot on how to write for a particular audience. I urged for a more colloquial style, beginning with more job news and linking the political lessons with local news as much as possible. I was often in conflict with others in the branch who wanted a more orthodox political statement. But in the process I did learn to adjust more to the opinions of other communists, to look for a common ground, to work as part of a collective.

But in the middle sixties, the influences that took the Communist Party away from a revolutionary line were becoming clearer. It surfaced with the trial of two Soviet writers, Daniel and Synavsky for anti-Soviet writing. Some of the Party criticised the Soviet Union for the charges and the trial. I had read some of Synavsky's novels, and agreed with the charges.

The real split came when the Warsaw Pact armies moved into Czechoslovakia in 1968. I had read about the Sudeten Germans (in West Czechoslovakia) who were the fifth column for Hitler in 1939, many of whom had been expelled in 1945-46 but had come back as "tourists". I knew that in 1939 Czechoslovakia was the door through which Hitler planned to attack the Soviet Union. It is the key door which US imperialism wants open for its attack on the socialist countries. I was part of a minority of communists in WA who supported the actions of the Warsaw Pact countries to forestall the Pentagon plans. If I needed confirmation it was to see on TV Shirley Black, that is Shirley Temple, a CIA agent crying after getting out of Czechoslovakia. When these and other issues showed the anti-Marxist line of the leadership and the majority of the members and it came to a head in expulsion of a major branch, I joined with others who wanted to carry on a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary line and took part in the formation of the Socialist Party.

Coming back to the third task I set myself, to write the poetry of workers in industry. There were plenty of examples of what I call verse; some poor, some good. But I found very few examples of poetry from which I could learn. My first attempts were verses about industrial struggles, but were not poetry. I read as widely as I could on aesthetics. I found the proposition of Gorki of the close relationship of literature with the work processes very useful, an important starting point. But I had to have the sensuous emotional experiences in industry before I had the basis on which to work. There was a lot of discussion about writing in the Communist Party, in papers and magazines in the Eastern States, and a fair amount of heated discussion in WA. But I was on a lone path in my striving for a poetry of industry. I think I first succeeded in 1954 with a sonnet

Early Finish Midnight Shift

*Our eyes were burnt with floodlight, rasped with dust;
Dawn on the river flows on our eyes like sleep;
Ears jarred all night by winches clogged with rust;
Now in our ears the sea breathes slow and deep.
Shovel and stone have torn at wrist and shoulder;
Now strength runs back as smoothly as the tide:
Now we have seized a few hours sold to labour,
And cross the river to the homeward side.*

*Mankind stands eager on the bank of time.
The chains of centuries lie at his feet,
And history in his hands like rivers flow.
The patient shovels undermine the prisons,
Hurry the dawn where man and freedom meet;
We'll cross our rivers sooner than we know.*

and in a different way, *Unfinished Letter* in the same year.

I think that with *Hammers and Seagulls* and *Delegate* that I have written what I set out to do. In *Speak For Us, Pablo Neruda* I have gone further in showing how industrial and social experiences change the character of people, bring them to a working class position. I have tried to apply dialectical materialism in the planning and writing of a poem. It can apply and be useful in other creative writing. I look for the main conflict and the opposing forces in the issue or experience; look for the development of that conflict and where it leads to a new position - possibly from a personal to a social or political position. That is the general direction of learning. For poetry, I think it is necessary to be based on sensuous and emotional experience - much better if it is based on the experience and expression of all the five senses. I write from a partisan position; I am emotionally and socially involved. (Many modern poets write as tourists, from one sense only, the sense of sight, and are not emotionally involved.)

I found that the writing I did for the bulletin and for leaflets helped me in writing poetry. Some leaflets or part of leaflets began to develop into poems. Lines of poetry crept into leaflets. The reading of Marxism to understand aesthetics and the content and technique of writing helped me to understand political problems. But it was above all my reading of Marxism-Leninism and trying to apply it to local national and international issues that consolidated me as a communist.

My Experience of the Western Australian Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union

Margaret Rear†

I first became involved with the Miscellaneous Workers Union in about 1961. I accepted a position with the Fremantle District Council of the ALP. Now at that time the ALP was housed in the Fremantle Trades Hall, a very old building, but one which is full of history. The Miscellaneous Workers' Union was based in a very, very small office in the Trades Hall. It housed the Secretary, Don Lippiatt, an Organiser and the Typist and they were virtually sitting on each other's back. There were times when the work of the MWU was excessive and I was called in to help them if I had nothing much to do and that's what started my time with MWU. That was in about 1961.

Now in 1963 the Union had grown to about 1400 members and even though that is small they were spread right through the metropolitan area and in the southwest land division. So not only were the finances of the union extremely limited but it cost a lot of money to organize because the members were so spread out. Remember this was in the days before payroll deduction of membership fees, so every member had to be visited for the fees to be collected. So we needed vehicles to get around to the workplaces on a regular basis. This was where the Federal Office of the MSU came to our aid by giving us support with research material to help us further the awards for those people that we had enrolled and also to help us with the running costs of the union.

In 1963 when the Fremantle District Council disbanded, the MWU moved into a larger office and at that time the union engaged Bill Latter, I expect most of you know who he is. He came in as a research officer. At that same time the funds of the union were very very low. We gained preference clauses, which meant that employers would give preference in employment to union members. The first preference award was the Bag, Sack and Textile. But at that time the Secretary had been also visiting the independent schools and he went to St Hilda's and in the kitchen the cook, whose name was Verna, was very, very anti-union. She never had a kind word to say to him at all. Her husband was a member of the union. He was quite happy with it all. However, Verna refused to join and of course the day that the preference clause was put into the independent schools award, Mr Lippiatt flew back to the office and ran off some clauses and zipped back up to Mosman Park and the first one to ever get one was Verna and then she did join the union. She just couldn't argue any more, and I think she was quite surprised about being a unionist - in the end she was quite happy about it.

* This paper was first presented as a seminar, "Women in Unions: My Experience of the WA Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union", in the WA Labour History Seminar Series at UWA in June 1988.

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The preference clause was put into the award by the WA Industrial Commission. The union had to apply to have it put in. It meant that a person joined the union or they had the option to seek an exemption from the Industrial Commission and then they had to pay the equivalent of the annual contribution into bread and milk and I think that then went into a charity. What we found from that was that people really didn't object to being a member of the union, what they objected to was having to pay. And this was how the funds of the union then increased.

In about 1968 the Fremantle Trades Hall was condemned. It either had to have extensive repair or it had to be sold or pulled down. So that meant that we had to move to Perth. That was a good thing in one sense because the union was then nearer the industrial commission and it was in the same building as the Trades and Labour Council and with other unions where they could call upon the researching material and their knowledge. But one of the sad things was that the waterfront watchmen's section that had been the base of the formation of the WA branch of the union, was in Fremantle. They decided that because the union had moved to Perth they would go back to the Maritime Workers' Union. They were the people who started the union off, a band of about 49 people who formed the WA branch of the MWU, so it was sad to see them leave.

During this time also we took in two big unions the Tanners and Leather dresses and the Ambulance Officers' Union. Now prior to the Ambulance Officers' section becoming part the MWU, the ambulances were manned by one man. It was only after union involvement and the encouragement by the union leaders to those men that we were able to get the two-man crews that we have today. The Ambulance Officers' union had an occurrence book at the time and in it they registered tragedies that had occurred because they only had one man on the vehicles and that was something that the MWU was able to change.

In 1968 also the Chemical Workers' Union became part of the MWU. That was a wonderful experience for us because prior to that the union members never actually had any involvement and the officials spent so much time trying to encourage them to get actively involved. Apart from the Waterfront Watchmen's section who were always united and very interested in their union, we never had any members with a history of organisation. They were in industries that were not traditionally strongly unionised. So before the Chemical Workers' coming in we never really had much interaction with our members but the Chemical Workers' were a very solid group and formed a very militant part of our union.

In 1969 the MWU also started the Credit Union. That went on for about four years and eventually merged with United Credit Union as it is today. Also at that time the Watchmakers and Jewellers and Optical Mechanics became part of the union, but they were only a very small group. Most of the unions that had amalgamated with the MWU prior to about 1980 were little tiny unions that just couldn't exist on their own any more. None of them had full time officials and they were usually run by the Secretary of the Trades Hall in Fremantle. That also gave the Secretary a bit of extra income.

In 1976 a great tragedy for the WA labour movement occurred when the Secretary of the MWU Don Lippiatt died suddenly. He was a most dedicated man and really worked himself too hard looking after the interests of the members. At that time his position as Secretary was filled by Clive Brown, the present Secretary of the TLC.

Now in 1980, we had to move from the Trades Hall in Perth because that was going to undergo extensive renovation, and we moved into a little office in Hay Street. It was a passage way and about three rooms and we knew where everybody was and where everyone was going because there were no secrets at all, we were so cramped in that place.

In 1980, the Water Supply Union and MWU amalgamated. That again was another wonderful experience for me, going to their premises in Wellington Street and actually seeing union members in there talking to each other and making use of the facilities that the union had provided for them. That was really tremendous because it was something that we'd never experienced before. Well, that happy band of men amalgamated with us. At that time also there was the ballot for the Secretaryship of the Cleaners' and Caretakers' Union. For many years our Federal Secretary and President had been coming over here trying to talk the Cleaners' and Caretakers' into amalgamating. The award was just based on the federal award and the MWU had coverage for the industry everywhere except WA. So the WA Cleaners' and Caretakers' Union just did nothing and got the benefit of the work done by the MWU in other States. Now their leaders knew that the members would be better off under the umbrella of the MWU than with its moribund executive but it would never ever move toward amalgamation. The result was that wages in WA always lagged behind. In the end there was an election and Jeanette O'Keefe stood for Secretary. She could see the needs of members and we strongly supported her. Her election cleared the way for the amalgamation. It was very important to me because I knew how hard Mr Gietzelt, Mr Cameron and Don Lippiatt had worked toward an amalgamation but it wasn't until 1982 that it came to fruition because of the obstruction of the Cleaners' old leaders.

After that time we also had an amalgamation with the Preschool Teachers Union and the Hospital Employees Union. So I've seen the union grow from 1400 members when I first came to work there to about 22,000 now. Our staff has increased from 3 to 42 and now we have many services available to members like the workers' compensation department and migrant services.

To appreciate just how great an improvement this has been you have to realise how poor and weak the union was at different points of its existence. I remember one Christmas, it was our first Christmas at Perth Trades Hall and we had been told at 11 o'clock you down tools, the TLC is putting on a party and everybody has got to go. So we came along in our best clothes and waited. At about 11 o'clock, the shop steward for the Trades Hall girls came along and asked why on earth we weren't upstairs feasting with the rest of the people in the Trades Hall. Well, the reason was we were waiting for Mr. Lippiatt to come back from collecting union fees, so that we could whip down the Bank, so that we could get paid and we could enjoy the Christmas season too. So that's how bad things were at that

time. The MWU took on all the hard and distant industries which other unions neglected, and this put a tremendous strain on resources - we really existed from hand to mouth. Now we have Branches up at Karratha and down in the South West with their own full time organisers and office staff, and just last year we purchased our first holiday homes. One lot up in Shark Bay and another lot down at Augusta. And we also have some land at Gilderton that we hope to build on.

The waterfront watchmen also provide some interesting stories about the character of the MWU in its early days. They were a wonderful band of people and they looked after each other. They were all keen unionists, they were really interested in the union and what it was doing for them, but they were also rogues and my father amongst them. One of the duties that we had when we moved to Perth was to get these men to work. Say for instance that on Friday a ship had sacked its watchmen because it was preparing to go that afternoon, and something would happen which necessitated the ship staying in port. Well then we had to find another watchman. Now there were a lot of pensioner watchmen, and they knew where they were on the roster, and they knew what ships were coming in, so they knew that if they made themselves scarce at the weekends someone would have to take this job and they'd get the better job later. Or, maybe the extra work for this week was going to muck their pension up. Now if this situation arose in the morning Mr Lippiatt would go out and find them but if it happened after lunch time well Mr Lippiatt would be out doing his rounds seeing the other members and it was left to us to try and find a watchman. You've got no idea how they could hide. I think I knew the name of every club and hotel in and around Fremantle. You'd ring their homes and you'd say to their wives, "Is so and so in?" "No!" they'd reply, and you'd know darn well he was there but there was nothing you could do. That was when we were in Perth.

When we were in Fremantle it wasn't so bad because we only had to walk up the street and we'd find them because they'd only be out there in one of the Hotels or out shopping with their wives and you'd say right there's a job for you, so that wasn't so bad. But they were really, truly a wonderful band of people. They came from the wharves and from the ships. They were people who perhaps had a disability and could no longer work at the job they had and they were given the lighter duty in the watchmen's section. They had a terrible time in the beginning because employment was by free selection. They had no roster and it was the way they smiled sweetly at that the shipping company bosses that determined whether they got a job or not. I know my own father for two years walked Fremantle and couldn't get a job because of his union involvement. It was only after a hard struggle that the watchmen, and the wharfies and painters and dockers for that matter, got a roster. The wharf was the main source of work for so many people and it was that comradeship that helping, and the militancy that kept the unions in the port. We can be thankful to those unions for many of the conditions that we have today.

Nowadays the union is much better organised but in some ways I miss the old struggles. I miss the closeness and the involvement of people, working as a team, that we had in the Fremantle Trades Hall. I miss that very much, because it wasn't just the unions there we also had the Labor politicians who used to come down to the Trades Hall of a morning and interview people who had housing

problems, or worries of that sort. And that involved us in a way too, we'd have people who were coming in who were migrants who needed help and if the politicians had gone we'd get involved with them and it just broadened your outlook and made us understand the problems that all people have. I miss that.

On the other hand there are things that we've gained. Now we've got photocopiers that sort and collate. In the old days if you needed a copy there was no alternative but to sit down at the typewriter and type it. We've got a word-processor now and we're looking to get a new computer this year. That's really something, but we've struggled along and we've taken over other unions and its just become a part of our life. I don't know of any single thing that I've enjoyed more, I've loved every minute of it. It's a challenge, it's doing something for people. You take the abuse that you get over the phone and you have people saying what's the union doing for me, but then I find that one person who sobs on your shoulder and you're able to help. It might be a workers' compensation matter, anything, but that's what makes it worthwhile - being able to help people. But one person can't do much. Working for a union is definitely a team spirit thing and I think that's what has made the MWU so strong, its the continuation of that team spirit, the support staff helping new organisers, helping them prepare their work to go to the Commission, and that's what we're doing and I think the staff does it very well.

Actually, when I was with the ALP and I said we all joined forces and helped each other, if the Misco's had an overload of work, then I would take some of the work away and I would do in my office. Now we had a newspaper, we still have it going - the Federation News. It used to be delivered to all the MWU branches and it was their responsibility to get it out to the members. We had one of those wretched address-o-graph machines that never printed very clearly. But we had Paddy Troy, Mr Lippiatt himself, we had the organiser and anybody we could rake in that was in the building, getting all these magazines out. And everyone shared the objective. Everybody rolled up their sleeves and got into it and helped each other. When I had my second child in 1963, I didn't want to leave him and come back to work so Don would get the typewriter and all the statements or labels or circulars, and he would dump the typewriter at my place and the work, and then come back the next day and pick it up.

