

# 'Rank and fileism' revisited: trade union bureaucracy and Australia's Great Strike

Robert Bollard

In the early 1990s a debate was initiated by conservative historian Jonathan Zeitlin, who attacked a number of (mainly) British Marxist historians for 'rank and fileism'—alleged exaggeration of what (Zeitlin argued) were arbitrary distinctions between the rank and file of trade unions and their bureaucracy. A key element of Zeitlin's criticism was his allegation that such historians were obsessed with periods of radical insurgency. This article uses the Great Strike of 1917 in eastern Australia to argue that such episodes of revolt are valuable because they illustrate in a stark and unequivocal way the inherently conservative nature of the trade union bureaucracy.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.<sup>1</sup>

When E.P. Thompson penned these famous lines he launched a movement, 'history from below', which appeared, for three decades at least, to sweep all before it. Implicit in focussing upon the actual working class rather than the institutions of the labour movement were notions of working class agency derived from classical Marxism. Nevertheless, the idea was acceptable at a superficial level to more liberal historiography—it is not necessary to see the working class as the agent of history to agree that the stories of ordinary workers need to be told. It was perhaps inevitable, after decades in which British

1 E.P. Thompson *The making of the English working class* London, Gollancz, 1980, p. 12.

historiography was dominated by Marxist historians, that an attack on ‘history from below’ was launched. It is also not surprising that the attack was oblique—not challenging the focus on the working class but rather the supposed historiographic sin of ‘rank and fileism’.

## The debate

The ‘rank and filist’ debate began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was conducted initially in the *International Review of Social History*. It was initiated by the historian Jonathan Zeitlin, who claimed to have identified a new orthodoxy in British labour historiography (specifically amongst the practitioners of ‘history from below’) based upon what he considered an artificial division between the ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ of the labour movement.<sup>2</sup> In his polemic against ‘rank and filism’, Zeitlin singled out James Hinton, Bob Holton and Richard Price.<sup>3</sup> He also included Richard Hyman, whose studies of contemporary workplace relations in Britain in the early 1970s had celebrated the achievements of shop floor organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Zeitlin was conclusively rebutted, particularly by Hyman.<sup>5</sup> The rebuttal mainly focussed, however, on demonstrating that Zeitlin oversimplified his opponents, and that he conflated and caricatured their positions. This is particularly relevant to Zeitlin’s criticism of the validity of the terms ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’. His arguments in this regard are reminiscent of earlier criticisms of Marxist categories such as class, bourgeoisie and proletariat. They have in common an identification of intermediate layers such as the new middle class, or in Zeitlin’s case, shop stewards, and the example of the ‘Convenor’: a senior shop steward in a large enterprise who is employed by the company but engaged full-time in union work. As Hyman points out, such criticism is predicated on a reductionist caricature. Just as Marxist scholars have a long history of using Marxist categories of class to analyse the complexities and subtleties of the real world, so have many of the scholars Zeitlin attacked directed their attention to the ‘grey areas’ between the ‘rank and file’ and ‘bureaucracy’ in trade unions.

But Zeitlin also criticised the fact that, with their various ‘intellectual and political preoccupations, historians of a ‘rank-and-filist’ bent were naturally attracted to the more

2 Jonathan Zeitlin, “‘Rank and filism’ in British labor history: a critique’ *International Review of Social History* 34, 1989, pp. 36-47.

3 James Hinton *The first shop stewards’ movement* London, Allen and Unwin, 1973; Bob Holton *British syndicalism, 1900-1914: myths and realities* London, Pluto Press, 1976; Richard Price *Masters, unions and men: work control and the rise of labour in building 1830-1914* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

4 See Richard Hyman *Marxism and the sociology of trade unionism* London, Pluto Press, 1971; Richard Hyman *Industrial relations: a Marxist introduction* London, Macmillan, 1975.

5 Richard Hyman, ‘The sound of one hand clapping: a comment on the “rank and filist” debate’ *International Review of Social History* 34, 1989, p. 321.

turbulent periods of British labour history'.<sup>6</sup> The implication is that their approach has involved a distortion of reality: labour history looked at through a prism that magnifies conflict.

Zeitlin's point highlights the fundamental difference between the approach of Marxist historiography and that of mainstream historians. Marxist historiography is informed by the implications of history for revolutionary practice. It has, therefore, an in-built bias towards periods in which revolutionary possibilities are evident. The point of doing so is not to pretend that such conflict is normal or natural, that the proletariat is forever straining at the leash, or that trade union officials spend most of their time restraining or betraying a militant rank and file. There is a place for analysis which attempts to establish what is normally the case—the patterns of everyday life. There is also clearly a place for a historiography that focuses on moments of conflict, war and revolutions, strikes and civil unrest. In such moments of conflict it is possible to discern aspects of society normally hidden from view. One such aspect is the inherent tendency towards conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy. It is no less valid to focus on extreme historical conjunctures than it is for scientists to examine the behaviour of chemicals at unusually high temperatures. If a bureaucracy exists which is incapable of leading a struggle that goes beyond the bounds of normal trade unionism, then, only in conflict which breaks those bounds, can this incapacity be discerned. Concentrating on understanding the highpoints of class conflict is not a manifestation of historical thrill seeking, or a focus on episodes in history predetermined to justify a hypothesis. It is instead the only legitimate way in which such a hypothesis can be tested.

