

From exploitation to resistance and revolt: the working class

Diane Fieldes

Class analysis and the significance of class struggles are contested. In a great deal of economic and social debate and analysis the people who create wealth, in particular, are not even mentioned. At best they appear as the middle class, 'who live between the rich and the poor', and whose existence 'is as much an outlook as a demographic category'.¹ The invisibility of the working class in public discussion makes it harder for workers to develop a consciousness of their collective interests and capacity to act on them.

Even when the term 'working class' is used, some mainstream social scientists almost define it out of existence. Don Aitken's approach is particularly extreme. For him a member of the working class is a trade unionist, lives in rented accommodation and was an early school leaver.² Other writers equate the working class with people in blue collar jobs.³ Under both these definitions the size of the working class has been declining for decades. But if classes are understood as constituted by relations of production, rather than as aggregates of individuals with certain characteristics in common, the picture is very different. Not only is the working class a substantial majority of the population, but it can act collectively. The working class is not just passively shaped by the forces of production and the capitalist class. As workers are responsible for the production of society's wealth, they also possess the ability to create a wholly different social organisation based on human need rather than the dictates of profitability.

The working class is made up of those who do not own or control the means of production, who must therefore sell their ability to work to employers and who exercise little control over their own labour or the labour of others.⁴ It therefore includes white collar along side blue collar workers. These groups cannot be distinguished on the basis of their wage levels (many clerical workers get less pay than skilled manual workers), their conditions of work or union membership (some white collar areas are now more highly unionised than the average). Because their labour creates wealth, workers have the power to stop production through collective action. But that is only possible when they organise together and develop a sense of their common interests. Class, in other words, is both an objective and a subjective phenomenon. The extent to which workers pursue their own class interests and hence the working class as a whole becomes a collective actor depends on their level of class consciousness. This chapter examines structures and experiences that tend to fragment the working class. It also considers aspects of capitalist society and organisations, particularly trade unions, that unite workers and generate or express class consciousness and the working class's capacity to engage in collective action.

How big is the working class? The 2001 census indicated that wage and salary earners made up 84 per cent of the employed labour force, the remainder was employers, self-employed and unpaid helpers.⁵ The category 'wage and salary earners', however, includes people who are not part of the working class. We can use the occupational breakdown provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to remove managers, administrators and professionals, apart from teachers and nurses. The resulting figure of 5 378 554 workers includes almost two thirds of the employed labour force. But it now *understates* the size of the working class, since there are undoubtedly others besides teachers and nurses in the 'employed professional' category, like most journalists, social workers and resident medical officers in hospitals, who are really skilled white collar workers. In addition, the 'self-employed' include people in industries such as construction, as well as outworkers in electronics and clothing, who may legally be independent contractors, but whose position in the relations of production is that of workers.

To get the full picture we would have to include retirees, discouraged job seekers, people working in the home and dependents, which would roughly double the total to around thirteen million.⁶ On any reckoning, the working class is a substantial majority of the population.

Conventional sociology has long interpreted these statistics in terms of interest groups or social stratification, rather than Marxist class analysis. The past three decades have seen a shift, by some formerly radical theorists, away from seeing the struggle between capital and labour as central to social change. Those who acknowledge the existence of a large wage-labour force but doubt its ability to form a collective identity or conduct a common struggle, like the authors of *The death of class*, argue that whatever the objective class situation of workers, other differences are more important in determining their interests and actions.⁷

What is the working class?

Numbers alone do not establish the working class's identity or capacity for collective struggle, the real issues in the debate over the usefulness of class analysis. We must therefore analyse the divisions inside the working class and then consider factors that enable workers to transcend them.