The same thing happened with the credit union. My husband had had enough of me rushing off to work and he said "that's it!" and I gave my notice. I left in 1969 at Christmas time, bade everybody a fond farewell, and I think March next year I was back again, because the Misco's had started off the Credit Union jointly with the Commission Agents in the TAB agency. They got it going and then it just went into limbo. It wasn't going anywhere. So Mr Lippiatt asked me if I'd come back and get the bookwork going - see what we could do. Four years later it had grown to about 1000 members. That Credit Union operated from my lounge room, and it was nothing to see an ambulance pull up out the front, the ambulance officer get out, belt up to the door and Mrs Rear would hand him \$20 out of her housekeeping, which was his withdrawal from the Credit Union, and off he'd go. Another time a car would come up and out would get a gentleman in a uniform, put on a hat and I'd think, goodness

the neighbours will think it's the police coming to the door, but it was a prison officer you see. He wanted to do some Credit Union business.

But it just got too much. It got too big and we had to come back to the Perth Trades Hall. We packed all our equipment into the boot of Don's little car and moved the Credit Union back up to Perth. But that was a wonderful experience. I actually had interaction with the members through that. I mentioned just recently when we started off with our holiday cottages, the different attitude people have on the telephone when they were speaking to you. Now if they've got a problem at work, they don't like you at all. They use you - they get really stroppy if you can't solve the problem immediately, or you can't tell them what they want to hear. But when they talk to you about their holiday cottages, it's a different story. Then they love you, because they are thinking "the union's done this for me". It's really amazing. Our members really loved us when we were operating that Credit Union.

Another experience that I had that really rocked me was when I went to a social function. Now something I very rarely do is mention to anybody when I'm out where I work, because it just about starts a war. So this lady asked me where I worked and I did tell her. "Oh, wonderful!" We really helped her husband. We got him money - he was going to be made redundant because he was too old. His workmates stood beside him and the union organiser, and the social welfare worker really helped her. They ended up getting about \$8,000 for the husband and the wife was very happy. Well, a little bit later in the evening somebody mentioned politics and unions, and here was this same woman, who a little while before was telling me what wonderful people I work for, downing trade unions as if they should have been taken off the face of the earth. So what you've got are people, though they're part of the union and they're happy with their union, they can say such anti-union things in general conversation. That really amazed me. I couldn't understand how they could work that out in their minds, because it is really all one union movement. But that's the way people feel about it.

And the way the Labor Party has been changing hasn't helped us overcome this type of view. I don't see labor politicians being in the same mould any more. Take the situation we had in the 1950s and 1960s when housing was very hard to come by and the newly arrived migrant people that were in Fremantle at the time they all needed help and the wonderful thing was that they could actually come into the Trades Hall where their trade union was and see the Labor politicians who would then ring up the housing department and get them help. So that was the source of help for them, the unions and the politicians working together. It was really a wonderful thing to be down at the Trades Hall in Fremantle at that time. I think the whole system has changed so much. You can never go back to it being that way, but it's a great pity. I would like to see ordinary working people given that kind of help today with the unions doing industrial work and offering services like the Credit Union and the politicians working in with them but I don't think that can be any more.

For one thing the unions are just so big. You take the Misco's, we now have 42 people working in

our office. I think we've got twelve support staff and the rest of them are officials. But one good change is that before there weren't many women working for unions, and now that is changing. Without the contribution of the female research officer and the female organizers I don't know how we would understand the problems of the women members, particularly when it comes to the children, childcare and the need for those facilities for working women. We've had a programme on the needs of part time women in the workforce, we haven't got the report finished on that yet but it is part of the result of having women officials and officers in the union. They've made a wonderful contribution.

However, it's only of recent years really that the women in the workforce have been standing up for themselves and really drawing attention to the conditions they have to work in. You go back to the 60's, there were very few women who were really part of the workforce. I mean, I can remember many years ago I worked for the Waterside Workers Federation and the policy was then that if you got married you had to leave. That was the trade union and they were always in the forefront with giving people better conditions but that was their policy. I can remember when we got our first woman State Councillor, Dawn Townsend, and that was really something to have a woman sitting on a State Council of the union, and she did a very good job for the people she was representing. She came out of Joyce Bros. Bag Sack and Textile Section. I can also remember when Jeanette O'Keefe took over secretaryship of the Cleaners' and Caretakers' Union and her victory cleared the way for the amalgamation with the MWU, which had previously been blocked by the leaders of the Cleaners' union. In the early days of the union, women were conditioned to look to the men to be the leaders, and probably that was why they retained the male domination in the union because of that theory. Now these women felt they needed the protection of a man and probably felt they couldn't do the job as well. But they changed in their thinking. It's not just young women who have caused that change but the older women have also changed their ideas on that question.

One of my vivid memories from when I was younger is that it used to be great fun watching the Labour Day procession in Fremantle, but they faded out in the late 1960's. I was also secretary of Mayday. It was a howling success. It was a really wonderful success. There were floats depicting the struggle and there was always a band. We had children dancing around the maypole, lots of activities on the Fremantle esplanade, but again with the closure of the Fremantle Trades Hall all that fizzled out because there was no central meeting place and that was a great pity. I think it's wonderful to see groups of people with common interests getting together, enjoying themselves with their families. It was a really wonderful day. In fact it was a demonstration that led to the downfall of the Coastal Docks, Rivers and Harbour Workers' Union, which started off the MWU. We knew some people who were to be evicted from their house and I think it was a seaman's wife there who was expecting a child, and they had been looking for housing for so long and this is the 1950's when housing was very, very bad. The dockies struck to support the wife of one of their workmates so she wouldn't be put out of their house and that was just one strike too many. The conservative Government and the public servants just weren't interested. But you see the unionists weren't doing something for their own sake, like getting more money. They weren't doing something for better

conditions. They were doing something to help one of their own, and so their union got de-registered for causing 'unnecessary strikes'. But out of something bad came the MWU.

When we have a problem working in the union office, like a problem with a member abusing us over the phone, we've got to remember that that person has a problem and they've got no one else to turn to except the union, particularly if it's work related. Not all of them are work related. For some of them we might have to make an appointment with our Solicitors for them to resolve the problem. It could be an argument with the next door neighbour, but they'll ring the union because they know that they can get help there. So what you've got to realise is that though they have the problem they don't know where to turn except to us so you've just got to be very very tactful and not take the abuse as if it's being directed at you personally. They're angry at the world, particularly people who are perhaps supporting parents, they're on workers' compensation, their payments have stopped and they just don't know what to do, so they get in touch with the union and we're able to help them.

Particularly as an administrative worker in a union office you've got to be tactful. When there is a particular case of misfortune the union has a distress fund. So if any member was in financial difficulty through being sick, or if worker's compensation has stopped, we are able to help them with that and that's a big relief to them. Usually we ask them once their compensation payments have started again to pay it back to the fund, but if they can't well we accept it. So that there's all sorts of help there.

The increase in staff numbers in the MWU office has certainly made life a lot easier but then we've been very fortunate in the people that we've had as officials, particularly in the position of Secretary. Don Lippiatt was a waterside worker, he was actually a crane driver but he was a very intelligent and well read man. Where the Secretary was elected from the rank and file he would come in and he would have the interest of the workers at heart. He would know where he wanted the union to go but he wouldn't have any idea at all perhaps about advocacy, about preparing things for the commission, writing a letter, preparing the minutes and this is where the female staff in the trade unions offices started to have a real impact because they would actually train the secretary, because they would've been through it all with the previous one and they'd go through it with another one. The same applies to new organisers and industrial staff. They would have to be taught how the particular office works and that job would be done by the female office staff. So if the union got a really good office worker they knew she was worth her weight in gold. We still have to support our people but, unlike other organisations, we've never really been in that position that the Secretary didn't know where the union was going. We've been very fortunate in that way.

It's just so important that the union movement be well organised and know where it's heading. I can remember Don Lippiatt saying to me a long time ago that if we're not careful his children and my children are going to refight for the conditions that his father and my father won, and that's very true. You must be on your guard all the time and we've got to have good leaders and people who are ready

to work hard to keep the unions going. You think about it, the seventeen and a half percent annual leave loading, weekend penalties, they're always trying to take them away and if the unions get lazy we could very easily lose them. You've only got to lose one right, and you can lose lots of others. Vigilance, that's the name of the game!

So we make an effort on behalf of our members no matter where they are. One of the things that we found maybe around 1974, was that the office didn't have consolidated copy of any of its awards. Now, we didn't have all the computer equipment as we do have now. So what we set about doing was going to the Gazettes and reconstructing and consolidating the awards, and that service has gone on ever since there. What we do is have a replacement page service for all our shop stewards and members if they want it, but mostly the shop stewards who are the contact point for the union in the workplace. So that the moment an award is amended the replacement pages are sent up to them, they can have their choice of the A4 size or we have the smaller A5 in a plastic files that they can keep in their pocket if they want it, so that they've got it on the job. We also service some employers who don't go to the Confederation but want a copy of the award and we charge them for that service, and they too get the replacement pages. So that is a service to all the shop stewards, so in every workplace, there's no reason why they shouldn't have an up-to-date copy of the award.

Another service we provide is through our Workers' Compensation Department. That came about after the amalgamation with the Hospital Employees' Union. Peter Brash is our Workers' Compensation officer and he has an assistant down there with him. That itself is a free service to the members, they don't have to go off and find a solicitor who will charge them an arm and a leg. If we can't solve it we send them to a solicitor for the initial interview without cost to them. Most times the problem will be resolved with the first interview.

We have another small service to our members that also developed from the hospital section. If they are off sick, and their leave credits run out and they're going to be off for a long period, we give them only a small, token amount of \$6 for each week they're off. But they seem to be very grateful for that contribution. Also we have the death benefit of \$1,000, that has been a great help for a large number of members' spouses. We also have a library which now is quite a good one. We were fortunate enough to buy some old back gazettes from the Fremantle Trades Hall and that started the library off. We have a lady who comes in just a few hours a week works in the library, puts everything away, keeps track of our subscriptions and so on.

One of the difficulties these days is that it's very hard to find people who'll really put their heart into the job the way that we used to in earlier days. For instance we're just losing one of our office workers who's been with us for about 11 years, she's been absolutely marvelous, and we'll miss her very much. But they don't seem to have the same dedication that they used to have. We've just recently put on another lady in our industrial section and she's working out very well indeed. You have to be dedicated. I used to think that you used to have to be 99c in the dollar to work in a trade union for the hard work which is required and the abuse you got, but really it is just dedication and

having a great desire to help people. If you haven't got that desire, if you think it's just a job, then you're never going to get anywhere in the trade union movement. Now, I think that's what has to come through with our elected officials and organisers too. They're very, very dedicated people and I think their wives and in some cases their husbands have to be too. Because the support they give them helps them along in the job. It's a team effort, it's a family and you really have to get involved if you're going to do the job properly.

What makes it worthwhile is the challenge, the feeling that you helped your fellow man. That's what gives union workers the drive they need - it's just the love of the job.

I think women have got a great future in the union movement. They're part of the workforce now. Years ago women weren't part of the workforce they stayed at home and attended their children, but now they're out in the workforce and they have a voice, because it's their livelihood and they've got to speak up for themselves and I think they're doing it pretty well. They've got a great contribution to make in all facets of life. We're having more and more in the union organisation itself, at the moment we have a female president and that was something that was unheard of, but she's really a dedicated lady, she's with the union all the way. It's not just a figure head situation. She really gets involved in the union's activities. The female members on our organising staff are treated with the same respect as the men were, they're there to do a job. In many areas we have a majority of female members and the women organisers are vital. We need the females there to voice the women's point of view. But the union will always need men as well - they work as a team. I don't think that in our organisation women and men are treated in anyway differently. They're workmates, they're colleagues. And that is a really outstanding feature about our office but it is not the only place it occurs. I've been to other union offices - our own and others - around the country and I've found this same attitude. Women and men are just working as a team on behalf of their members - and that's another way in which the union movement is showing the way to the rest of society.

Retirement Provisions for Western Australian Nurses in the 1940's*

Fiona MacLean†

Introduction

The predominance of the belief that a woman's proper place is in the home is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the discrepancy between male and female earnings. However, such a belief has many other ramifications for working women. It limits their possibilities for being selected for jobs, of receiving appropriate training and promotion and even of continuing to be employed in positions they already hold. This paper deals with one aspect of women's employment, which has been neglected because of the prevailing conservative social attitudes, that is their retirement. If a woman is expected to marry and become dependant upon a male income, it is hardly surprising that provisions for her retirement have not seemed a cause for concern.

The particular circumstances of each occupation in which women are employed have given rise to different configurations of the same underlying problems. For nurses, who are the particular focus of this paper, efforts to achieve improved wages and conditions have been complicated by the additional aim of gaining increased status for the occupation.

In Western Australia in the nineteenth century nursing was considered little more than a variation of domestic service. Worse still, rumours circulated that nurses were also alcoholics and drug addicts. By improving the training and skills of nurses, Florence Nightingale and her followers did much to counter the poor image of nursing. In 1888 a Nightingale trainee arrived in Perth and the teaching of Florence Nightingale began reshaping attitudes to nursing in the local community.

But increased status for nurses came at a price. If the ideal man was a good provider, the ideal woman was well provided for. A nurse who modelled herself on Florence Nightingale did not rely on payment for the work she performed. Associated with the saintly apparition of the lady with the lamp was a spirit of dedication which floated far above material reward. The convent provided a pattern for nursing accommodation and in 1916 anyone who wished to train as a nurse in the Perth Public Hospital required a letter of recommendation from a clergyman. Tensions between a nurse's duty and her rights as a worker have continued to be felt to the present day.

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This essay focuses on the decade of the 1940's. It is a period of particular interest for the history of working women since it includes both the war years, when many new possibilities for women workers were revealed, and the immediate post-war years when male supremacy in the workplace was firmly re-asserted. The war years also had important consequences for retirement. Reductions in building activity and changes in domestic living arrangements caused shortages in rental accommodation. Perhaps even more significant was the fact that as a result of increased participation in the paid workforce women were often less able to care for elderly members of the family.

During the 1940s there were a range of services which offered financial assistance and accommodation to the elderly. Since the turn of the century the Federal Government had provided old age pensions. There were private nursing homes as well as a few operated by religious or voluntary organisations which were free of charge. The well paid and thrifty could also make use of banks and investments to save for the future. This paper looks at two other forms of assistance, superannuation and the Women's Home. Each are discussed in the light of their affect on WA nurses and steps taken by nurses to gain improved retirement provisions are also described. The final section offers some explanation of the particular strategies nurses pursued.