## The Great Strike

In Australia, there is a clear candidate for such a concentration of effort, the Great Strike of 1917. Triggered by the introduction of the 'card system', a form of Taylorist speed-up, into the railway workshops in Sydney, this strike spread through an explosion of rank-and-file solidarity into a mass strike encompassing up to 100,000 workers in a range of industries, mostly in NSW and Victoria; the core of the strikers were out for five weeks before they were defeated. Only the maritime strikes of the 1890s bear comparison in terms of the scale of the strike, the viciousness with which it was repressed, and the radicalisation which engendered and accompanied it. In fact, as Turner has cogently argued, the mass strike of 1917 was in almost all respects, a larger-scale confrontation than the strikes of the 1890s.<sup>7</sup>

The defeat of the strike was sealed on 9 September when its official leadership, the Defence Committee, capitulated and called the strike in the NSW railways off without any concession from the Government or the Railway Commissioners. Regardless of whether

6 Zeitlin, "'Rank and fileism' in British labor history", p. 43.

7 Ian Turner *Industrial labour and politics: the dynamics of the labour movement in eastern Australia, 1900-1921* Canberra, ANU, 1979.

defeat was inevitable (as many historians have assumed) it is clear the union leadership was unprepared for a struggle of this scale. Most did not want to strike, but their attempts to prevent it failed. All they achieved was some limitation of the strike's extent and some retardation of its spread. None of this assuaged the anger of governments, state and federal, or mollified the severity with which they responded. The unfortunate E.J. Kavanagh, secretary of the Sydney Trades and Labour Council and head of the Defence Committee, was arrested and charged three weeks into the conflict with inciting a strike he had attempted to prevent. The main impact of their ambivalence on the strike was to limit its effect, to constrain the energy of the rank and file, and to prepare for eventual capitulation.

The number of unions, and, consequently, of officials involved made this strike something of a litmus test for the politics and mettle of the leadership of Australian labour. The unanimity of reactions by officials as diverse as Willis of the Coal Miners and Cooper of the Seamen, one a Marxist, the other a right-winger, is telling. There were differences in their behaviour. Cooper made little attempt to hide his hostility to the strike, and was even, at one point, willing to organise scabbing. Once his members had forced his hand, Willis, in contrast, worked tirelessly to make the strike effective, and when, as the time came to end it, he was faced with a similar rebellion by the miners in the Maitland District, he responded with argument rather than bureaucratic manoeuvres. Yet both were forced to endorse the strike by their members against their better judgement. Both were unwilling to spread the strike beyond New South Wales. Both, whatever their politics, were *industrially* to the right of the bulk of their members. We may reasonably ask: was there a systematic sociological basis to their common industrial conservatism?

## Marxist tradition

The analysis of a trade union bureaucracy, distinct from and yet connected to the working class, has a long history, not confined to the classical Marxist tradition. A similar analysis has been made by figures as diverse as C. Wright Mills and Robert Michels.<sup>8</sup> The Marxist tradition has remained, however, the most influential on labour historiography.

There are a number of different strands to this analysis. One begins with the apparently straightforward observation that full time union officials are not workers. The bourgeoisie does not employ them and they are not exploited. As a result, their relationship to the means of production is different from that of the workers they represent. This has a number of obvious ramifications. Viewed exclusively from the point of view of their material interests, the difference between officials and their members is clear. They do not

8 C. Wright Mills and Helen Schneider *The new men of power, America's labor leaders* New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1948; Robert Michels *Political parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy* (Trans. By Eden and Ceder Paul) New York, Hearst's International Library, 1915. Michels, unlike Mills, who saw the restraining influence of officials on the rank and file as salutary, did not view his famous 'iron law of oligarchy' as positive. Nevertheless his pessimistic and a-historical concept helped pave the way for other non-Marxist sociological analyses of bureaucracy (such as Mills').

experience the working conditions of their members, for example; they are not in danger of dying from industrial accidents; they do not have to go down a mine every working day nor endure the tedium of an assembly line. Nor will they suffer if their members' wages are cut, except inasmuch as this affects the revenue of the union. All these things matter to the officials, but they matter at an inevitable remove. That which affects the rank and file affects officials to the extent it affects the union machine upon which those officials depend.

This strand of analysis has obvious relevance for the giant unions in the U.S. and extreme examples can be found there: John L. Lewis of the Coalminers swigging champagne and smoking cigars at elite parties, gangster officials of the Teamsters playing fast and loose with the millions of their members' pensions funds. A press report from Atlantic City in 1910 relates:

Engaged in a game of baseball in his bathing suit with President Sam Gompers, Secretary Frank Morrison and other leaders of the A.F.L. on the beach this morning, John Mitchell, former head of the mine workers' union, lost a \$1000 diamond ring presented him by admirers after the settlement of the big Pennsylvania coal strike. Capt. George Berke, a veteran life guard, found the ring, whereupon Mitchell peeled a hundred dollar bill from a roll he carried in his pocket and handed it to the captain as a reward for his find.<sup>9</sup>

In Britain, where there is generally less wealth available to leading national officials, the existence of the Labour Party has created a career path that is rewarding in a way that involves prestige and social incorporation more than wealth.<sup>10</sup>

Australia's relatively tiny trade union movement offers still fewer rewards: however union amalgamations in the 1980s and 1990s created larger and more powerful bureaucracies even as the percentage of the workforce in trade unions declined. Accompanying this trend has been a tendency for officials to be recruited, not, as they traditionally were, from amongst the ranks of the members, but from outside. A substantial proportion has been trained in law and/or industrial relations and proceeded straight from graduation to employment as officials.<sup>11</sup> But this was not, of course, the case in 1917 when many unions were too small to afford full-time officials. Even with the larger unions at this time, many

9 Cited in Howard Zinn *A people's history of the United States* New York, Longmans, 1980, pp. 321-2.

10 A recent obituary illustrated this process. The obituary was for a Trotskyist Ross Pritchard, one of the leaders of a strike by apprentices at the Glasgow shipyards in 1961. Pritchard was one of the few members of the apprentice strike committee who failed to end up (via trade union officialdom and/or parliament) in the House of Lords. The other major exception was the comedian, Billy Connolly. See: *The Guardian* online, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,423250,00.html>.