The most obvious divisions are those between workers employed in different industries and occupations. These are continually changing. In Marx's time the largest single group of employees in Britain was domestic servants.⁸ When the first Australian census was taken in 1911, labourers and miners made up a quarter of the workforce. By 2003 fewer than one worker in ten was engaged in labouring and related occupations, while the proportion of clerical workers had more than quadrupled.⁹

The industrial and occupational characteristics of Australia's working class have changed substantially over recent decades. As large companies have replaced family firms and the public service has expanded, new sectors have emerged. Purchasing, marketing, accounting and administration have expanded to employ a virtual army of white collar workers.¹⁰ In 2003, 65.1 per cent of the workforce was employed as white collar service employees: salespersons, insurance clerks, bank tellers, teachers, nurses, social workers and technical officers etc. Traditional 'working class' jobs such as driver, plant and machine operator, labourer and tradesperson, which made up over half of the labour force in 1947, are now less than a third of it.¹¹ One of the most important changes is the decline of manufacturing, which in 1966 accounted for 26.2 per cent of employment. By 2002 this had fallen to 12 per cent.¹²

This does not mean all white collar employees are in the working class. We can distinguish three class positions amongst them: salaried members of the bourgeoisie, people in 'contradictory class locations' and workers.¹³ The last group, whose members are distinguished by lack of control over the use of their own labour, is by far the largest.¹⁴ The *bulk* of white collar employees are therefore part of the working class.

The recent changes in the structure of the workforce do not demonstrate a decline in the working class but rather its recomposition, as capitalist competition and capital accumulation has reorganised industry.

Other divisions within the working class reflect the sizes of the enterprises in which workers are employed. In 2003, workplaces employing 200 or more people made up less than 0.25 per cent of private sector businesses, yet they employed 26 per cent of the private sector workforce.¹⁵ This is important because class relations are more transparent where workers are concentrated. In big enterprises, the personal relations between employer and employee found in the smallest workplaces are less significant and workers' *collective* power over what happens in the workplace is most obvious. Union organisation is strongest in large workplaces, where industrial action is also more common. Large workplaces are consequently more likely to be governed by collective agreements than individual contracts.¹⁶

Gender divisions in the working class are discussed in some detail in chapter 6. Here it is worth noting that more women have joined the paid workforce over the last four decades than ever before. As the demand for labour grew, their proportion of the workforce rose from 28.1 per cent in 1964 to 44 per cent in 2003. Since 1988 a majority of adult women has been in the paid labour force.¹⁷ Another area of differentiation in the workforce has been the growth of part-time and casual work. As recently as the late 1960s, around 90 per cent of all workers were full-time. In 2002 the figure was 61 per cent.¹⁸ Since the mid-sixties there has been a boom in part-time employment, primarily involving women. Much of this pattern arose because a large proportion of women joining the paid workforce have been restricted to part-time hours because child care is inadequate or unavailable.

Full-time work itself has changed. About 15 per cent of full-time jobs are now casual or fixed-term rather than permanent. The Australian workforce is today divided fairly evenly between permanent employees and those in non-standard employment. Between 1985 and 2001, the labour force grew by 2.5 million jobs. But within that expansion were job losses. The jobs lost were largely full-time. The growth areas have been industries characterised by high levels of part-time and/or insecure work, such as hospitality, where only 43 per cent of the jobs are permanent. This has led to a net loss of employment across the economy, reflected in widespread unemployment and under-employment: a total in 2001 of 1 240 300 who could not get work, or could not get as much work as they wanted.¹⁹

Immigrants with non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB), who initially came in response to employer demands for extra labour during the post-war boom, changed the Australian working class. By 1994 one-quarter of the workforce was born outside Australia, and two-thirds of these people came from non-English-speaking countries.²⁰ The recession of the early 1990s intensified the higher incidence of unemployment amongst recent migrants.²¹ Australian-born and NESB workers often have different experiences of unemployment, but this is a difference of degree, and the situation is deteriorating for both groups. In 1978 there was no difference in the average duration of unemployment, 24 weeks. By 1995 the figure was 52 weeks for Australian-born, and 74 weeks for NESB workers.²²

Aboriginal workers remain the worst off. They are concentrated in rural jobs, although, since the 1970s, a growing number has been employed in clerical and other office jobs.²³ Aboriginal people are less involved in the paid labour force than the rest of the population, reflecting their oppression and marginalisation in Australian society, a point developed in chapter 8.