The Situation in 1940

Material published in the Journal of Western Australian Nurses¹ gives an indication of the insecurity which existed amongst nurses during this period. On the one hand there are the leading articles which attempt to buoy up confidence by relating stories of the extraordinary heroism of nurses in crisis situation, or by exhorting nurses to plan for the bigger and brighter future which would follow the war. On the other hand, there are the savings bank advertisements which in sharp contrast to today's promises of new cars and overseas trips, hone in directly at the fear of poverty. The Commonwealth Savings Bank, for instance, declares itself a "shield against adversity" and assures readers "you need never have that 'sink or swim' feeling - you need never fear the future - you're safe if you save."²

The prospects for single women who were retired or approaching retirement were particularly bleak. As was noted by the inspecting accountant in his report on the Women's Home in 1943, old women were less like in these years to be able to rely on the support of their families:

One factor tending to increase the claims for admission [to the home] is the enlistment of the son of the claimant and the employment of his wife, with the result that the old lady has nobody to look after her.³

This difficulty was compounded by the lack of suitable rental accommodation. Vicki Hobbs in her history of West Australian nursing describes a typical scenario which contributed to the shortage:

Many service men married while on leave but could not provide homes for their wives, so that in many cases the young wife and often a child boarded with the parents and grandparents some of whom in other times might have let rooms.⁴

One way in which nurses of the 1940's could attempt to provide for their retirement was through contribution to a superannuation scheme. Unfortunately, the schemes available at the time tended to be either poorly suited to the employment patterns of nurses or extremely meagre in the benefits they offered.

In 1939 the West Australian Government had introduced a superannuation scheme for State Government employees. According to a representative of the current State Superannuation Board, nurses employed in State public hospitals were eligible to take part in the scheme from its inception. Conversations with women who were employed as nurses at the time confirm the availability of a State superannuation scheme from at least the immediate post-war period.⁵ The issue is complicated, however, by minutes from a meeting of the Council of the Western Australian Nurse's Association, (WANA), which refer to a letter received from a nurse who had discovered she was not eligible for government superannuation because she was employed at a "Committee Hospital".⁶ Hospitals which came directly under the control of the Medical Department were often referred to as "Government Hospitals" and it would seem that the term "Committee Hospital" was used to distinguish those hospitals, (many of them large metropolitan hospitals), which were publicly funded but administered by a board or committee. In combination with the comments of the Superannuation Board Representative and the retired nurses, the letter suggests that during the 1940's State Government superannuation was available only to nurses employed at so called "Government Hospitals".

At hospitals where the Government scheme applied, eligibility was further constrained by requirements concerning the contributor's length of service with his or her employer. A recent pamphlet promoting the new State Government scheme currently being introduced, notes with reference to the old scheme that "membership was restricted to full-time, permanent employees of the State who had aggregated 7 years of service at the date of retirement". It goes on:

What's more, under the old scheme anyone who resigned, for career development or other reasons would have had to say goodbye to sizeable benefits. All they received back was their own contribution and a small amount of interest.⁷

Data which relates directly to the frequency of job changes of nurses in the 1940's is unavailable. However, the general labour market upheaval which accompanied the Second World War and its particular impact on women workers is well documented. In addition, the Federal Secretary of the Royal Australian Nursing Federation, (RANF), reported in September 1987 that:

a nurse's working life now spans an average of thirty years during which time she may hold an average of eight to twenty different nursing positions in any State or Territory of

Australia or overseas in both the private and the public sector.⁸

While it would be unwise to assume that current statistics would exactly reflect the situation which existed in the 1940's, the fact that these figures refer to careers with an average duration of thirty years does lend them some degree of general applicability. If, as seems likely, the mobility of nurses in the 1940's was similar to either that of the overall workforce of the time or that of the nurses in the present day, the number who accumulated seven years of service with their employer by the date of retirement must have been very small indeed.

There is no evidence of any employer sponsored or operated schemes for nurses who worked in the private sector at this time, but from at least the early 40's advertisements were published in the Journal of the Western Australian Nurses for schemes offered on an individual basis by private insurance companies.⁹ As far as nurses were concerned such schemes had an important advantage over the Government scheme in that they remained in place regardless of changes in employer. It was probably a recognition of this special appeal which prompted one company to begin dressing the model who appeared in their advertisement in the uniform of a student nurse.

While their immunity to the effects of job changes constituted a significant improvement on the Government scheme, the insurance company schemes were still far from ideal. In fact in many ways the service they offered varied little from a long-term savings account with a bank. Not only was the individual contributor responsible for the regular payment of contributions, but the financial benefits of the schemes were often minimal. Often too, policies were arranged to mature at a date many years prior to retirement so that they provided no real superannuation benefits at all. The experiences of Jean Stewart, one of the retired nurses with whom I spoke, provide an example of how poorly insurance company schemes, (or in her case a similar bank operated scheme), measured up as retirement provisions. When Jean's policy matured she found that the lump sum pay out she received was modest and that she still had several working years ahead of her. What had once been intended as superannuation was rapidly transformed into a new car.

For nurses in the 1940's who were considering superannuation as a source of income during retirement, there were two alternatives, neither of which was likely to prove satisfactory. On one hand there was the Government scheme for which nurses were rarely eligible, and on the other there were the insurance company schemes whose benefits were generally inadequate. From my conversations with retired nurses it would seem that the insurance company schemes were more widely patronised than the State Government scheme, however, none of these nurses considered that such schemes constituted realistic retirement provisions.

The Women's Home

The Women's Home belonged to a tradition of social welfare which preceded superannuation. From at least as early as 1855 the colony of Western Australia had had a Women's Home or Poor House as it was then known. There were retired nurses living in the Home between 1909 and 1942 when it was located in Fremantle in the buildings now occupied by the museum and art centre, and again after 1951 when the Home moved to the Mount Henry buildings in Como.¹⁰ However, according to Monnie Powell who was matron of the Home from 1942 until the mid sixties, there were no retired nurses in residence between 1942 and 1951 at the time when the Home was based at Woodbridge in Guildford.¹¹ While retired nurses did not in fact live at the Home for most of the 1940's, this did not rule it out as a possible option or necessary last resort. That retired nurses were able to find alternative accommodation during this period was probably largely the result of the action of nurses of the time which is discussed in a later section of the paper.

In 1942 American servicemen took over the Fremantle premises of the Women's Home and the Home and its occupants moved into Woodbridge. In 1884 when Woodbridge was first completed a local paper, The Inquirer, had declared it to be "the handsomest private residence that has as yet been erected in the colony."¹² After the high stone walls of the Home in Fremantle, the gracious architecture of Woodbridge must have provided a welcome relief for the new residents, but while the building may have had aesthetic attractions, its size and state of disrepair were also the source of a good deal of physical discomfort. The Honorary Secretary of the Perth Central Branch of the Housewives' Association was perhaps a little melodramatic in her comments to the Minister for Health:

Having visited these quarters, you will agree that the conditions are not hygienic. Visitors to the present home have reported the most disgusting conditions under which these women live.¹³

Her letter is also dated soon after the move to Woodbridge at the early stages of a process of repair and renovation which continued almost constantly throughout the 1940's. Nevertheless, there were serious defects with the accommodation at Woodbridge which received little or no attention throughout the period in which it served as the Women's Home.

On two occasions the Fire Brigade advised that a fire alarm and extinguishers should be installed and a water main laid to avoid fire risk to the Home. The response of the Undersecretary of the Medical Department was to explain that these precautions were an unnecessary expense since the Home was shortly to be relocated. In fact, as was previously indicated, the Women's Home remained at Woodbridge for over ten years. Overcrowding was also a problem at the Home and led to the use of verandas as dormitories. The Minister for Health informed the Premier that:

the verandahs are protected by canvas blinds, but the water drives right across some of the verandahs and in wild weather few if any of the beds escape a certain amount of rain.

Given the age of many of the women living at the home, it is particularly disturbing that the authorities knowingly allowed the situation to continue.

Added to the physical discomfort of Woodbridge as a building, was the psychological distress of the Women's Home as an institution. The Home did not specifically cater for old women, but offered shelter to any destitute woman who was not too obviously criminal, insane or acutely ill. Monnie Powell remembers that among the women who lived at Woodbridge were a mongoloid woman and a chronically incontinent woman, both of whom had lived their entire lives in charitable or Government institutions. In a letter to the Undersecretary in which she discussed the plans for the new Home to be built in Como, Monnie Powell suggested that Woodbridge should continue as a "Grade Two Institution". She explained that:

there will always be a number of undesirables and I have quite a big percentage semi-mental, dirty, profane police cases. I do not think it fair that decent old ladies should be forced to mix with these.

It is difficult now to accept a proposal which lumps together in one class the "semi-mental", "the dirty", "the profane" and "police cases", nevertheless, the implication is clear that for many of the women who lived at the Home the current arrangements were degrading.

An incident which occurred in 1947 reveals both the community disregard for the Home and its occupants and also the effect on one particular Woodbridge woman of living in a constant state of humiliation. When the principal of Guildford Grammar, the neighbouring boys' school, constructed a fence which blocked the road leading from the main highway to the Home, Elizabeth Berry wrote to the Mayor of Fremantle, the district in which she had previously lived. In her letter she described the problems the fence created for the nurses and also for firemen and ambulance drivers who might be called to attend at the Home. She even considered the danger of the barbed wire to the milkman and his horse. But she had become so self-effacing that the nearest she approached to arguing on the ground of her own need was to refer to the past contributions of women at the Home and the current work of their relations. As Elizabeth explained it, the women did not deserve the treatment they were receiving from the school authorities because:

many of the women who were in the home and several in it at present were the pioneers of Australia. Their relatives are still growing food for England and this country [and because] many of these elderly sick women had sons and grandsons at the last war.

When the Women's Home moved to Woodbridge, the new matron Monnie Powell had abolished many of the crudest features of institutionalised living. The women who lived at the Home were

not required to wear uniforms, the strict rationing of food was removed and there was no longer a system of pass cards for coming and going from the premises. The matron's aim was "to make everyone as happy and comfortable as possible". But there were limits to what was possible. No woman had a room of her own and they were all officially referred to as "inmates".

In summary then there were major drawbacks associated with two important forms of retirement assistance available to West Australian nurses in the 1940's. Government superannuation was limited in its coverage and impractical in its terms, while the schemes offered by private insurance companies were in many ways more like savings bank accounts than true superannuation. The Women's Home at Woodbridge, although less regimented and more aesthetically pleasing than it had been in Fremantle, was still a catch-all institution in cramped and run-down accommodation.

The Nurses' Campaigns¹⁵

One way in which nurses themselves attempted to improve retirement provisions, was by working to establish a superannuation scheme which would be tailored to their own specific needs.

In the late 1930's the Federal Government had proposed the introduction of a national insurance scheme to cover health and old age pensions. At meetings of both the Council of the Australian Trained Nurses' Association (WA Branch) and the Council of the Australian Nursing Federation, (the ANF or national parent body of the various state branches of the Australian Trained Nurses Association or ATNA), the formation by the ANF of an Approved Society under the scheme, was the subject of extended discussions. The ATNA (WA Branch) was particularly in favour of such a move and a hundred West Australian members indicated their support by filling in applications for membership of the foreshadowed Society. For reasons not clear from the ATNA minutes, the ANF finally decided against the formation of an Approved Society. As circumstances eventuated the decision was of little consequence for the government's insurance scheme fell victim to pressure from doctors and financial institutions and was never in fact implemented.

The ATNA and ANF took no further action on superannuation until in February 1946 the Council of the ANF included in a representation to the Prime Minister, a request for government intervention to establish a superannuation scheme for nurses. It would seem that the request met with little or no response from the Federal Government, for on 22 July 1946 the first of a series of negotiations between the nurses' Associations and various private insurance companies took place.

Negotiations continued for almost two years and were held at both National and State Council levels. When plans fell through at one level, another insurance company was contacted and discussion was reconvened with the other Council. Repeatedly, the issue of whether responsibility for the payment of contributions should lie with the individual, the Association or the insurance

company presented the major stumbling block to agreement being reached by the parties. However, at last in March 1948 an article signed by a representative of the AMP Society, appeared in the Journal of the West Australian Nurses.¹⁶ It announced that:

the Australian Trained Nurses' Association (West Australian Branch), through the Secretary Mrs B Garnsworthy, has entered into an arrangement with the AMP Society to provide a commendable voluntary scheme for all ATNA members and intending members.

Particular attention was drawn to the fact that

arrangements have been made for the deduction of premiums from salary at some hospitals, if preferred to yearly, half-yearly, or quarterly payments, and this convenience mode of payment may be extended to other hospitals once the response to the scheme warrants it.

Although this article has the ring of being the definitive statement on the subject, the problem of finding a suitable superannuation scheme for West Australian nurses was far from being solved. The AMP scheme referred to in the article actually offered very few improvements on the schemes already available from private insurance companies. No provision had been made in the scheme to prevent policies maturing at a date prior to retirement. In addition, the return on investment continued to be low. For a weekly commitment of 1s 4d a contributor could expect a payment of 152 pounds after a total investment of about 100 pounds. This implied an interest rate of about 3% per annum on an investment of 30 years. Perhaps the only significant advantage of the AMP scheme was the option of having contributions deducted from salary, and this was only available to nurses who worked in some hospitals.

Ironically, it was the very aspect of the scheme where some progress was evident which sparked dissatisfaction and a call for further action. At the Annual General Meeting of the ATNA held in August 1949, a member complained that she had met with little co-operation from government authorities regarding the deduction of private superannuation contributions from the salaries of nurses employed in Government Hospitals.¹⁸ The speaker recommended that in order to solve the problem the ATNA commence negotiations on superannuation with yet another private insurance company. Apart from their limited effectiveness, the other notable feature of the Associations' efforts in the area of superannuation was their failure to stimulate interest among the membership. Other than the support shown by ATNA (WA Branch) members for the formation of an Approved Society under the government insurance scheme, and the speech at the Annual General Meeting which has just been mentioned, nearly all discussion and decision making on the subject occurred at the meetings of the State or National Council.

Superannuation was on the agenda at the Annual General Meeting of the ATNA in 1946 and it was later reported in the Journal of the West Australian Nurses that "all present [felt] it a necessity".²³ While some nurses may have felt that superannuation was a necessity, the majority obviously did

not find the subject particularly interesting. Only 51 members of a total financial membership of almost 900 were present at the 1946 Annual General Meeting and this was only after the meeting had been deferred from an earlier date when attendance was not even sufficient to provide a quorum.²⁰

The Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses ²¹

A different approach to the issue of nurses' retirement was taken by the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses, many of whose members were themselves nurses and also members of the ATNA. Rather than pursuing superannuation as the Councils of the ATNA and ANF were doing, the Society's aim was to establish a house at which retired nurses could be provided with rent-free accommodation. Not only did the Society's goals differ from those of the Councils, there was also a sharp contrast between the protracted and inconclusive negotiations of the Councils and the Society's broad based support and sure-fire results.

Attendance at meetings provides an obvious measure of the general level of interest in the Society. On 18 March 1940 a General Meeting of the ATNA was held in order "to consider furthering the scheme for establishing a home for aged and incapacitated nurses".²² This was the first meeting of what was to become the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses and already it attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of nurses. Present at the meeting together with other interested nurses, were members of the ATNA Council and representatives of six nursing special interest groups. In later years when numbers were dwindling at ATNA meetings, the Society's meetings maintained high levels of attendance. As previously mentioned, it proved difficult to find a quorum for the ATNA Annual General Meeting in 1946. By contrast, it was reported that the Society's Annual General Meeting in 1946 was composed of "a very large attendance of Committee members, subscribers and friends". The year before, a similar situation arose. Only eleven members attended a General Meeting of the ATNA in December 1945, while more than a hundred were present at the Society's Annual General Meeting held in April of the same year.