11 See Tom Bramble *Trade unionism in Australia: a history from flood to ebb tide* Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2008, for a discussion of these more recent developments.

officials at lower levels remained in the workforce and received only nominal payments for the extra time devoted to their duties.<sup>12</sup>

That does not make this strand of analysis irrelevant to Australia in 1917. The existence of a layer of officials with at least reasonable salaries is alluded to by two completely divergent contemporary sources. The first source is George Crossman, the federal secretary of the Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Association, who wrote a report in early 1918, which can be summed up as a lengthy 'I told you so' to members for joining the strike against his advice. The report complained that 'the greater portion of the Strike Executive was composed of the paid officials of unions'.<sup>13</sup> He was making a populist point for his more conservative members that officials who have no wages to lose could find it easy to remain on strike. It is a point that bears little resemblance to the reality of the 1917 strike, which was so clearly driven from below, more often than not against the wishes of officials. However, it does indicate the existence of a layer of salaried officials. The second source is the private notebooks of Ted Moyle, a leading activist in the IWW. Moyle applauded the fact that the strikes were started by 'the workers themselves, in opposition to the union officials', but regretted that 'high salaried officials' were in charge of the strike, and that they appeared to be 'hanging back' and 'afraid to move'.<sup>14</sup>

The highest ranks of the full-time officials in 1917 in the larger unions (who were the most likely to be full-time paid officials) were generally less responsive to the militant impulse of the rank and file than the lower ranks. This can clearly be seen in the case of large unions like the Seamen and the Waterside Workers, where the federal officials (who were more likely to be full-time and to be paid reasonable salaries) were more conservative than the state-level leadership. In the case of the Seamen's Union, the initial agitation that began the strike in Sydney was led by the vice-president of the NSW branch, William Daly, a working seaman.<sup>15</sup> The federal officials opposed the initial walkout in Sydney where Daly, at the head of a group of around 200 militants, virtually kidnapped the federal secretary, Cooper, and forced him to witness a meeting which voted to strike.<sup>16</sup> After a subsequent (and far more representative) mass meeting of the Sydney membership endorsed the strike call, Cooper and his fellow federal officials had no choice but to acquiesce.<sup>17</sup> This, then explains the lack of communication between the federal officials

12 University of Melbourne Archives, Sugar Works Employees' Union of Australia (SWEUA) Papers, Melbourne Branch Minutes, 4 September 1917.

13 University of Melbourne Archives, Australian Federated Union of Railway and Locomotive Engineers papers, 10/1/1/2 *The Locomotive Journal of Australasia: The Official Organ of the Federal Railway Locomotive Engineers' Association* 'Federal Executive's report', January 1918, p. 2.

14 Cited in Verity Burgmann *Revolutionary industrial unionism: the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia* Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 175.

15 *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1917, p. 5. Daly is described (in a report of his trial) as a working seaman, also as 'a native of Wales and a freethinker'.

16 *Sun* (Sydney) 24 August 1917, p. 5.

17 *Sun* 13 August 1917, p. 5.

and the state branches complained about by the Victorians. The federal officials were hardly likely to want to inform interstate branches of the reasons why Sydney had struck when they were opposed to the strike.<sup>18</sup> Later the Victorian Branch leaders, who had initially opposed the militants within their ranks moved to the left with their membership and into bitter opposition to the federal leadership. In the case of the wharfies, the federal secretary, Joe Morris, was inactive for the first three weeks of the strike. Meanwhile the NSW secretary of the union, Timothy McCristal, was being gaoled for sedition after making a speech in the Domain about the need to shoot 'parasites'.<sup>19</sup> After 23 August, Morris moved to end the strike but was thwarted at a Melbourne mass meeting where the Victorian state officials, Ernest Jones and J. Williams, regaled the audience with a portrait of the solidity of the strike in Sydney.<sup>20</sup>

One apparent exception to this was the leaders of the NSW railways union, the ARTSA. Despite being confined to NSW, this was one of the largest unions in the country. Its officials (at the highest level at least) were salaried and full-time. These officials, led by the secretary, Claude Thompson, after some initial reluctance to spread the dispute beyond the workshops at Eveleigh and Randwick, called its members out throughout the state and worked hard to make the strike stick throughout the scattered ranks of its members in the rural areas. The leaders of the ARTSA also pushed the Defence Committee to call the Tramways Union out. This was the one occasion where a union was called out by the peak committee rather than being held in.

This exception, however, makes sense within a framework that sees the interests of union officials as being primarily concerned with the maintenance of the union machine. The railway workshops in NSW were the biggest workplaces in Australia. They were well organised and militant. To all the unions who had members there they were important, but to the ARTSA they were central. The rest of its members were scattered in tiny pockets throughout the state, often immersed in a conservative rural milieu. The card system was an attack directed at the heart of unionism on the railways. For this group of officials, therefore, it had to be fought till the end. It is explicable that this would prove to be the one case where the rank and file (at least outside Sydney) was found to be significantly to the right of their officials, as around half of the non-metropolitan membership 'scabbed'. This is an important point as it rests on an understanding that the officials had a *different* rather than necessarily more privileged class position to their members. Their economic existence depended on the maintenance of the union machine and this would make them generally more mindful of preserving that machine rather than risking it in overly aggressive industrial action. However, when the machine *itself* was threatened sufficiently to demand action, the officials might show more enthusiasm for action than the rank and file, for whom preservation of a union machine might appear less important.

18 The complaint can be found both in the *Age* reports of the time (see for instance *The Age* 15 August 1917, p. 9) and in a report cited in Fitzpatrick and Cahill *The Seamen's Union of Australia* p. 44.

19 *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 September 1917, p. 12.

20 *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 August 1917, p. 9.