Since many of the Society's members were also members of the ATNA, the variation in levels of attendance at meetings of the two organisations suggests not so much that nurses were more interested in the Society than the ATNA, as that they were more interested in the Society than other ATNA activities. The same conclusion can be drawn from the copious space devoted to news of the Society in the ATNA's official magazine, The Journal of the West Australian Nurses. Throughout the early 1940s no other issue, apart from nursing education, received more consistent attention than the Society. Not only did notices of forthcoming activities and reviews of previous events appear in The Journal, but almost without fail every issue included it was a list of recent donations and a statement of the Society's current bank balance.

The significance attached to the Society within the ATNA is also demonstrated by the career of Mrs

Garnsworthy, one of the Society's most successful fund raisers. Through her work for the Society, Mrs Garnsworthy rose rapidly to prominence within the wider sphere of the ATNA. At the second Annual General Meeting of the Society in April 1942, Mrs Garnsworthy was commended for her contribution and nominated to fill a vacancy on the Society's Committee. Later in 1942, the Society offered a prize to the person who could raise the most money for an outlay of not more than one pound. This prize was won by Mrs Garnsworthy who raised 25 pounds with a guessing competition based on a needlework picture. It was only a year later, in October 1943, that Mrs Garnsworthy was elected as Secretary of the WA Branch of the ATNA. The Society had recently purchased a house which was to become their home for retired nurses and the cover of the October 1943 edition of The Journal of the West Australian Nurses showed a photograph of the house surmounted by the headline "Mrs Garnsworthy Takes Over".

Widespread interest in the Society translated itself into a broad front of activity, directed firstly towards fund raising and then once a house had been purchased, towards furnishing. Most of the activity was on a small scale with much of it centering on either the hospitals at which nurses were employed or on the various ex-trainee associations which brought together practicing and non-practicing nurses who had trained at the same hospitals.

The core of the Society's fund was comprised of the annual membership subscription of 10 shillings, which was generally collected either by a hospital representative or a representative from one of the ex-trainee associations. Subscriptions were supplemented by donations from people outside the Society as well as by profits from fund raising activities conducted by the Society's members. Contributions came from a wide range of sources including doctors, patients and community organisations associated with the nursing profession. One which stands out from the lists published in The Journal of the West Australian Nurses with particular irony is the war saving certificate received from F.M. Windsor, a retired nurse and current resident of The Home of Peace. Had the Society begun its campaign a few years earlier, it is interesting to speculate on whether F.M.Windsor would have been among the home's first occupants.

Just prior to the purchase of the house, a benefit concert was held at the North Perth Town Hall and simultaneously broadcast on commercial radio. However, fund raising on this scale was exceptional. In most cases money was raised for the home through more modest events such as small afternoon tea and bridge parties. Once again the hospitals and ex-trainee societies served as important focuses for activity. Among other fundraising ventures recorded in The Journal, are the sale of flowers by the Children's Hospital Ex-trainee Association and a Freak Party held by nurses at the Perth Hospital.

During the furnishing phase of the Society's activities the roles of the different ex-trainee

associations and hospital groupings of nurses became highly visible. Several of the associations and groups elected to take responsibility for decorating a specific room or providing a particular piece of furniture or household service. The house was named in honour of Eleanor Harvey, a past president of the ATNA and first matron of King Edward Memorial Hospital whose ambition had been to establish a scheme which would provide for retired nurses. Some of the ex-trainee associations and hospital groupings followed this lead and dedicated their contributions to the memory of a well known representative of the hospital or association. The Children's Hospital Ex-trainees Association provided furniture for a bed sitting-room which they named in honour of Helen Holman who had been matron of their hospital. The Returned Sisters Association furnished another bed-sitting room which they in turn named in honour of Sister Watt who had nursed at the First World War. The Perth Ex-trainees Association provided the Home with bookshelves, books and a wireless. These the members dedicated to the memory of Anne Jewell who had trained at Perth Hospital and was killed during the Second World War in the sinking of the hospital ship *Centaur*.

A brief summary of the history of the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses will demonstrate how widespread interest and concerted action in support of the Society enabled it to move quickly and surely to accomplish its goals. When the Society was first formed in March 1940, it inherited a sum of 221 pounds from an earlier fund set up to provide a retirement home for nurses. By September 1941, eighteen months after the Society's first meeting, the original fund had more than doubled to reach a total of 454 pounds. Two years later in September 1943 the fund had almost doubled again and a deposit of 500 pounds was paid towards a house in Davies Road, Claremont, valued at 1,650 pounds. In less than a year the house was furnished and at the official opening in June 1944 five retired nurses were already in residence. During the following year all but one room in the house was occupied and the Society's Committee began to consider extensions. They were clearly in a position to do so, for by March 1947 the entire mortgage on the Eleanor Harvey Home had been paid off.

Reasons for the Strategy

It was suggested in the introduction to this paper that in any attempt to gain improved wages and conditions, nurses are confronted with two major obstacles. The first problem which they share with all women workers, is that of identifying a role for themselves as workers outside the home. In addition to this there is the more occupationally specific difficulty which arises from the conflict between nurses' rights as workers and their efforts to achieve increased status for the occupation. If these obstacles are kept in mind it becomes possible to provide explanations of why WA nurses during the 1940s were so much more successful in their attempts to establish a home for retired nurses than they were in their efforts to improve superannuation.

It is perhaps stating the obvious to remark that the conditioning nurses received as women,

provided them with motivations and skills which were more suited to the task of setting up a retirement home than that of developing a superannuation scheme. Work as a nurse sharpened and extended the motivations and skills women had acquired since childhood. But while cleaning wards and attending to patients developed house-keeping and care-giving skills, nursing accommodation frustrated all aspirations of becoming mistress in one's own home. Nurses in the late 1940's were lucky to have their own rooms, let alone their own houses. It is hardly surprising that living with these contradictions nurses were enthusiastic about a project which centred around buying and furnishing a house.

While nursing fostered traditional female values and abilities, it offered few opportunities to acquire the skills needed for financial management. In the 1940's such administrative responsibilities were entrusted only to a very few nurses employed at senior levels. At the same time, it was unusual for West Australian women at this time either to have been taught the skills required for financial administration, or to grow up with ambitions in this sphere. Nurses' lack of interest or lack of knowledge in financial and other forms of administration is evident from the fact that during the 1940's the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses required the assistance of an honorary male auditor, an honorary male solicitor and a Men's Advisory Committee. If the administration of retirement homes was difficult, clearly the prospect of developing an entire superannuation scheme would have been even more daunting.

Nurses' concern with the status of their occupation also played an important part in determining the way they handled the issue of retirement provisions. The ATNA had never been a radical organisation. The WA Branch had been formed with the primary aim of raising the status of trained nurses through the introduction of a recognised system of nursing education. However, in 1934 when a recognised nursing union, the WA Nursing Association (WANA), was established the ATNA's alignment of itself with the professional middle class became irrefutable. In general terms the overall effect of the nurses' concern with status was similar to that of gender conditioning. It facilitated the establishment of a retirement home and created problems for the development of a superannuation scheme.

With regard to superannuation, it is notable that ATNA and ANF efforts were almost entirely directed towards arranging a suitable scheme with one of the private insurance companies. There is only one definite and a second possible instance in which the Councils lobbied for government assistance on the matter. The closest that the Councils came to considering a superannuation scheme operated by nurses themselves was when a member of the ANF Council suggested that the ANF sponsor a workers' compensation scheme, and this the Journal bluntly reports "was not approved".²⁴ The possibility of a private sector employer sponsoring or operating a superannuation scheme did not even arise.

The ATNA and ANF negotiations with private insurance companies continued over a period of several years and included dealings with a number of companies. The fact that the improvements which resulted were so very limited in scope, suggests that it may only have been by enlisting government or employer support, or by setting up their own scheme that significant advances could have been made.

However, throughout the 1940s, beginning with the proposed national insurance scheme in the late 1930s and continuing with the increased government regulation of banking in mid 1940s, the role of financial institutions in Australia was a highly sensitive issue. For nurses to encroach on the territory of the financial institutions by requesting government sponsored superannuation or establishing a superannuation scheme operated by nurses, was to place at risk their relationship with the professional middle class. To blatantly bargain with employers over superannuation provisions, was an option which may have been open to the WANA, but would certainly not have been an alternative considered by the ATNA.

The establishment of a retirement home for nurses was a very different matter. Since it had only negligible impact on the existing distribution of wealth and power in society, it was the kind of non-political, charitable enterprise which local dignitaries could afford to patronise. Thus, the local Mayor became the Honorary Solicitor for the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated Nurses, his wife became the Society's official patron, and Lady Mitchell, the Governor's wife accepted the invitation to formally open the home.²⁵ No doubt the Society's association with respected public figures such as these raised the level of interest and involvement among the ATNA members who were concerned with the status of nurses in the community. If to seek government assistance on superannuation, or to establish a superannuation scheme operated by nurses was to set the ATNA in opposition to the interests of the middle classes, the Society for the Care of Aged or Incapacitated nurses provided an opportunity to work side by side with members of the professional middle class on a project where the roles of patron and patronised were comfortably blurred.

Conclusion

Western Australian nurses in the 1940's were clearly very successful in their aim of establishing a retirement home for nurses. It should not, however, be assumed that the Eleanor Harvey House provided a complete solution to the problems which confronted retired nurses. In 1946 there were approximately 1,500 registered trained nurses in Western Australia and the home could offer accommodation to only eight retired nurses. As previously mentioned, within two years of the opening of the home it was already perceived that "additions and extensions [were] very necessary in the near future."²⁶ Nevertheless those women who were "guests" at the Eleanor Harvey House

lived in conditions of comfort and dignity which were not afforded to "inmates" at the Women's Home. Each woman who lived at the Eleanor Harvey House had her own room which if she did not wish to furnish it herself was furnished by one of the Ex-trainee or other smaller nursing organisations. The naming of the home as well as the particular rooms in honour of past nurses signalled the role of Eleanor Harvey House as a tribute to the work of past nurses. The knowledge that the home had been established specifically for retired nurses provided the women who lived there with very concrete evidence of the respect of women who now worked as nurses.

It may be that the larger an institution becomes the less individual requirements for comfort and dignity can be met. Perhaps for retirement provisions on a large scale, superannuation is by its very nature preferable to a retirement home.

Changes which have taken place over the past forty years, particularly in regard to the role of women in society and the role of white collar unions in industrial relations, have made it possible for the RANF to recently make significant improvements to superannuation schemes available to nurses. In July 1987 the Health Employees' Superannuation Trust of Australia, (HESTA), was launched to provide a national superannuation scheme for nurses and other employees in the health sector.

Many of the disadvantages associated with the schemes available to nurses in the 1940's have been overcome by HESTA. Since the scheme is union operated portability is no longer a problem. Nurses can continue to contribute to the scheme regardless of whether or how often they change their employer. The question of who should be responsible for the collection of contributions has been settled by establishing that the basic contributions to the fund will consist of an additional percentage or fixed amount of the salary which is paid by the employer to the fund. The Federal Government's Operational Standards for Occupational Superannuation Funds ensure that all employer contributions are preserved until genuine retirement at or after 55, thus avoiding the situation which often occurred with private insurance company schemes which matured at a set date. HESTA is not entirely operated by nurses, nevertheless, nurses will have far greater control over the profitability of the superannuation fund than they did over any fund which existed in the 1940's.

NOTES

1. The Journal of the Western Australian Nurses, (from 1945 The Journal of the West Australian Nurses) was published by the Australasian Trained Nursing Association (W.A. Branch),
2. JWAN, Vol. 5, No. 8, March 1940 and Vol. 5, No. 2, November 1939.
3. Report of the inspecting accountant to the Under Treasurer, Health Department File "Women's Home Buildings", 862/42, 25 November 1943.

4. Victoria Hobbs, But Westward Look: Nursing in Wesern Australia, 1829-1979 (University of Western Australia Press for the Royal Australian Nursing Federation (W.A. Branch), 1980) p 124.
5. Phyllis Lee, Edith Harler, Jean Stewart and Monnie Powell.
6. Minutes of the Western Australian Nursing Association, Book 2, pp. 18-19.
7. "Government Employees' Superannuation Fund : The Super Solution" (Superannuation Board of Western Australia, 10 Kings Park Road, West Perth) p. 3.
8. Fiona Kyle, "National Superannuation Scheme Launch", The Australian Nurses Journal, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1987, p. 15.
9. JWAN, Vol. 6, No. 6, March 1941 and Vol. 6, No. 9, June 1941.
10. Hobbs, pp. 61, 125.
11. Noted in a letter received from Monnie Powell, November 1987.
12. The Inquirer, 29 October, 1884.
13. Health Department File, "Women's Home Buildings", 862/42 contains a number of entries on this and related questions. This information is listed as follows: 12/9/42, f. 6; 18/10/45, f. 123; 8/8/46, f. 174 and Elizabeth J. Berry's letter to Mayor Gibson ff. 238-239. Other relevant material is contained in Health Department File, "Woodbridge Continuation as a Women's Home", 913/48, particularly at 24/6/48, ff. 3-4.
14. In a letter received from Monnie Powell, op sit.
15. See JWAN, Vol. 11, No. 6, June 1946, p. 9; Vol. 11, No. 7, July 1946, p. 11; Vol. 12, No. 5, May 1947, p. 6; Vol. 11, No. 8, August 1946, p. 11; Vol. 11, No. 11, November 1946, p. 30; Vol. 12, No. 5, May 1947, p. 6; Vol. 13, No. 3, March 1948, p. 18. Also Minutes ATNA (WA Branch) Book No. 5, 9 August 1938 - 8 November 1938, ff. 41-43; Book No. 6, 25 February 1946, f. 165; 7 August 1946, ff. 199-299 and Book No. 7, 2 August 1949, ff. 69-70.
16. JWAN, Vol. 13, No. 3, March 1948, p. 18.
17. Ibid., p. 13.
18. Minutes, ATNA (WA Branch), Book 7, 2 August 1949, ff. 69-70.
19. JWAN, Vol. 11, No. 8, August 1946, p. 11.
20. JWAN, Vol. 11, No. 7, July 1946, p. 3 and No. 8, August 1946, p. 11.
21. JWAN, Vol. 16, No. 4, April 1950, pp. 9,10; Vol. 10, No. 14, December 1943; Vol. 11, No. 5, May 1946, p. 17; Vol. 10, No. 9, June 1945, p. 2; Vol. 9, No. 9, June 1944, p. 4; Vol. 6, No. 12, September 1941, p. 8; Vol. 8, No. 12, September 1943, p. 8; Vol. 16, No. 4, April 1950, p. 9; Vol. 11, No. 8, August 1946, p. 27; Vol. 16, No. 4, April 1950, p. 9.
22. JWAN, Vol. 5, No. 8, April 1940, p. 12.
23. JWAN, Vol. 13, No. 6, June 1948, p. 25.
24. JWAN, Vol. 11, No. 6, June 1946, p. 8.
25. JWAN, Vol. 9, No. 9, June 1944, p 4.
26. JWAN, Vol. 11, No. 5, May 1946, p. 17.