Another strand to the classical Marxist analysis of the trade union officials relates to their relationship with the two main classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie. This is more a sociological than an economic analysis, relying as it does upon the routine of union bureaucracy—a routine that in a fundamental sense determines their relationship to the class struggle. Gramsci summed it up in lines written during the revolutionary upsurge in Turin of 1919-20:

The specialisation of professional activity as trade-union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period, leads only too easily, amongst trade-union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook...From this also comes that openly admitted need for peace which shrinks from great risks and presumed dangers to the stability of the trade-unions...<sup>21</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg had made a similar point in 1906:

The rapid growth of the trade union movement in Germany in the course of the last fifteen years, especially in the period of great economic prosperity from 1895 to 1900, has naturally brought with it a great independence of the trade unions, a specialisation of their methods of struggle...and finally the introduction of a regular trade-union officialdom. All these phenomena are quite understandable...They are...an historically necessary evil. But...these necessary means of promoting trade union growth become, on the contrary, obstacles to further growth...<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis here is on the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a specialised group with possession of skills based on an arcane knowledge of legal procedure and an ability to negotiate. The officials are—as Tony Cliff was to argue more explicitly in the 1950s—brokers between the two main classes.<sup>23</sup> This means that the role of officials is to ameliorate and resolve class conflict as much as, or even more than, to initiate it. This role is manifested concretely in the everyday reality of trade unionism: a reality not so much of ceaseless struggle as of routine and mundane activities. The endless round of meetings and motions, the collection of dues, representations to individual employers regarding petty grievances, and appearances before industrial courts, all foster a mindset which views industrial conflict as, at best, another problem to be resolved by the officials' arcane knowledge and skills. At worst, conflict threatens to tear apart the delicate infrastructure of 'the industrial relations club'. The position of the officials is threatened from both directions: from an insurgent rank and file which begins to act as if it no longer needs the

21 Original in *L'Ordine Nuovo*, reprinted in Gramsci *Soviets in Italy* pp. 9-11.

22 Rosa Luxemburg *The mass strike*, in Rosa Luxemburg *Selected political writings* (edited and translated by Dick Howard), New York and London, Monthly Review Press, 1971 pp. 261-2.

23 Tony Cliff, 'Economic Roots of Reformism' in Tony Cliff *Neither Washington nor Moscow, essays in revolutionary socialism* London, Bookmarks, 1982.

officials, and from the state and the employers who manifest a frenzy of reaction which threatens the unions' very existence. When conflict goes beyond the point where brokerage is possible, the brokers are out of business. Or as E.J. Kavanagh mournfully reflected, unionism had reached its 'highest pinnacle' after 27 years of hard work, largely through arbitration, but it had been 'knocked down in 27 days by direct action in 1917'.<sup>24</sup>

## Arbitration

While the economic differentiation between the rank and file and the officials was less developed in Australia than in larger countries, arbitration had added a bureaucratic twist to the development of trade unionism. The movement, decimated in the strikes and the depression of the 1890s, had been reconstructed in the first decade of the twentieth century. Arbitration began in NSW in the 1890s; it was extended to the federal sphere by the Harvester Decision in 1907.<sup>25</sup> In that judgement, Justice Higgins ruled that every unskilled, adult, male Australian worker should be paid a wage 'appropriate to the normal needs of the average employee regarded as a human being living in a civilised community'.<sup>26</sup> His judgement was an advance for working people, establishing that the living standard of unskilled workers should be based, not on what the market could bear, but on criteria of social justice.

Higgins possessed a genuine concern for the social justice, but this was always allied with a concern for social peace. 'Essentially a pragmatist, he believed social relationships should be ordered so as to minimise group conflict and exorcise poverty from Australia.'<sup>27</sup> Arbitration reflected this duality. On the one hand, it gave the unions a role in determining and safeguarding the wages and conditions of workers and provided a safety net for the unskilled worker whose bargaining power is always limited. On the other, it aimed to direct the union movement away from industrial action. It was both a reform and a method of incorporation.

The Harvester Decision was greeted with anger by the right and Higgins remained a reviled figure in conservative politics.<sup>28</sup> This hostility even resurfaced recently, as the Howard Government rode the fashionable tide of neo-liberalism and at last sought to undo

24 Labor Council of NSW *Report and balance sheet for the half-year ending December 31st 1917* p. 9.

25 The Harvester Award was, in fact, nullified by a successful appeal to the High Court against the Excise Act on which it was based. Higgins, however, used it as a template for a range of further awards, which became in effect the basis of the Federal Arbitration system. See John Rickard *H.B. Higgins: the rebel as judge* Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1984, p. 174.

26 P.G. Macarthy, 'Justice Higgins and the Harvester Judgement', in Jill Roe (ed.) *Social policy in Australia: some perspectives 1901-1975* Sydney, Cassell, 1976, pp. 41-55.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 45 (citing reports in the *Worker* 1918-21).

the arbitration system established by the Harvester Case.<sup>29</sup> In the furore from the right, then and now, one aspect of the decision has tended to be ignored. Higgins found himself, during the hearings that preceded the decision, more in conflict with the unions than with management. The basis for the decision was the Excise Tariff Act, which demanded that businesses receiving tariff protection prove they paid decent wages. The union's interpretation was that the workers should receive a share of the profits which would increase when the company reaped the benefits of its tariff-based monopoly. Higgins rejected this:

It would be ridiculous to make a manufacturer pay high wages when there are big profits, unless I allowed other manufacturers to pay low wages when there are small profits.<sup>30</sup>

Higgins thereby set a limit on unions. Their role was defensive rather than offensive; it was acceptable to defend their members against abuses, but it was not acceptable to challenge the right of employers to make windfall profits. A frugal existence was all unskilled workers were entitled to, no matter how much wealth their labour created. In 1907, a labour movement recovering from the depths of recession and defeat had reason to applaud Higgins's assistance. The time would come, however, when the movement had grown in power and confidence so that it could assert more than a purely defensive, ameliorative role. The constraints that Higgins imposed would then become a barrier.

While official statistics for trade union membership began to be compiled only in 1912 (when 31 percent of the workforce was in unions<sup>31</sup>) there is little doubt that there was a significant revival in membership around the time of the Harvester Decision. A telling indicator is the date of foundation (or re-foundation or reorganisation) of major unions. The national leadership of the Seamen's Union in 1917 had come to power in a major reorganisation in 1906.<sup>32</sup> The Waterside Workers' Federation was founded by amalgamating of local unions in 1905. The wharfies famously chose a group of Labor parliamentarians (headed by William Morris Hughes) to head their Federation. They were expelled in 1916, but one member of the 1905 team remained—the only wharfie on the original executive, Joe Morris.<sup>33</sup>

29 See, for instance: <http://www.ipa.org.au/files/58-3%2013%20mistakes.pdf>, (accessed 16 October 2006) for a report by the neo-liberal think-tank, The Institute of Public Affairs *Australia's 13 biggest mistakes*, which lists the Harvester Judgement at number two.

30 Macarthy, 'Justice Higgins and the Harvester Judgement', p. 51.

31 Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics *Labour and industrial branch report 2*, 1912, p. 90.

32 Brian Fitzgerald, and Rowan J. Cahill *The Seamen's Union of Australia* Melbourne, Seamen's Union of Australia, 1981, p. 39.

33 Peter Gahan 'Did arbitration make for dependent unionism? Evidence from historical case studies' *Journal of International Relations* 38 (4), September 1996, pp. 648-98, in an article devoted to deconstructing the myth that Australian unions were completely dependent on Arbitration—the 'Dependency Hypothesis', nevertheless provides evidence in two of his four case studies of the impetus provided to federal union organisation by arbitration. The Federated Clothing Trades Union emerged in

The assumption that arbitration was responsible for the pre-war growth in union membership has been challenged by recent scholarship. Sheldon and Markey have demonstrated that the pre-war growth in union membership had more to do with traditional forms of organising allied with favourable economic circumstances.

That does not mean that arbitration had no impact. What Sheldon and Markey's revelations indicate is that arbitration can be better understood as a *response* to union growth than as a cause of it. It was a response which sought to tame and incorporate trade unions. It was not totally successful, and it was always likely to have more influence on officials, who were given a central role in arbitration, than upon the rank and file, for whom grievances were more immediate and direct action a more obvious response. Sandra Cockfield shows that the moulders at Metters achieved many of their industrial successes by defying union officials who preferred arbitration to direct action.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, there is little doubt that the establishment of national union structures was accelerated by the Harvester Award. To achieve a federal award, unions needed to have a federal structure. Markey notes this development, whilst downplaying its significance:

National unions developed quite quickly, to total 72 in 1912, and 95 in 1919, accounting for over 80 percent of unionists, partly to take advantage of favourable decisions in the Commonwealth Court under the head of Justice Higgins, notably his 1907 Harvester Judgement...However, most of these organisations were really federations of State-based unions which conducted most union business and have remained the primary locus of union power ever since then.<sup>35</sup>

We have seen, however, particularly in the case of the Waterside Workers and the Seamen, that the establishment of this new federal bureaucracy did create a force for conservatism. It was a force that was not always successful in subduing the militancy of the state and local branches, but a force nonetheless.

If the Australian labour movement had been totally dependent on arbitration, an explosion of struggle such as occurred in 1917 would be unthinkable. Arbitration, however, was not the only option available to workers and their unions; in practice they resorted to direct action as well. Arbitration had failed the Broken Hill miners in 1908 when their employers ignored the ruling of the Commission with impunity.<sup>36</sup> It was a *bête noir* of the IWW and

1907 as a federal union 'with the express intention of gaining federal registration' (p. 661), although, due to internal union politics it did not achieve a federal award till 1919. The NSW branch resisted this move as it already had a generous award granted through the pre-existing NSW system. The Municipal Officers Federation was formed, albeit in 1920, from scratch 'in direct response to federal arbitration'.

34 Ibid, pp. 52-53.

35 Ray Markey, 'Explaining union mobilisation in the 1880s and the early 1990s' *Labour History* 83, November 2002, p. 24.

36 Turner *Industrial labour and politics* p. 42: 'The unions appealed to the Arbitration Court, seeking an award and an injunction restraining the Broken Hill Proprietary from closing its mines. Mr. Justice Higgins granted the injunction but warned the unions that it probably could not be enforced.'

the wider syndicalist current that emerged before the war. However, the fact that the movement had rebuilt itself largely without the help of arbitration does not mean that union officials did not believe it important—or even that it was not the central strategy for union building. The only serious challenge to arbitration by any union before the war was the 1909 coal strike led by the socialist Peter Bowling, and this had been defeated.<sup>37</sup>

The idea of using arbitration remained, therefore, hegemonic within the official circles of the movement, and was especially important to the federal level officials of national unions who, mostly, owed their existence to arbitration. Its influence can be seen in the refusal of the federal officials of the Amalgamated Engineers to allow their Victorian Branch to hold a strike ballot in August 1917. According to *The Age*, a key motivation for this bureaucratic fiat was the belief that a strike in more than one state would lead to cancellation of the union's federal award.<sup>38</sup> It can be seen starkly in Morris's abject response to being dressed down by Justice Higgins on 23 August 1917. Higgins demanded Morris explain the unruly behaviour of his members in Melbourne who had joined the strike. Morris, who had indeed been quiescent (the federal executive of the union had not even met) abjured all responsibility arguing that 'it is the men who are to blame and not the Federation'.<sup>39</sup> Higgins, as well as demanding that Morris engineer a return to work, required him to amend union rules so that individual branches were not allowed to strike without the consent of the federal executive. Morris complied and the branches—even while they remained on strike—passed the rules.<sup>40</sup>