TED THOMPSON'S STORY*

Stuart Reid†

One of the first people to be interviewed for the Trades and Labor Council Oral History Project was Ted Thompson who, as well as being an active member of the AWU on the Goldfields in the Thirties, was President and, later, the only full-time organiser for the Bricklayers' Union. He became Organiser with the Building Workers Industrial Union when it was formed. He told interviewer Stuart Reid about many of his experiences on the Goldfields including those in the Goldfields Riots and talked about his part in the war, his post-war training in bricklaying and his union experiences. Part of his story is told in the following article which illustrates the contemporary relevance of some old struggles and shows, too, that there is a lively sense of humour in some of the old unionists.

I left a little coalmining village in Derbyshire when I was seventeen and came to Australia in 1923 or 1922 - there is some doubt about which year. What happened in England was that when the 1st World War finished Germany paid all the reparations in coal and as we lived in a coal mining village we just didn't have any work. I came to Melbourne and there was not a great deal of work around but there was plenty of work for farming boys so I had to get a job as a farming boy for a couple of years.

I got to owning a team of horses and we were scooping irrigation channels out in the Goulbourn Valley for the people who had vineyards. When the Depression came everything went down and there was no work of any kind. I had to sell the horses and only had a few bob left. I got on a boat and came to Western Australia for a change. Things were just as bad and for the first three days I slept in Supreme Court Gardens. Eventually, we were carrying our swags, me and another fellow, and we jumped a train up to the Goldfields.

Well, in the Goldfields, I, just like everyone else, had to wait around the shafts for the foreman or shift boss to come up and ask for any work. Sometimes you were lucky and sometimes not. They were good blokes in the mines and they knew that a lot of persons were not going too good and some of them would bring their crib up and give you their crib. We wouldn't have much more to eat.

It was a fairly thin life. We just scratched what we could - chopped wood, did any little jobs, cut lawns - anything to hang on. We didn't get three meals a day but we knew it was no good leaving the place where jobs were.

*Ted Thompson is a former President and Organiser of the Operative Bricklayers and Rubble Wallers (later Stoneworkers) Industrial Union of WA.

†The article is based on Stuart Reid's interview with Ted for the TLC Oral History Project. Stuart's comments are in italics.

from job to job. When you worked for a professional builder he had his toilets for you, he had amenities for you, a shed for you to eat your food. Things were looked after for you there.

Eventually it got to the stage where some of them said "Well, look, instead of working day work for him we can get a little more money. We can work Sundays and Saturdays." There might have been a bit extra and they started this piece work. That was always a bad day, for the bricklayer, for the carpenter, for everybody else. The old builders were never the same. They weren't builders. I don't know what you'd call them. Just 'agents' because they didn't have a builder's yard. They didn't have a joiner's shop. Only a telephone.

When you became a piece worker, there'd be no shops near you, there'd be no toilets, there was no shed. If you had to go to the toilet you had to go behind a tree and watch for the people. Nowhere you could go for lunch, nowhere you could sit, nowhere you could get out of the rain, no water to drink. Heat and rain and everything, they were the conditions. It broke down the whole of the conditions. Everybody was fighting with everybody else. Some of them were very bitter and some of them realised that their only saviour was the union. And that's how they came to put on an Organiser.

Being an Organiser was a very hectic life. Some bricklayers had been working two years without seeing anyone from the Union and we got some very hostile receptions. Of course some of them were very glad to see the Union. Sometimes the builder would be a shonky kind of a builder and many of them there didn't get paid. We had more than a full-time job.

I always ask one or two of the blokes, "What price are you getting?" and they'd tell me. I never said too much about that, I just put it down and at the end of the month I'd come out with a paper with all the builders down and all the prices they were paying. As I went out on the job I said "There's a price list, mate." and he got fixed up for his money. We got a lot of money for them, too right.

The builders didn't like us too much there, but they realised that we had some force and threatened to take them to the industrial commission, but they didn't want that. They paid up in lots of cases. Sometimes we had to settle for a little bit less. The builders were wild about the whole bloody thing.

"What right have you to come on my job asking my price?" they'd say.

I said "I've got every right, mate. I belong to the Union and these blokes belong to the Union" (I hope they belong to the Union, or, they will belong to the Union). "They're entitled to know and I'm entitled to know."

"Keep off the bloody jobs!" the builders told me.

"Never!" I replied.

I can remember one builder who was a hard type of bloke and he owed this money to this bloke. The joker was a member of the Union and wasn't a bad sort of a joker, but the builder wanted more than his pound of flesh. So the Secretary and I went and saw him and said "Well, look. You'll have to pay the bloke."

He said "No. I'm not going to pay him at all."

So we came away and said "How are we going to get the money from him. He definitely owes the money." So I says "I don't know what we'll do."

So I was thinking about it and called back in a couple of days on my own. I said to this bloke "The Secretary's gone down to the lawyer and he's carried out a summons on you."

"What for?" he says.

"About the money."

He says "You don't need to go that far."

I said "Well you're due in court on the 19th. Haven't you got the summons yet?"

"No. No." he said, "I never heard anything."

"Well, you'll hear him come today."

He said "We don't want to go that far. You take the money and square it with your Secretary."

When I went back to the office I said to the Secretary, "There's that money for that bloke, Bert."

"How'd you get that?" he said.

"I went down to talk to him and had a bit of reason about the whole thing and he's realised he hadn't paid."

I never told him what I did. Bert Fletcher was a very honest man. I couldn't tell him I'd lied, so I just said "Well, he decided to pay."

Ted Thompson was President of the Bricklayers' Union for eight or nine years and Organiser for thirteen years, six of which were prior to the amalgamation with the Carpenter's Union. Amalgamation led to formation of the Building Workers' Industrial Union which is now one of the major unions making up the Construction Mining and Energy Union. Now in his eighties, Mr Thompson lives with his wife, Pearl, in an old rambling house near the Zoo in South Perth.

THE RELEVANCE OF LABOUR HISTORY*

Tony Beech†

Thank you for giving me the opportunity as President of the Trades and Labour Council to speak to you on the subject of labour history and also on the occasion of effectively forming a society for the purposes of labour history. Looking at the people here this lunch-time I can see a number of people who have made labour history and despite the fact that I started with the unions in 1973, you probably know more about the importance of labour history than I do myself.

To that extent you are going to have to bear with me as I put my views about the relevance of labour history. It seems to me, speaking as a Union Official, that it is all too easy for us to do our daily work and to treat it as just that; a one off issue here, a one off issue there, a labour stoppage here, a wage claim there. Most of us in the union movement work at such a pace in handling those issues that it's very difficult to try and get a broader perspective of just what it's about and where it fits. It's always been my belief that you can really only work effectively in the union movement if you adopt a wider perspective. We are part of a long and continuing struggle to maintain and improve the living and working conditions of people in our society. And we live in a society which would if we as a labour movement disappeared today, degenerate into a jungle environment in which those, whom we seek to protect by the existence of the union movement, would just perish.

Now that would not occur overnight. If the union movement disappeared overnight, there wouldn't be a drastic change but slowly and surely those elements of our society which we oppose daily, would just take over. Most of us know the rules of that jungle. On the one hand there are the words of retailers, "buying cheap and selling dear and if you can't afford to live, too bad. There are plenty of others earning a wage who can come in and buy my products". It's the "I'm alright Jack" syndrome, and all of that. On the other hand there is the myth of the equality of bargaining power between management on the one side and labour on the other, and there's always a tendency for people to say: "Well what happened in the past is not going to happen today, that's not going to happen in the 1980's in this modern, technological age, this enlightened age of higher education and those sorts of things, that's not going to happen today". And people speak about our conditions today and the existence of unions and the strength that they have today as if this is some kind of utopian era or some kind of modern enlightenment that means it can't go backwards, and that the worst conditions and the conditions that we see in countries without a strong union movement will just never happen here. Now, that's demonstrably not so and one of the lessons of labour history is that the things we are striving to achieve with our union movement can be lost almost overnight.

* This is a reproduction of a speech delivered at the inaugural meeting of the Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in August 1988.

† At the time of the speech Tony Beech was President of the WA Trades and Labour Council and Assistant Secretary of the WA Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union. Since then he has become a Commissioner of the WA Industrial Relations Commission.

I want to read some extracts of a book about the history of Broken Hill which I found particularly interesting because they show something of what we can learn from labour history and I'll tell you a few little bits about it as we go on. But as I read things from it, I wonder how many of you will recognise the similarities between those past-times and things we face today. First there's a bit about a strike and the way the company reacted to union activism.

BHP were first class at blackballing, they'd blackball anyone leading a strike, and they were very effective. That's why some people used to sneak back to BHP under assumed names, see. When Port went back to work in May the strike leaders couldn't work, poor devils. BHP said we don't want any of them fellows in Port, one of them, J.J.O'Reilly, came to Broken Hill and he worked on the mines alright, but he never in all the time I knew him used his right name.

Then there is the story of the struggle to establish a labour newspaper.

Two local newspapers were being published with significantly different editorial slants. The Barrier Miner and Afternoon Daily established in 1888, it originally supported the union's aims, but by the late 1880's, its editorial policy was independent. But then, in 1889 the unions launched their own newspaper The Barrier Truth. The Barrier Miner closed in 1974 but the Barrier Truth is still publishing today.

Then there are examples of conflict like the lock-out by BHP in 1909.

Broken Hill's militancy found expression in the town's three major industrial disputes in 1892, 1909, 1919 and 1920. The confrontation in 1909 was extremely bitter and had long-lasting effects on local industrial relations and on the town generally. The company called the dispute a strike but the workers remember it as the lock-out, and the union's immediate aim was to prevent a cut in mine wages. The 1906 wage rise had been made when world metal prices were high, but during 1908 metal prices slumped and the older mines such as BHP had also extracted their richest ore, and BHP reacted to withdraw the 1906 wage bonus. Wage justice was not the only issue that united Broken Hill's unionist in 1908. There was deep union disquiet over local working conditions and living conditions, and the provocative arrival of fifty Sydney policemen in November, 1908, inflamed feelings. Local opinion polarised against BHP.

There are a number of extracts which are probably a bit too long to read about the fact that BHP was based in Sydney, maintained its mine in Broken Hill, and did absolutely nothing to maintain the mine's working conditions, to maintain the living conditions and to look after the community that it expected to live there at no cost to the company for the benefit of being able to work for BHP. There are stories about the police moving in, and a number of good stories about the worst sort of mongrel which was the scab; the effects of the scabs upon the strike and the effects of the scabs upon the workers themselves. The parallels that I saw between these stories and what happened at Robe River only a couple of years ago, are just enormous. And in many ways, a lot of what we have been able to achieve can be set at nought by companies such as BHP, by companies such as Robe River, because of the immense economic might that they wield. The scale of things might have changed. Wages might be proportionately higher. The living conditions may have improved and transport may have improved and all those sorts of things. But many of the basic issues about control are still with us.

I think there's always a great tendency to accept the conditions and the environment that we experience today as set and believe that they are immutable. Such things as the right of the union to exist; the right to take industrial action, the right to expect to continue to struggle to improve wages and conditions and take whatever action we have to do. History just shows that isn't the case that these rights have always been ours or that they can never be taken away. They were won by struggle and unless we are able to maintain that struggle they can be easily undermined and that puts a true historical perspective on all that we do today. You don't have to look very far to see what happened to the trade movement in Fiji. You don't have to look back very far to see what happened to the union movement in Chile or in Germany in 1933, and it's also not that far fetched that some time in the future unions might try to come to work in Perth and find that there are either police or troops or some non-union security company changing the locks on the doors and stopping you from functioning. It can happen and that's the frightening reality of it.

If you look at the history of the Trades and Labour Council and the disputes that it had in the early days of its formation, you look especially at things particular to W.A.. Even here we have a history of struggle to achieve the most basic rights which so many people take for granted today.

Paddy Troy's biography really ought to be compulsory reading for those of you who didn't know it first hand anyway. Things such as being arrested in 1961 for addressing workers on the waterfront, arrested under the regulations that cover the Fremantle Port Authority, give an idea of the power available to employers. And it wasn't that long ago that those same regulations were enforced against the meat workers picketing against the live sheep exports. You look at section 54 (b) which takes what happened on the waterfront out of just the waterfront area and imposes it on everywhere in society. If they want to, they can stop you addressing union meetings and they can stop union meetings taking place. Section 54(b) is not merely a thing of the past. I mean, anybody who thinks that, doesn't realise that it could be introduced tomorrow. It doesn't take much of a change.

If you look at the creeping casualisation of industry, at the attempts by organised employers to break down permanent work and to introduce part-time work you see something of what we are up against. Now we have permanent casuals and the break down of permanent employment, permanent wages. How are these workers going to cope with the rising cost of maintaining their living conditions? How are they going to live the sort of life we have grown to expect in this society? How are they going to meet long-term commitments such as mortgages?

Now if you think back in history just a little bit, you can see what Paddy Troy had to do with this situation. You can read about his magnificent struggle at eliminating the casual employment of dockyard labour and the description that he gave about the employers picking labour every day at their own choice. Choosing the ones who weren't union members, all the rest of it. They were the ones that got the jobs because the employer had the absolute control over the choice of labour. No guaranteed weekly earnings. No way to plan ahead. No possibility of the sort of life style most of

us expect today. It was the unions and people like Paddy Troy, people dedicated to improving the conditions of workers, who eliminated that insecurity. But they were only successful after an enormous struggle. And a struggle moreover, that meant a great deal to the workers concerned, but unfortunately, wasn't seen as being an issue that had a broader perspective outside of the waterfront. Even in my own time, the struggle to increase wages and working conditions was stopped by Parliament. When you think of the wages freeze of 1982 and how that was implemented in an historical perspective, it's still just part of the overall struggle. What we have at the moment as a union movement has been gained by the biting, scratching and clawing of it from the system, and in order to hang on to it, we need to be aware of how tenuous it is.

Everyone has the feeling that accidents happen to other people and will never happen to me. And, I often feel that there's a feeling within the trade union movement that we're safe in Australia. These sorts of things we read about in the history books won't happen to us. We don't have those particularly bitter strikes where perhaps people are killed, people devastated, communities split. Oh that won't ever happen to us. And the tragedy of it is, if we're not vigilant, it will happen to us. In my experience, it doesn't happen overnight in Australia. It might in some countries, but it doesn't happen overnight here, but it's creeping. Deregulation, which aims to take all of our achievements away, is a very strong orchestrated political movement. It might be a new word, it's not a word that you pick up from the history books, but what it means is straight out of the history books. It takes us away from where we are strongest with a centralised union movement, a centralised wages and conditions framework where we can look after the weak because of the efforts of the strong in the union movement. It takes us away from all of that to where we are weakest. A lack of uniformity, no comparability, no particular relevance in going to a group of workers here and say help us over there, because they're totally separate. Their wages are looked at on a separate industry, company, establishment basis. There's no enforceability of conditions across the board, there's certainly no strength to enforce it.