Higgins embodied all that was good, from the conventional union point of view, about arbitration. He was an enlightened liberal who believed in intervention by the state to ensure a civilised standard of living for the working classes. More importantly, he had placed unions, and union officials, at the centre of the system of industrial awards. Higgins came to resemble Trotsky's classic description of a liberal as possessing two symmetrical bumps on the left and right hand sides of his head. The left bump was provided by the coal miners' strike of 1916, an outrage to Higgins' notions of orderly procedure, which had ended with (according to Higgins) a secret instruction from Billy Hughes to Higgins to end the strike on the miners' terms. Higgins refused and a more compliant judge was chosen.<sup>41</sup> Hughes was also involved in the provision of the right hand bump when, during the Great Strike, he pressured Higgins' to deregister the Waterside Workers' Federation. Higgins characteristically preferred to use the threat of deregistration

37 Ibid, p. 36. Bowling's personal hostility to arbitration was well known, but even his opposition, in this case, was only to the NSW system as modified by the conservative Wade government.

38 *The Age* 24 August 1917, p. 5.

39 *The Age* 24 August 1917, p. 6.

40 NBA, WWF papers, T62//1/1, COM minutes, 24 August—11 October 1917, T62/28/4, telegram from Albany Branch WWF to COM (Undated), telegram from Morris to Melb., Bairnsdale and Port Phillip Branches of WWF, 24 September 1917.

41 NLA, W.M. Hughes Papers, MS1538, Series 18, 'Statement by Justice Higgins'.

to put pressure on Morris.<sup>42</sup> The times, however, had bypassed Higgins—judicial master of brokerage. It was no longer sufficient from the point of the view of the employers and the state to tame the unions; they had to be broken.

## The politics of the officials

The final element in understanding the behaviour of the union officials in 1917 was their politics. Since the 1890s the Australian labour movement had been dominated by labourism, a pragmatic and ideologically under-developed variant of social democracy.<sup>43</sup> From the 1880s onwards, some of the more sophisticated ideas of continental socialism had begun to infiltrate the antipodes. Peter Bowling, failed opponent of arbitration, had been a member of the International Socialists.<sup>44</sup> The young William Holman, by 1917 the conservative Premier of NSW, had made his name in 1893 arguing for the superiority of Marx over Henry George.<sup>45</sup> British socialist, Tom Mann, after helping to found the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) had led a strike in Broken Hill.<sup>46</sup> The young secretary of the Timberworkers Union in Victoria, John Curtin, was also a member of the VSP. He had moved to Perth in early 1917.<sup>47</sup> His old union, however, was one of the key constituents in the strike movement in Melbourne, and, perhaps significantly, held its mass meetings during the strike in the VSP's Socialist Hall.<sup>48</sup> The defeats of the strikes of the 1890s had, however, encouraged a defensive mentality within the labour movement and a reliance on a form of parliamentary politics which marginalised revolutionary ideas and even the more left-wing social democratic currents.<sup>49</sup>

The leadership of the Miners' Union is in this regard, both more difficult to pin down and more revealing. It represented a recent amalgamation of the most militant workers in the country, the coal miners and the metal miners of Broken Hill. Both had suffered defeats in 1908. Both had begun to recover under new leadership in the years immediately preceding the war. Willis and Badderley were the architects of amalgamation in an era where union amalgamation in and of itself carried the radical aura of the 'one big union'. Willis in

42 Rickard *H.B. Higgins* p. 236.

43 See Raymond Markey *The making of the Labor Party in New South Wales, 1880-1900* Sydney, UNSW Press, 1988.

44 Turner *Industrial labour and politics* p. 36.

45 H.V. Evatt *Australian labour leader: the story of W.A. Holman and the labour movement* Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1956, p. 30.

46 Verity Burgmann *In our time: socialism and the rise of Labor, 1885-1905* Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1985, pp. 40-41; Robin Gollan *The coalminers of New South Wales* Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1963, p. 127.

47 Lloyd Ross *John Curtin: a biography* Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1996.

48 See Burgmann *In our time* and Geoffrey Charles Hewitt, 'A History of the Victorian Socialist Party, 1906-1932', MA Thesis, Latrobe University, 1974.

49 Markey *The making of the Labor Party in New South Wales* describes this process particularly well.

particular had a reputation for intellectual radicalism.<sup>50</sup> The successful miners' strike of 1916 cemented their reputation. It was the 1916 strike that Vere Gordon Childe was referring to when he condemned the 1917 strike in comparison for 'lacking unitary control'.<sup>51</sup> For Childe it was the model of how a strike should be run—militant but centrally controlled by a strategically aware leadership.

But the victory of 1916 was more complex. According to Gollan, Willis and Baddeley were only goaded into calling the strike by a series of walkouts at lodge level. Later Hughes attempted to get the miners to return without any concessions except that their demands would be considered by an inquiry. He printed thousands of ballots asking for the miners to vote including a written statement that the union executive supported a return to work. The statement was clearly correct, as the leadership of Willis and Baddeley agreed to distribute the ballots with the recommendation intact. The recommendation was not accepted. Furious aggregate meetings in the Northern and Southern Districts refused to co-operate with the ballot, and Hughes was forced to capitulate. The strike was won but it was not a victory for 'unitary control'.<sup>52</sup>

One way to look at the politics of trade union officials is to see how individual officials change over time—how the experience of being a trade union official affects the political ideas they hold. People do not normally become trade union officials because they desire to restrain the insurgent spirit of the working class. Officials tended in this period to be recruited from amongst the ranks of its more politically engaged and activist sections. Much of the time trade union officials, therefore, tended to be to the left of their members politically. In Australia this phenomenon has a long history, as there has been a traditional willingness for workers to elect officials despite, or even because, those officials hold to 'ratbag' revolutionary ideas that the workers themselves reject. The historical strength of the Communist Party in the trade unions can partly be explained by this tradition.