I have a great deal of faith in working people. I've never been before a mass meeting of union members, where they have been in possession of the facts, and achieved a bad decision and I'm very confident that workers generally will always make the right decision. But unfortunately, most people don't read the history books. So if you go in front of them and you talk about deregulation, or you put an article in the newspaper about deregulation our people will switch off and do the crossword or read the sports page. Because they don't see the relevance of it. They don't see it in its context and in that sense they are not in possession of the facts about it. And the difficulty that we have is that deregulation as a concept probably sounds attractive to an awful lot of people. Everybody knows there's too much Government red tape and just in case they don't the newspapers are there to tell them so. How can people get beneath the surface of events to reach a real understanding? It's only by reading labour history that you can understand what's behind the word, and that it's very much a part of that overall conservatism that is constantly attacking us.

Now, labour history is in my opinion also fundamental to anybody who wishes to work in the labour movement because without it union officers just can't get their own activity into perspective. It's easy to become frustrated at sorting out individual members' complaints, or fixing up a particular strike here with short term solution, but unless you understand the historical perspective, the wider frame of things, I don't think you do yourself justice and I don't think you can do the job properly.

There's a tendency for us to read a book about labour movements for the colourful stories contained within it. We've all got colourful stories, and I have them also in relation to the time that I've spent with the union movement, and labour history is important from that point of view. But labour history is wasted if people look at it only from that particular point of view. It's not really what it's all about. It's about the lessons to be learned from the struggles of the past. It's about the continuity of the struggle. Here we are today in August 1988, and we're part of history because we are still struggling on the basis of the foundations laid by those who've gone before us. And what we have now is transitory, it might be better than what we had yesterday, but if at any moment we forget how we got it and why we have it, they'll take it from us very easily. They might take it from us by stealth, but how they take it from us doesn't really matter, if they take it from us, we're gone.

I will conclude by saying that I've been particularly pleased that there has been an effort made by a number of people to ensure that the labour history of W.A. is not forgotten. Labour history comes in different forms. There are academic theses like the work that was done by Saliba Sassine about the history of the Trades and Labour Council, and Maxine Kampf's thesis about the federal and state union relations in four WA unions. These might have been written for a particular academic purpose, but as a record of what went on go, they really are invaluable. Then there are books such as the one I've been quoting from, it's called United We Stand - Impressions of Broken Hill in 1908-1910. It might not be seen as relevant to W.A., it really is of course, because these sorts of situations re-occur. Within WA we have the excellent book about Paddy Troy. I also applaud what Michael Hess is doing for the history of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union, because in the history of one union's growth is the history of us all. Furthermore there are many veterans of the labour movement, some of them here today, these people too must be asked to give their story. We need to preserve their stories for their own sake and because we need to learn from them. If this labour history society that we've helped form today can play a role in that, I think it will be excellent, and I think it is very worthwhile and also very necessary.

Larry Graham†

In July, 1986, Peko Wallsend assumed the majority shareholding of what was then Cliff's Robe River. But the actual history of the 1987 dispute starts at least as early as the award negotiation in April and May of 1986. Peko had already indicated that they were seeking to buy out Cleveland Cliffs, and in the award negotiations held in Perth in April and May, Peko representatives were present as observers to the award negotiations. The Peko representatives were quizzed by Union representatives as to what role Peko would play, when and if they ultimately achieved the control of the company there were seeking. Peko made statements then to the Union Representatives in those negotiations that they would be seeking to make no major changes to the company's operations. It is history now that on the 31st July 1986 Peko finally got control of the company. On that day Peko issued a series of statements to people employed by the company, to the Unions and to the public generally, that the operations were losing money and the management would be sacked. The top management was sacked and a series of notices were issued putting in place wide ranging changes.

However, no major statements were made to indicate that the company was setting out to address what were subsequently called restrictive work practices. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile having a look at the state of the company at this time when it was complaining that it was losing money. In August 1986, the company announced that under the old management, they had made a record profit. Let's just have a look at the company's returns. In 1970 the investment of the company was \$443m - that's what it cost to put Cliffs Robe River on the map including building the two towns, Pannawonica and Wickham and a railway line to Cape Lambert. Between 1982 and 1986, the company had a return of \$1053m - that is just over a billion dollars. Yet Peko were able to argue that they were losing money out of the operations at Robe River. The figures simply did not bear out the company's claims.

A similar situation existed with the claims they later made about the restrictive work practices. According to company spokesman at different times those restrictive work practices varied between 150 and 300. We still don't know exactly what the company meant by "restrictive work practices" at the time they first raised the complaints. We do, however, know what they put forward to the

* This paper was first presented at a Trades and Labour Council meeting in May 1988 to provide delegates with background information on this historically important dispute. It has been re-written for publication as a contribution to the continuing debate about the nature of that dispute.

† Larry Graham is a research officer with the Association of Mining Unions and is the endorsed ALP candidate for the WA Legislative Assembly seat of Pilbara. He has spent many years in the Pilbara as a union official.

unions at a later stage. Then the term "restrictive work practices" was used to include award conditions such as annual leave loading and meals breaks, as well as deals that had resulted from direct negotiation between the management and the employees.

In some cases, these deals were reached in a manner which excluded the unions and in fact were at odds with union policies. Very early in the dispute it became the view of the unions that Peko was using the dispute for ulterior motives. As early as July 1986, we were convinced that their intention was to provoke a situation in which legal mechanisms could be used to undermine both the position of the unions and the wages and conditions of the workers. Subsequent events proved this to be correct as the company clearly used the industrial relations system to get people into a position where they had no alternative but to go into private weekly individual contracts with their employer. Those contracts being to the exclusion of both the Industrial Commission and the trade union movement.

I have been involved with the Robe River dispute now since the outbreak of what I suppose you could call 'hostilities' in July 1986 and one of the things I have had incredible problems with is trying to convince people that Robe River are not a normal company. They are in fact a rogue company.

What I would like to do is to go through and give you some examples of the behaviour of this company over the past two years. A few examples of the way they have acted towards people, the things they have done to the individuals and to the Unions will help us arrive at a better understanding of what sort of company they are. I start by going back to the breaking off of all the agreements and practices that were put in place over the life of the company from 1972 on. As I said earlier, there were notices issued to all employees writing off all agreements, arrangements and understandings that had been entered into over a 14 year period. Now unions and workers cannot exist purely on the basis of award arrangements. It doesn't matter where you work or who you work for, whether you work for a multi-national company or whether you just work as an offsider to a milkman, you enter into arrangements that are outside the award. They may be informal arrangements or they may be given a formal shape. In any case it is quite normal for people in work situations to reach understandings outside of the awards that allow them to do the job. Fourteen years of these type of agreements were written off by Robe with no warning whatsoever.

Of course the publicly advanced reason for this action was to remove the dreaded "restrictive work practices" which, despite the profit figures, were supposedly sending the company broke. It was a successful public claim. Remember the polls done in the newspapers? "Are you in favour of restrictive work practices?" Of course, just what constituted a "restrictive work practice" was not defined. When examples were given later on, they were those most likely to appeal to public sentiment as "unfair" to the company. No wonder most people answered "yes". You cannot possibly, by definition, be in favour of restrictive work practices.

But the important thing about restrictive work practices is they were the public launching pad for the company. It took four months to get from the company what it was they considered to be the restrictive work practices, and then a close examination of those restrictive work practices showed that in fact most of them weren't. Most were simply award conditions, entitlements for workers, with which the company was uncomfortable. It is interesting to note at this stage that it was only after the Chief Commissioner and the Commission in Court Session, ordered the company to produce its list of "restrictive work practices" that the unions got to see it.

A few incidents served to indicate the company's frame of mind. These are related in no particular order. We will all remember Charles Copeman's interview on television in which he inferred that the dispute was the result of Moscow-trained agents of the like of Peter Dowding, David Parker and Jack Marks. We remember Eva, the tea lady, who was 60-odd years old and had been working in the Mess for 10 years when the Mess was abolished, again without any prior warning from the company. Eva was reclassified as an ore handler and put out on yard duties. That got wonderful headlines but few of the newspaper readers would have thought of the fact that it is often 45-48° out in the yard in summer and when this happened to Eva, she was put out there and was told quite clearly that she was to go out on a shovel. That was obviously a PR mistake by Robe River but even after it achieved national press coverage Copeman was still able to deny, as he did in a recent article, that it ever happened.

Let us go back to August, 1986. The company had used the issue of "restrictive work practices" to gain public support, but then the Commission ordered them to produce their list of these practices. The Commission had had a look at what they were seeking to do, and said that was unreasonable. The Commission's view was that there should be negotiations over the work practices. Of course there had always been this type of negotiation and the practices themselves were the product of it. At this stage the company was in grave danger of losing the issue of "restrictive work practices" as its catalyst to gain public support. So even though they were ordered to open up and re-employ people and put people back into the jobs that they had prior to the coup, they refused. They had a number of grounds but their major ground was that the practices breached safety requirements. That safety requirement was investigated by the State Mining Engineer and it was subsequently found that there were no grounds for the company's safety concerns.

It is interesting here also to note that all the way through that exercise the unions said they would abide by the decisions of the Commission and in fact we did. We were the ones who were abiding by "the umpire's decisions" and further down the road we claimed and were paid compensation for the period that the people were locked out. By contrast Robe River would not accept the legitimacy of the other parties to the industrial relations system. They did not accept that unions had a legitimate function and targeted union activists within their workforce.

This is clear from one of their newsletters put out by Mr. Ian McCrae who was the General Manager of the company in the North after the lockout, but before the strike in December. It

referred to "die-hards" in the unions. In that newsletter it was clearly stated as company policy that those individuals who were being union representatives would be isolated, and by isolated we can only assume he meant isolated from the workforce and then be terminated. Now we saw that system in operation at Cape Lambert where there were two teams and called put to work on what we loosely refer to as "punishment details" and they ended up getting nick-named the "grot-squad" and the "A-team". The "grot-squad" was a group of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who were put on mindless details like picking up the rubbish alongside the road to the rubbish tip, cleaning up the school yards in front of school kids and weeding the railway line. The A-team was a group of tradesmen who were also agitators on the job, those people were put on jobs such as cutting up an old reclaimer and putting it in to be sold as scrap by the company. It is our view that those two squads were nothing more or less than "punishment details" and that it was no coincidence that the vast majority of those placed on these types of work were union representatives.

Another little gem of the company's concern for fair dealing with its workforce came along in the form of a tenancy agreement that people were obliged to sign if they wanted accommodation or if they transferred accommodation. One provision was that the rent went up about 400% if you went on strike. That in itself was nothing more or less, in our view, than intimidation of the workers.

But worse was to come in the personal contracts introduced by the company for the new starters. I won't go through the details of those personal contracts but the last paragraph, paragraph 20, really says it all with the provision that "any or all of the conditions of employment can be changed weekly at the sole discretion of the company". Now, that in our view, had been what the exercise has been all about - to get people on to those personal, individual contracts, which could be altered at any time and in any way by the company. Now that's security for you!

A further insight into the attitudes of Peko Wallsend and Robe River can be gained from considering the Federal Award. Their basic claim in the federal award was \$250 a week as the rate for a tradesman, 3 weeks annual leave and time-and-a-quarter for overtime after the first two hours. These are conditions that would be totally unacceptable anywhere in Australia. Again it was always our view that this was never intended as a serious bargaining proposition. Our view was that the company was looking for a way to sack its workforce. An opportunity would be provided if the dispute was moved into the federal arena because there would be a vacuum between the time a dispute was created and the time a federal award was issued. Furthermore at that time there was no right to reinstate through the Federal Commission and people would have again been re-employed only on the personal contracts. That was the experience of the unions at King Island, in a similar situation, and it was something that we learned from.

Even the salaried staff were not immune to the company's poor attitude to its workers. They too were forced to sign new contracts that said they would do the work of wages people when the wages people were on strike. The result of this was to entrench both the policy and the means for strike-breaking in the company's operations. It places the individual staff member in an invidious

situation where if they don't act as strike breakers they are in breach of their contract. Yet even the Commission believed that those contracts were entered into voluntarily by the staff.

Another aspect of the company's attempts to reorganise things to suit only its own interests is its training program. Under the Robe River training system it takes four days to produce an auto electrician. Elsewhere in Australia it takes 3 or 4 years to do it, but under the Robe River system you can do it in four days under the auspices of TAFE. Furthermore there is no increase in pay as a result of becoming an auto-sparkie under this magical system and that again is despite the fact that arrangements of that kind are specifically excluded under the industrial agreement.

On a more personal note I have already mentioned dear old Eva the tea lady. Others too faced severe personal difficulties because of the attitude of the company to its workforce. The wife of one of my friends up there suffered a miscarriage through the lock-out and then further down the road during the strike she was again pregnant and suffered a further miscarriage. Now they both quite clearly lay that down to the stress that they were under as a result of the actions of Robe River. That might sound far fetched to people living in the comfort of suburban Perth but considering some of those actions it is not so strange. For instance one of the executives of the company said that when the picketers were on strike you should drive through them like you drive through a mob of sheep. This from a company that had imported an armoured car into the little country town of Wickham, with the publicly stated intention of driving that car through the picket lines to transport company-induced scabs to work.

The company also involved police in its policies. I don't want to dwell too much on that but suffice it to say that police have been involved in the day-to-day application of industrial relations. An example was police action in escorting people on and off site when in the view of the company they are in breach of their contract of employment, even before such a breach has been legally established. The company also attempted to use the law to sort out its difficulties in its use of writs. We have had writs served on unions, we have had writs served on workers and now and again we have got writs served upon the Maritime Union members. That is the most recent example of the civil action in the disputes.

Possibly the worst example of the behaviour of this company is the Besco Batteries fiasco where the company simply sacked its entire workforce and closed the factory on a half-an-hour's notice. Now you can imagine if a union had a track record such as the one that I have outlined of Peko Wallsend, you can imagine quite clearly the public outcry that there would for action to be taken against that union. What I would like to do now is just go through and outline some of the tactics that have been adopted by Robe and explain how they fit into the whole picture.

The first tactic is that the company involves legal counsel as soon as there is any argument at all even at low level conferences where there is no clear cut point of law involved. Robe River continue, even to the current day, using Council on every matter on which they appear in the

Commission. It is interesting to note that the Unions have spent hundreds and thousands of dollars on legal fees, and I have got no doubt that the legal involvement in the system is purely aimed at the frustration of the system. The industrial system is there because the legal system cannot handle industrial relations, it is really a lay-people's court and the involvement of legal people in it arguing pedantic points of law, frustrates that system and makes it totally unworkable.

The other aim of the company I am in no doubt, is to opt out of the industrial relations system in any way shape and form. I can't recall too many applications over the two years being put in by the company, it has mainly been responses to union applications into the Commission. There is no doubt that the aim of Robe River or Peko overall is to carve the unions off from any of the decision making of the company, and to alienate the workers from their unions. Part of their tactics in this case is the use of their very capable propaganda machine, which operates at all levels, on the job, in the Commission and in public. They are very good at this. Their communication with their workforce is a case in point. They very seldom tell outright lies about what is happening in the Commission or elsewhere, but there is an emphasis put on matters reported back to the workforce, through supervisors, that is quite clearly incorrect and they are quite guilty of sins of omission. It is something that we have taken on head-on, and we are nearly as good at it as they are.