There are countervailing tendencies. The first is inherent to the nature of trade unions. Because unions, unlike revolutionary parties, need to embrace the whole of the class (or of the trade they represent within the class) to be effective, their leadership has to relate to the consciousness of the most conservative of their members as well as to the activists. Neither trade unions, nor their officials can ever be a 'vanguard' in the Leninist sense. The experience of John Curtin is instructive. Curtin was a young clerical worker who had become an activist and street orator in the VSP under the influence of Tom Mann. His best friend, Frank Hyett, also a VSP member, had obtained a position with the Victorian

50 *Daily Telegraph* 20 August 1917, p. 5.

51 Vere Gordon Childe *How labour governs: a study of workers' representation in Australia* Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1964, p. 153: '...the uselessness of a strike, however widespread and popular, when the forces of labour lack organisation and unitary control—was cruelly demonstrated... In the Great Strike of 1917 there was as much solidarity as in the Coal Strike. The craft unionists and the unskilled fought side by side. But there was no directing plan animating the whole, and the solidarity was misapplied.'

52 Gollan *The coalminers of New South Wales* p. 146.

Railways Union and Curtin followed his example, winning an appointment to the Timberworkers' Union.<sup>53</sup> Curtin's main qualifications were his oratorical and journalistic ability, honed in the VSP. He had never worked in the timber industry, but worked tirelessly, travelling to mills and logging camps, making speeches and attending to the tiresome work of handling the compensation cases that dogged this most dangerous of industries.<sup>54</sup>

Curtin's socialist principles remained strong during his tenure as an official, and his *Timberworker* carried courageous anti-war articles from 1914 onwards.<sup>55</sup> It was Curtin who moved the motion at the anti-conscription conference in October 1916 for a stop work/strike meeting against conscription<sup>56</sup>; yet, in six years as secretary of the union, this was the only strike he led. The point is not that Curtin was responsible for this industrial quiescence, his biographer actually asserts that Curtin was disappointed in the lack of action. That, in a way, is the point—that even a socialist with militant aspirations found himself unable to do avoid being sunk into the mundane routine of officialdom. In his defence, it is tempting to draw a connection between Curtin's tireless socialistic propaganda in the union journal and the fact that in 1917, after he had resigned his position and moved to Western Australia, the timber workers in Melbourne played a prominent part in the strike movement. It is significant that, in the columns of the *Westralian Worker*, Curtin wrote approvingly of the strike, even after it was defeated.<sup>57</sup>

Yet it is also significant that his friend, Frank Hyett, still a member of the VSP, as secretary of the Victorian Railways Union (VRU), made sure his union did not join the strike, ignoring those militants in his union who wanted to show solidarity with their comrades in NSW.<sup>58</sup> Hyett's transition from a socialist who envisaged using the union movement to promote socialism to an official determined to keep the Victorian Railways

53 David Day *John Curtin: a life* Sydney, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 134. Hyett was initially appointed as organiser in 1910, but quickly rose to be secretary of the union.

54 Ibid, pp. 142-3: 'Much of the attraction of the union for its members came from the disability and death insurance that it offered in an accident prone industry...he [Curtin] would be bemoaning the administrative burden of the accident and death fund until his departure from the union in 1915.'

55 See, for instance, the *Timberworker* 17 September 1914.

56 NLA, Lloyd Ross Papers, MS3939, Box 46, Australian Trades Union Anti-Conscription Congress: Manifesto, No.7. The Manifesto is signed 'J Curtin, 26 September 1917'.

57 *Westralian Worker* November 1917, cited in Ross *John Curtin* p. 60: 'The truth is that the only thing the plutocracy really fear is the well-organised army of Labor. Political campaigns come and go.'

58 *The Age* 23 August 1917, p. 8, reported that: 'There is a turbulent section of the railway service which is badly disappointed over the result of the recent strike ballot and which is now advocating sympathetic action in respect of the New South Wales railway men. These men are in the minority, and not the least militant among them are to be found among the shunters.' *The Age* 24 August 1917, p. 5, reported that the shunters at Spencer Street station voted to ban goods from NSW; *The Age*, 25 August 1917, p. 11, then reported that the response of the officials to this decision was not to act on it: 'It is significant that although the Council [of the Victorian Railways Union] met on [the following] Thursday night it did not decide one way or the other.'

out of the Great Strike, is a powerful demonstration of how, in Gramsci's phrase, the 'specialisation of professional activity...leads only too easily, amongst trade-union officials, to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook'. Hyett was a great success as secretary of the VRU. He built it up from 2,000 to 12,000 members.<sup>59</sup> The means by which he achieved these ends—primarily negotiating the peaceful absorption of smaller unions—were not likely to encourage a militant mentality. By 1915, in a debate within the VSP about which model of One Big Union to support, Hyett fought against future Communist, W.P. Earsman. Earsman wanted the union to be modelled on syndicalist principles whereas Hyett preferred a bureaucratic approach modelled on his experience with the VRU.<sup>60</sup> Hyett had spent years patiently building the VRU into a powerful machine. He had begun by seeing the union as a weapon in the fight for socialism. By 1917, that weapon had become too precious to be endangered by use.

### **Outflanked by the rank and file**

The second, and probably the most important, countervailing tendency to the 'vanguard' identity of left-wing officials, has to do with the way that workers' political consciousness develops. It can be seen in the way that the different life experience of officials can separate them from the pressures that radicalise their members. The radicalisation of the working class has never proceeded on the basis of orderly and patient propaganda by an enlightened few. In periods such as the First World War (and later the Great Depression), economic and political crises inspire outbursts of mass political activity, strikes and protests. These lead to a shift to the left in which propaganda and agitation play a role. However it is the experience of the crisis by workers that creates the audience for the previously isolated activist minority. The economic crisis and the threat of conscription combined in such a way in 1917.