One of the other quite deliberate tactics of Robe River is that at times during an issue when the unions put forward a demand Robe River simply up the ante. They make another claim and then they bang it in, or they bang a writ on someone, or they throw another ambit claim in, or they twist it around and say there is not jurisdiction or something like that. On every major issue at every stage where we have got close to having a win, or to sorting the matter out once and for all, the ante is upped in some form or another. Now the ultimate aim of Robe River I have said many times is that they are seeking the personal contracts, that is what they are on about, the personal contract. Now they say that they will talk direct to their employees and they will sort out their problems with their employees. Implicit in that is the exclusion of the unions. The way however, that they talk direct to their employees is not on the basis of open and frank consultation. It is on the basis of their making an offer and saying that if you don't respond by a deadline then you have accepted it. Now, what choice do our members have. How can they sit down opposite the company's QC's and debate their terms and conditions of work?

A typical scenario is that the union makes a claim on the company, the company will then respond via the notice board to the employees, and say in that the Unions have made a claim for A, we will consider A if you agree to do these particular things. The notice will also say that if we don't get any response by such and such a date you will then have accepted. If there are responses the company then seeks to frustrate the issue by first seeking "further and better particulars" from the union and once those are supplied they respond that they are under no obligation to do anything at all. The end result of that is something that is relatively simple and, that with another employer could be fixed up at the drop of a hat, draws you into 10 or 12 different associated arguments on the same matter. Furthermore all of these arguments will be taken through the entire legal system.

They go from the Conference stage in the Commission, through to hearing and determination, before a single Commissioner, an appeal to the Full Bench and in most cases on most major issues over the last two years, they are then progressed out into the legal world of the industrial appeals court and that brings about some strange decisions.

An example is provided by the Abandonment of Employment Clause. When the Pilbara was a wild and woolly place and strikes were pretty regular, people used to pack up and leave town for the duration. The strikes always went for a week or more so it took a while for people to get back onto the job at the end of a dispute. Companies in the early days used to simply sack people who weren't back at work when the strike ended. To protect those individual's rights, we put a clause in all of the Iron Ore Industry Awards called the Abandonment of Employment Clause which said that you are deemed to have abandoned your employment after seven days non-attendance without notification of your absence off the job. Everyone who has ever worked in the Pilbara understands quite clearly what that was all about. When we had the dispute in December 1986, Robe River took that clause up and said all you people have abandoned your employment. We took it to the Commission to get that interpreted in the correct manner and we won it before a single Commissioner. Robe River appealed it to the Full Bench and we won it before the Full Bench and they subsequently took it out into the Industrial Appeals Court, which is bound at law to make a decision based only on the legal technicalities. They made that decision at law and said that the company hadn't sacked those people, that they had abandoned their employment. Now that is the complete reversal of 20 years of tradition in the Iron Ore Industry and 20 years of history in the Iron Ore Industry and I think better than any other incident over the last 2 years, exemplifies the ridiculousness of the law being involved in day-to-day industrial relations. The result was that a time tested system was overthrown by a Court in which knowledge of local conditions and traditions had no place.

One of the other things that I would like to address here is Robe's public image. They are very, very concerned, it seems to me, about public opinion about the company. If you go back to when the dispute was THE national dispute, there is no doubt that Robe River were treated as the guilty party, if you like, given that they were the people that were coming in and wielding the broad sword. They have become very adept at twisting the facts of cases to make it appear now that the unions are totally out of the line and they have pushed that, not only on site, but also in the public arena. An example is provided by the saga of the 4%, the second-tier wage increase.

In October 1987, the unions put claims on Robe River for the 4%. In November, 1987, Robe made some applications to the Commission seeking trade-offs as they saw them for the 4% pay increase. In December 1987, they discontinued those applications. Between December and currently, we have sought responses from the company and we have sought a company offer and we have sought to have the company meet with us as envisaged in the State Wage decision for the purpose of negotiating a 4% second-tier pay increase. That has not happened to date. All that we is the private offer that was made by Robe River to each individual employee. That was in the

view of the unions and in the view of the Commission, quite clearly outside the Wage Fixing Guidelines, and an Order has been issued out of the Commission ordering the company to refrain from making that offer, on the basis that it is outside the Commission guidelines.

That has been appealed by Robe River to the Full Bench. Now, in the same period that we have been trying to talk to Robe River, who are twisting all that around publicly and saying that it is recalcitrant unions who are holding up the settlement of the 4%. By contrast four other companies in the Iron Ore Industry have reached agreement with the unions and settlements of 4% and 3% claims affecting 7000 workers have been completed. Similarly the Maritime Unions had settled their 3% and 4% with every employer party to the National Tug Boat Award, except for Robe River. Now the facts speak for themselves and even a close examination of what I call "Robespeak" shows that the company's case doesn't stand up. In addition to withdrawing the personal offer that was made, the company have been ordered to put in into the Commission what they will trade-off in return for payment of the 4% increase.

In terms of Robe River's public perception of themselves, they have gone to unprecedented lengths to try and make themselves out to be a reasonable employer which has been handicapped by these mad militant trade unions. I think it is worthwhile looking at who the people are who have seen fit to publicly attack Robe River. We have had the Prime Minister, we have had the past Premier and the current Premier, we have the Minister for Resources and Energy, and surprise surprise, we have had the other producers in the Iron Ore industry. All have given Robe River a serve about the role they are playing in the Iron Ore Industry and the damage that they can do to the Iron Ore Industry if they continue in their current role.

The unions and the producers in the Iron Ore Industry over the last five years, have put a lot of time and effort into improving industrial relations in the industry. We have been remarkably successful in doing this. One example is that the Japanese perception of the Pilbara has changed. We were seen as a totally unreliable supplier and our market share had gone down to 32% and was heading downwards. Now we have a share of the Japanese market of 48% and heading upwards. Now it is Robe River which have imperiled our exports by suggesting to the Japanese that we are an unreliable supplier and what the effects of that will be ultimately to us and the Japanese market, I don't know and I don't think anyone else does know.

What I would like to finish on is a quote from that well-known left wing militant trade unionist Brian Burke who described Peko Wallsend as dishonest and foolish and said quite clearly that WA would be better off without them - that is a view that myself and the whole trade union movement would wholeheartedly endorse.

TRAILER.....WA METAL WORKERS STRIKE 1972*

Harold Peden†

In August 1972 WA metal trades unions were involved in a campaign of direct action which stands out in my mind as one of the most innovative and successful I was associated with.

The action revolved around 17 fabrication shops. They included Forward Downs, Tomlinson, Fabricated Products, Sledgers, Crewe & Sons, Vickers, Steelmain, Baguleys, Evan Deakin, Fremantle Foundry, Cockburn Engineering, Comeng, Structured Engineering, Transfield, EPT, Park Engineering and McClartys. All of these firms were tied to the development necessary for the export of raw materials (iron ore, Bauxite, nickel etc). In this period of relative boom in the 1960's and 1970's these fabrication and engineering shops experienced recurrent cycles of highs and lows in their work orders.

In July-August 1972 they were in a real low. The employers' response was their suggestion to their various workforces that wages should be reduced. The amount suggested was \$12.00 per week. This amounted to a cut in the over award payment of \$16.40. The logic was that this would allow the employers to quote for jobs at a lower price and thus become more competitive.

The companies saw to it that the idea was presented at every opportunity and the proposal became a matter for considerable discussion and debate within their workshops. During these discussions it was evident that some workers thought that the proposal had merit. When they came together, however, and considered all aspects of the situation, the proposals were rejected.

There were three basic points at issue:-

First, the view that lower wages would effect costs favourably and improve the competitive position of each firm overlooked the fact that many of them were bidding in the same market and were in fact direct competitors. So if wages were reduced, all firms would be able to reduce their costs but their competitive position would remain the same.

Second, wage cuts were a very blunt instrument for employers to use. Wages in the West were already lower than in NSW and Victoria. Keynes, the famous British economist, had suggested in the 1930's that wage cuts had the effect of creating sympathy for workers and put them in a strong position to mount campaigns of direct action. A better means for employers to recover lost ground,

* The original report upon which this article is based appeared in the national journal of AMWSU, The Amalgamated News, October 1972.

† Before his "retirement" Harold Peden was Senior Vice President of the WA Trades and Labour Council and State President of the AMWU.

and obtain a yet lower level, was to allow prices to rise and thus erode the real value of wages. Then if workers went on strike, the idea was to restore parity to their wages and make them look greedy if they continued to press their demands. The attempt of the employers in this case to cut wages in actual money terms went against this advice. It would be the first cut in metal trades wages of this kind since the infamous Beeby decision in the Depression.

Third, WA workers, at this time, were battling to get their share of the wealth created by the development of the iron ore industry. Before that boom metal trades wages had been held down since September 1953 when the quarterly adjustments to the basic wage had ceased. When the iron ore boom created conditions favourable for a push to increase wages the fabrication shops in the metropolitan area became the cutting edge of those union actions. Gains made in the fabrication shops flowed through to other work places in both private and public sectors under various titles, such as "incremental payment" and "service pay".

Here is how I described the events and results of the August 1972 strike to our members at the time in the national union newsletter:-

In a two-weeks strike that ended in complete victory, 700 metal workers from 17 Western Australian companies struck a shattering blow at employers' attempts to absorb over-award payments. The strike by members of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union, Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Union, the Australasian Society of Engineers, the Electrical Trades Union, Transport Workers' Union, Maritime Workers' Union, Shipwrights' Union and the Australian Workers' Union was successfully conducted in a period of utmost difficulty.

It followed a threat to cut tradesmen's wages by \$12 a week or alternatively, if the unions agreed, the current over-award would be fixed for two years with any rise in award rates absorbed for the first year. The workers returned to work with their full \$16.40 over-award payment intact, with no absorption of any award increases.

Support came from a wide section of people. Newspaper coverage gave a very factual picture and radio and TV sessions went out of their way to obtain the unions' views. A wage cut of \$12 (nearly 15 per cent) in 1972, with prices of consumer goods still on the up and up, shocked large sections of the community. A bank officer, after being handed a leaflet by a striker explaining the situation, asked for another dozen and walked away shaking his head. A worker in a pub in Bentley, an industrial suburb, exploded: "Wage cut!! Bull-shit! I can't live on my wages now," when handed a leaflet by myself.

However, it became clear after the first mass meeting that determination and solidarity was the order of the day. When this was transmitted into organisation and action, victory was assured. Over 700 workers, members of eight unions covering almost every classification of the metal trades (and some other trades), employed in 17 shops, staying on strike for two weeks and with the

knowledge that many faced the sack through lack of orders on the return to work, shows the depth of unity that prevailed.

Eight mass meetings were held before and during the dispute with most decisions being almost unanimous. Shop stewards meetings were held prior to all mass meetings and on at least one occasion, twice in the same day. Shop stewards area committees were formed and were the framework of all the organisation. At these meetings changes in tactics, new procedures, etc., were vigorously debated before being placed before the larger meetings for endorsement. A high level of initiative and understanding arose out of the need to picket all workplaces.

In the Fremantle area where most of the shops are small, a mobile force was instituted with a "flying squad" being sent where required. At Forwood Downs, Bentley, the management allowed the pickets to use the adjoining factory toilets until an argument developed over a certain truck going in, when the order was issued "no toilets". While at the same time at a nearby factory the foreman presented the pickets with hot dogs and cups of tea. A workers' embassy was set up, tent and all, outside Vickers at Ashfield. When after a showing on TV of eggs and sausages being cooked over an open fire, the local Shire Council inspector arrived to order that under the Health Act nothing could be cooked there, and when shown an empty frying pan and a look of innocence, went on his way.

While the police turned out on a number of occasions at some of the factories, a cordial relationship existed between the pickets and the officers in attendance. While one oxy supplier, Liquid Air, kept their trucks away from picketed places, one of CIG's drivers tried in a couple of places to be a "strong man", resulting in some newspaper headlines in regard to Vickers. Two leaflets, "How Would You Like \$12 a Week Wage Cut?" (30,000) and "The Big Steel Steal" (10,000) were distributed in suburban shopping centres, with the streets of Perth and Fremantle being saturated between 7 am and 9 am.

A meeting of apprentices was called on Saturday morning, where 150 apprentices debated what type of support could best be given to the adult workers. From then on a pipeline existed between the union office, the picket lines and the apprentices with information being supplied from right on the spot. Nearly 10 per cent of the money collected came from MIA apprentices. A meeting of wives was welcomed with many phone calls asking for the time and place of the meeting. Successful meetings were held in other factories. Newspaper workers, construction workers and power workers also were addressed.

Any number of reasons could be advanced for the success or failure of any dispute, but in this strike, unity and agreement between groups of workers, between shop stewards and between officials and unions, show the way to win.

TRAILER The Noonkanbah Convoy 1980*

Denis Day†

In 1976 the Federal Labor Government purchased Noonkanbah station in the Kimberley region of Western Australia at the request of the Aboriginal community there as part of an initiative to aid Aboriginal people in becoming more self-determined. Noonkanbah is part of 20 million hectares of Aboriginal reserves in W.A. held in perpetuity by the Aboriginal Land Trust, but not inviolate to European incursion. Some of the land, as at Noonkanbah, is made up of pastoral leases on which the government can and does authorise mining exploration and development without the consent of the Aboriginal communities living there. In 1980, mining companies, supported by Sir Charles Court's Liberal state government, drilled for oil on Noonkanbah. Denis Day, an organiser for the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union in 1980, took part in a campaign trying to prevent a convoy carrying an oil rig from reaching Noonkanbah.

When the discriminatory clause in the Australian Workers' Union Award was removed and squatters had to pay Award Rates to Aboriginals, they sacked them in droves. The Aboriginals gravitated to centres such as Fitzroy Crossing and Roebourne. The entitlement to drink preceded the right to collect unemployment benefits. It was during this period that the Noonkanbah people withdrew their labour and moved to Fitzroy Crossing. Soon afterwards, Noonkanbah Pastoral Pty. Ltd. went bankrupt. The government was eventually persuaded to buy back the lease. In 1976, nearly 200 people returned to Noonkanbah.

It was a great emotional experience for this group. The years spent at Fitzroy Crossing had been shattering for the older people, who now looked forward to a time of renewal. They called their community "Yungngora" which means "the land is everything to us". They set about re-establishing their sacred areas and pouring energy into the healing process. The men, being fine stockmen, relished the idea of managing their own land without being ordered around by bosses. A major worry was the children, whose experience of racism at Fitzroy Crossing had started within them the fatal process of alienation. They were forgetting their Aboriginal language and beginning to emulate the least attractive traits of European social life. A school was established with the aim of reversing this damage. In 1980, the year of the Noonkanbah Convoy, the school was able to provide a little continuity and stability at a time when many predicted the break-up of the community.

For years, prior to the drilling for oil on sacred ground and the convoy episode, Noonkanbah had been a model community. The people were highly motivated and industrious, despite the poor

* Two titles, by the same author, How the Pilbara's Millions Reach the Workers' Pockets and The Pilbara's Progress give more background on mining in the North West. This paper seeks to tell "the true story of Noonkanbah by one who was there".