How does the distinction between officials and rank and file workers relate to this? The differences in their life experience—different class locations—mean that they experience the crisis differently. For example, the strike wave during the First World War was largely fuelled by an explosion in the cost of living. For the mass of workers the equation was simple: they could no longer make ends meet and arbitration was too slow to resolve the problem, so they resorted to strike action. The success of the Broken Hill miners in 1915/16, followed by the coal miners in late 1916, provided inspiration. In this atmosphere, the tiny bands of syndicalists and socialists who had been arguing against arbitration and in favour of direct action for years suddenly found a mass audience. The IWW, in particular, grew in influence.

The crisis had a less direct impact on full-time officials. They experienced it more in terms of the increasing restiveness of their members. In many cases this resulted in officials being overtaken by a rank and file, once passive, apathetic and inarticulate, suddenly

59 Day *John Curtin*, p. 135.

60 Hewitt, 'A History of the Victorian Socialist Party', p. 191.

bursting into militancy and shifting dramatically to the left. The officials may once have been workers who became officials because they were the most active and committed. But that point of time had passed, and they became, as it were, a layer reflecting the politics that prevailed in their youth, but modified by years spent in the far-from-radicalising milieu of officialdom. The Melbourne Branch of the Seamen's Union is a classic example. One of the weakest branches of the union became, during the strike, its most militant. The confusion and exasperation are evident in the complaint of the unidentified Sydney official of the union who, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, bemoaned the Melbourne Branch's newfound militancy.

One prominent official [of the Seamen's Union] said that the actions of the Victorians was [sic] rather humorous, as they were never looked upon as staunch unionists. Now they objected to work alongside loyalists, and no doubt the trouble was being prolonged by many of the malcontents in the Sydney branch who had gone over to Victoria. It had been stated on good authority that the Victorian strikers were being supplied daily with hot meals, and their boots repaired free of charge. The official added if this were true he did not know where the funds were coming from. No doubt, as long as these things were provided free of charge, many of the men who did not like work at any time would be only too pleased to see the trouble prolonged.<sup>61</sup>

It was a militancy that he could only explain as the product of external force, whether that was the arrival of militants from Sydney or a mysterious and sinister agency providing them with meals and boots.

Press reports of mass meetings in 1917 consistently stress that younger workers were more militant. This makes sense. They would be less constrained by family responsibilities or mortgages (the latter less common than today but mentioned in some contemporary reports as a concern, especially for skilled workers). They would less likely be worried about pension funds, which were often controlled by the employer and subject to penalties for strike action.<sup>62</sup> Many of the skilled railworkers, especially the engine drivers who continued at work, are reported to have been motivated by concern for their pensions. Additionally, younger workers would only have experienced a labour movement on the offensive. Older workers would remember times when the going was tougher. If they were old enough, they would have experienced the defeats of the 1890s. In contrast, the youngest layers of the working class were schooled in victory rather than defeat, and a super confidence bordering on hubris is a consistent feature of the very young in any period of insurgence.

61 *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 October 1917, p. 7.

62 CSR in Victoria provides an example of this: NBA, CSR papers, 142/204, Letter from Frank Tudor MP to W.M. Hughes, 19 September 1917: 'Every employee concerned with the strike has to either withdraw his money paid into the Provident Fund *without interest* and be re-employed or else retire and take a reduced pension.' (Emphasis in original.)

In this context, it becomes relevant that the lower ranks of the officials would normally tend to be younger. William Daly of the Seamen was in his early 30s and Timothy McCristal of the wharfies was 35, which made them a generation younger than the federal officials of their respective unions. McCristal was a returned serviceman who had had some experience in the labour movement and a reputation as a public speaker—enough at least to encourage the Defence Minister Pearce to intervene to encourage his repatriation after receiving a comparatively light wound as he might be some help with recruiting. His experience as an official was, however, confined to the period immediately preceding the Great Strike when the movement was experiencing an unprecedented wave of militancy. His recent return from the carnage in Gallipoli was unlikely to have encouraged a conservative outlook, something underlined by his refusal, once safely returned, to take any part in recruiting.<sup>63</sup>

The identification of a trade union bureaucracy with a conservative tendency is not, therefore, made untenable by subtleties and distinctions such as the left wing politics of some officials, the existence of intermediary layers, of a ‘grey area’ between the higher pinnacles of the bureaucracy and the rank and file, or the fact that workers are not always champing at the bit. A bureaucracy is not an edifice with a locked gate within which no one ever dreams or misbehaves. Nor need it be reduced to a strictly defined group of ‘bureaucrats’, labelled with the distinction and certainty associated with comparative zoology. Individual officials will be influenced by factors other than their interests *as officials*. They may enter into their positions with radical, or even revolutionary politics. They may have partners or children who are still working, perhaps who are rank and file members of their union. In 1917 they may well themselves have remained within the workforce. Most importantly, their behaviour will be modified and constrained by the attitudes and activities of their members.<sup>64</sup> How much they are so modified and constrained will be in turn be determined by the extent to which the union itself is democratic and to which the members are active and organised. All these countervailing factors, however, have individual relevance. They will vary from official to official and from union to union, whereas the factors that tend to generate bureaucracy and conservatism are universal. The greater the number one looks at, therefore, the more the general tendencies of type prevail over individual idiosyncrasy.

63 McCristal’s service record can be accessed online at the National Archives of Australia (NAA B2455/1) The record includes copies of the relevant letters from Pearce and the recruiting authorities (complaining of his refusal to assist them).. He had served briefly with the Mounted Rifles in the Boer War as a teenager and served in Gallipoli with the First Lighthorse.

64 For a discussion of this point see: Tom Bramble, ‘Trade union organisation and workplace industrial relations in the vehicle industry 1963-1991’ *Journal of Industrial Relations* 35 (1), March 1993, pp. 39-61.

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