† Denis Day became the first full time metal trades organiser north of the 26th parallel in 1975. He now lives in Goldsworthy.

conditions and lack of amenities in their camps. They faced and overcame the disruptive tactics of local authorities. For instance, three times police drove cattle mustered at Noonkanbah to near panic. The police frightened the animals into a corner with a spotlight until the fence gave way and the stock fled. Noonkanbah station grossed more than \$100,000 from cattle sales in 1979-80. Three years previously it grossed only \$40,000. When the property was taken over in 1976 it had been badly run down and the river pasture was eaten out. The Aborigines improved the pasture, well and fences. The cattle herd increased from 4,000 to 5,000. The community was interested in a stock breeding program being developed on another Aboriginal run property, Mowanjum, near Derby. The policy was that everyone must work and work they did with success. Thirty young men did the cattle mustering and the season would have been better if the community had not been so disrupted and upset by the mining people going on to the land, and the police upsetting the cattle with motor vehicles.

In 1978, an employee of the U.S.A. based AMAX Corporation, working with an exploratory drilling team in the area, bulldozed a track through a tribal sacred site on Noonkanbah station, the Goanna Dreaming Hill. The Aboriginal people demanded that AMAX employees leave the property and began legal action to halt further exploration. The legal action failed and the West Australian Government lead by the Premier Sir Charles Court, deliberately pushed for a confrontation to demonstrate its rejection of the principle of Aboriginal landrights, and to assert necessary powers so as to pursue a policy of resource development. The state government proceeded to assist the company in a paramilitary operation, to ensure the continuation of exploration on the station.

AMAX was acting as the managing component of a joint venture which also included Whitestone Petroleum International - 32 %; Pennzoil Aust. - 29%; Australian Consolidated Minerals - 5%; Yom Oil - 5%; and AMAX held 29%. The attitudes of the company to traditional landowners had already been demonstrated in the USA where AMAX was named as a defendant in an action brought by a group of Navajo Indians in the US District Court in Arizona on December 19, 1979. This action claimed damages of \$10 million for personal injury or wrongful death, resulting from employment in certain underground mines on the Navajo Reservation, which was operated by the Climax Uranium Corporation (merged into AMAX in 1961) between 1950-1965.

The company had apparently brought some of the US frontier attitudes with it to Australia. An interesting sentiment was elicited by Ritchie Howitt in an interview with AMAX's Western Australian Regional Exploration Manager in May 1980. The Manager stated that

the problem at Noonkanbah was at least partly due to do-gooders such as teachers and university people going up to places like Noonkanbah and telling people they should stand up for their rights. There is of course nothing wrong with this. But the same people are very strongly opposed to apartheid in South Africa, and yet they are saying that Aborigines in Australia should, for example, get royalties from mining on leasehold land - a right which no European has. He said that while he recognises that Aborigines are a special group, which

should have reserves and so on, they should also accept that they are a conquered race.

TRADE UNIONS IN ACTION

When the Yungngora Aboriginal Community at Noonkanbah requested the Australian Council of Trade Unions to assist them in preventing the desecration of a sacred Aboriginal site, the West Australian Trade Unions banned the movement of the oil drilling rig.

A convoy of trucks flanked by police cars, motor cycles and support vehicles began a long journey from Perth in August 1980. This paramilitary operation was Sir Charles Court's Government's final solution to the impasse reached over AMAX Petroleum's determination to drill for oil on Noonkanbah. Six men were arrested by the police on the North-West Coastal Highway 15 kilometres west of Karratha. A Transport Workers' Union Organiser, Patrick Hartnet drove his car onto the road to block the convoy. An Anglican Archbishop suggested in the media that the iron ore workers should have stalled an iron ore train in the path of the Noonkanbah Convoy.

More than 25 police and a big crowd of spectators awaited the convoy at Port Hedland. I had just commenced Sunday dinner when Charlie Butcher, AWU Northern Secretary, knocked on the door at South Hedland with news of the imminent approach of the Noonkanbah Convoy. There was no time to lose. The intervention of the State Emergency Services and Duncan Glendinning prevented Port Hedland Public Works Department employees denying refueling facilities. We hurried to the Port Hedland - Broome turnoff. A placard proclaiming a Trades and Labor Council picket line was produced and carried onto the highway in the path of the Noonkanbah Convoy.

Riley Miller, a former Western Australian State footballer, was in charge of police escorting the Noonkanbah Convoy. He recognised me from my days as a WA Police Boy's Club champion boxer and warned me that I was committing an offence. A uniformed policeman repeated Riley Miller's warning as the Noonkanbah Convoy came into sight.

"Are you going to move?" asked Riley Miller. I shook my head. "Arrest him", ordered Miller and police pushed me off the highway into a waiting paddy wagon. Soon I was joined by Australian Workers' Union Organiser Roger Parsons. "Where are all the others?" exclaimed Roger. He thought others were going to follow him onto the road to be arrested. None did, and the convoy roared past.

The police escort at Karratha and Port Hedland was put in the awkward position. First they insisted that it was a low key affair and then they moved in in sufficient numbers to suggest that a circus was coming to town. Some of the convoy drivers wore masks so that they would not be recognised. The Aboriginal flag was carried amongst the crowd of onlookers by a Port Hedland Aboriginal activist. Roger Parsons and I were conveyed to the Port Hedland Police Station where

they were charged with "hindering traffic". We were remanded to appear in the Port Hedland Court on the 3rd February 1981 before Magistrate Peter Thorbaven.

No traffic had actually been hindered and the police realised the charge would not stand up in court. They requested the magistrate to allow them to change the charge to one of "disobeying the lawful order of a police officer". The magistrate agreed to the prosecution's submission. I was found 'guilty' under the new charge, refused to pay the fine and was later goaled. Roger Parsons was found 'not guilty' because the police did not warn him correctly after I had been arrested. At the 12 mile Aboriginal reserve, a man was arrested when he was found drunk on the road in the path of the convoy. He spent the night of Sunday 11th August 1980 in the Port Hedland lock-up.

At Tabba Tabba Creek

On Sunday 11th August 1980, the Noonkanbah Convoy was halted for some time while the police moved 160 Aboriginals, part of the Strelley Mob, off the road at the Tabba Tabba Creek crossing, 50 kilometres past Port Hedland. The Strelley Mob sat silent and still. The police drove up and enquired "Who's in charge here?" No one answered. They made the police understand that they were not going to move.

More police arrived. The order was given; "This is your final warning. Come on move, move!" Police in paddy wagons slowly drove the Strelley Mob off the crossing. Some had to be physically removed. The convoy thundered past as the Strelley Mob began to sing.

On the same day the Noonkanbah people reclaimed their land by reading a proclamation, raising the Aboriginal flag, and firing a volley, just as Lieutenant Lockyer had done in 1826 at Albany.

At Broome

Aboriginal protesters pelted Noonkanbah Convoy drivers with gravel as the trucks broke through an angry demonstration outside Broome. Six men were arrested when they tried to set up a picket line near the turnoff to Derby, on the North West Coastal Highway, 35 kilometres from Broome. Trade unionists ran across the road seconds before the convoy, travelling at about 20 km/hr, reached the picket line just as the sun was setting. The lead truck smashed a banner the men were carrying, narrowly missing them. As a Broome policeman asked a man to get off the road, a sergeant travelling with the convoy's lead car shouted: "Drag him off the road. Grab him by the hair."

At Noonkanbah

The anti-climax to the six day oil rig trek came when 22 people - including five churchmen - were arrested at a protest blockade on the access road into Noonkanbah station. The arrests occurred after a line of vehicles from Noonkanbah station made its way to Mickey's Bore, a dry creek bed about 7 kilometres from the homestead. The vehicles were parked across the narrow road in rows.

The people sat between them in a group. It was not long before the police drove up and warned them that they were obstructing a public road (recently gazetted) and that they could be arrested. No one replied to the police. A front end loader and a grader was used to drag the vehicles aside. The Aboriginals began an initiation chant aimed at keeping the group tightly together. People were carried away, struggling with the police. In less than an hour it was all over, with a line of police guarding the crossing.

Postscript

Since the Noonkanbah struggle companies in the Kimberley have taken great pains to avoid another confrontation, preferring negotiated agreements. The ALP Government, lead by the Premier, Brian Burke, announced that a committee of inquiry was to be set up to examine all relevant questions around the issue of land rights for Aboriginals in Western Australia. Representatives of the Aboriginal people from the Kimberleys and from the mining industry have held a number of meetings with government ministers. The battle lines are drawn. Aboriginal people with 18,000 years of history in the region are now confronted with a mining invasion.

RESEARCH NOTES

notes on research currently in progress on Western Australian Labour History

Oral History Project

**Stuart Reid for the
WA Trades and Labour Council**

The Trades and Labour Council's Oral Histories Project will document the stories of people who have made significant contributions to the political, industrial and social history of Western Australia. The focus will be on retired or retiring trade unionists and will give them an opportunity to tell their own stories in a relaxed and informal way. Transcripts of some of the taped interviews will be edited for publication in union journals, broadsheets and *Papers in Labour History*. There will also be some extracts broadcast on "State of the Union", the TLC's radio program on 6UVS-FM.

In addition to the oral record being collected, a major emphasis will be on encouraging unionists to collect and record their own histories and workshops in writing, recording and interviewing will be arranged for those who are interested.

The project is being conducted by Stuart Reid who has worked on other TLC projects, including Powerhouse Lives - a record of the lives and work of South Fremantle Station employees - and the Robe River tapes - a collection of contemporary recordings made at the height of the Robe River Dispute. Stuart describes his approach as "more journalistic than historical in that I am interested in stories, anecdotes, thoughts and feelings; reflections rather than detailed records." Stuart has, however, undertaken to "include enough 'specifics' to provide future researchers with 'keys' to access the stories to complement their own research".

The project runs for six months and will be completed in January 1989. Any inquiries or suggestions regarding people to interview should be addressed to Stuart Reid, c/- TLC Arts Office, 27 Brewer Street, East Perth, or be phone on 3287877.

Organise - Labour, a Visual Record

**Lenore Layman
and Julian Goddard for the
WA Trades and Labour Council**

The Trades and Labour Council has undertaken a research project culminating in the publishing of a book written by Art Historian Julian Goddard and Labour Historian Lenore Layman. The book

will be a 20,000 word critical treatise on the role of image as utilised by the labour movement in WA. The book will be launched in conjunction with an exhibition at the Alexander Library during the month of November 1988. The exhibition will feature some of the items discovered during the course of research for the book, including banners, paintings, drawings, photographs, cartoons, sculptures, posters, journals, leaflets etc.

To date around 4,000 items have been catalogued as a result of the research undertaken. There have been many significant discoveries of previously unrecorded items, such as the turn of the century Australian Society of Engineers banner, discovered in the back shed of a retired union official. This is the earliest WA trade union banner held by the museum and has been valued at between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Three hand painted certifiants by WA artist Richard Fellows have been located, along with several early badges and many important photographs. The catagoluing of items was conducted over a period of 12 months on a State-wide basis.

The importance of this research project has been widely recognised. Support for the project has been obtained from the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the Australia Council, the WA Department of the Arts, the WA Museum and Battye Library as well as the TLC and its affiliates. Many individuals have also contributed material and insights to this history of the WA labour movement.

The end products of this research, the exhibition and the book, will present a visual history of working men and women in WA. They will document the highly creative contribution made by the trade union movement and will highlight the historical and ongoing commitment of unions to improving the lives and working conditions of their members.

WA Branch

Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union

Michael Hess

The FMWU began in the mid 1950's with some 40 members. By the early 1980's it had grown to be one of WA's largest unions. This study traces that growth and seeks to explain the success which made it possible.

The project will have two products. The first is a series of short pieces on particular aspects of the development of the union, which are appearing in its quarterly journal *Union News*. The second will be a book detailing the history of the organisation from its inception to its amalgamation with the Hospital Employees' Union in the early 1980's. This study should be completed in early 1989 and depending on the finalising of publication details the book should be available in later that year.

WA Branch**Australian Social Welfare Union****Peter McDonald**

This project looks at the history of this union with special emphasis on the decade 1975-1985. In this period the union faced an extremely difficult task of organising "professional" workers with little previous record or experience of collective action. Furthermore, this was attempted in an environment of political and bureaucratic opposition, in which industrial organisation by such workers was not as legitimate. The study will draw on both written and oral source material and will attempt to isolate the factors which have worked against the achievement of all the goals established at the time of formation.

Peter would appreciate hearing from anyone with information, experience or opinion relevant to the study. All documents and information will be treated with care and discretion. He can be contacted at the School of Social Work, Curtin University, Hayman Road, Bentley, or by phone on 350-7030.

Life of Monty Miller**Vic Williams**

Vic is editing the autobiography of Monty Miller, who was an influential radical political activist in various parts of Australia, including WA, from the 1850's to the 1920's.

The first part covers his early life up to his participation in the Eureka Stockade in 1854. The second part is his own account of the trial in Perth in 1916 of the nine, including Monty, for seditious conspiracy. It continues with his trial in Sydney in 1917 and the beginning of his prison term of six months hard labour at the age of 85! Vic's understanding is that most of this has not been published before. He has, however, also included Monty Miller's pamphlet "Labour's Road to Freedom", which was published by Andrades Bookshop in 1920.

Miller's wide-ranging observation of political, economic and social phenomena and his deep thinking on questions of his time, many of which are still relevant today, make this material extremely valuable historically. We expect the book to be available soon.

Paddy**Phil Thompson**

Paddy is a play about former Fremantle waterside leader Paddy Troy. It will be performed by the Deckchair Theatre in 'D' Shed on the Fremantle Wharf from 17 November to 11 December.

The requirements of a work of theatre are quite different from those of an historical text or biography. There is a medium of essence rather than fact, of moment rather than historical progression, of "seeing the achieving" rather than of analysing the achievements. It is a medium of action. Our task has been to create a play which portrays the essence of Paddy Troy and what drove him to achieve so much for working people in an entertaining and dramatically arresting style.

I began by interviewing members of the Troy family and from this and the information in Militant, Stuart McIntyre's biography of Paddy, chose to set the play in 1956. This year was chosen because of the dramatic industrial and political struggles Troy was then involved in. Many interviews then followed with Paddy's fellow workers, friends and family. We needed to know, not only the cut and thrust of events, but also the personal details what Paddy put in family sandwiches and how his language changed from stump to kitchen table. I was joined in this phase by John Walker, my co-writer and the actor who is to portray Paddy. These joyful excursions into the past thus not only produced script material but allowed the actor to taste the times and feel the presence of this great West Australian.

Concurrently we were plotting the scenario of the play, writing scenes and developing characters. We chose to focus on one major industrial campaign and a political crisis. It was during the developing of the scenario that we faced the dramatic difficulties of our challenge in some ways the most creative phase of writing. Then it was weeks of hard slog - writing and re-writing, inventing jokes and solving staging problems, checking facts and reading archival material and newspapers for increased authenticity. Then there was more re-writing. The actors' draft was finally completed in a 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. all night-sitting, with a bottle of scotch and too many cigarettes!

Our superb cast and script editor Ken Kelso, will further refine the work during rehearsal. A play reading early in the rehearsal period, for the many people who have assisted in the research, will test our efforts on those who lived and worked with Paddy Troy, and will allow us time to right anything we may have got wrong.