Working class experiences

Clearly the working class is not homogeneous. Women, Aboriginal and migrant workers are generally lower paid; unemployment falls disproportionately on Aborigines and recent migrants; and there are considerable income differentials between and within other groups. The wages of tradespersons and related workers averaged \$676.90 per week in 2000, for example, while those of elementary clerical, sales and service workers averaged \$513.40.²⁴ Some work full-time, others part time. National, gender, homophobic and racial prejudices also create rifts among workers (see Introduction and chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9). But the view that such differences and ideas make it impossible for workers to unite in collective action to defend themselves and even to change society is mistaken.²⁵ Common experiences of working class life and struggle can break down these divisions.

The employer strategy of simplifying, routinising and fragmenting jobs, in order to exercise more control over employees has led to a convergence in the nature and conditions of blue and white collar work.²⁶ Furthermore, by bringing together workers from different backgrounds into the cities and large-scale industry, capital itself imposes a common life-style and work discipline on the bulk of the population. The work experience itself, whether it is on an assembly line or as a member of a small team in a public service office, organises workers and teaches them co-operation. Despite a

degree of occupational and sectoral segregation, a large proportion of women work alongside men in the workplace, non-English-speaking background migrants work with the Australian-born, part-timers work with full-time workers, older workers with younger.²⁷ In other words, a common experience of work tends to bridge these divisions and can lay the basis for overcoming them.

The existence of a distinct working class is evident in the ideas workers hold, although it is sometimes obscured by a tendency for workers to describe themselves as 'middle class'. This is partly because conventional wisdom tells us 'we're all middle class', and partly because being middle class is seen as more prestigious.²⁸ But, in his major study of class consciousness, Chamberlain pointed out that, whatever the language used, workers have a fairly realistic understanding of where they fit into the class structure. Much depends on just what they mean by 'middle class'. If 'they mean the great majority of people who do the work of the system, as distinct from the rich who run things and the poor who are the casualties of the system' this may just amount to 'a definition of class that cuts across blue and white collar occupational divisions'. Indeed 'it could be argued that the working class perception that they are the majority group... is, in fact, fairly accurate'.²⁹

Everyone can understand the contrasts between different parts of town.³⁰ Although the dispersion of working class population into the suburban sprawls may have reduced the importance of community networks, there are still many formal and informal linkages ensuring that a certain 'us and them' awareness endures. There is even a tendency for working class people to be involved in particular codes of football. A 1992 rugby survey found that 76 per cent of union test players had been educated at fee paying schools, whereas 57 per cent of league players had gone to state schools. This understated the real class distinctions. Among the fee-paying institutions it is the parochial Catholic schools, catering for large numbers of workers' children, which generally play league.³¹ Since teams are supported by clubs with extensive local followings, sport is a significant aspect of the networks holding social classes together. Schools themselves reflect the class divide. More than 40 per cent of students at non-Catholic private schools live in households with incomes of more than \$100 000. The comparable rate at public schools is 11 per cent.³²

If divisions among workers persist, it is partly because employers have an interest in perpetuating them. They benefit from paying lower wages to oppressed sections of the working class and from reduced solidarity amongst different groups of workers. The media, the education system and other channels of mass communication, which are owned or controlled by those who benefit from the status quo, reproduce ideologies like racism and sexism which promote such divisions. As recently as the 1960s such ideas had sufficient hold to be embodied in formal pay differentials. Employers were legally entitled to pay lower wages to Aborigines in the pastoral industry and most women workers.³³

Ideas that justify divisions in the working class are therefore not static. In particular, the hold of conservative ideas is challenged by workers' own involvement in struggle. When Australian unionists in the 1960s took industrial action to win equal pay for women or to support the pay and land rights claims of Aboriginal stockmen in the Northern Territory, their ideas about women or race often changed too, helping to forge a stronger class identification, across sex and race lines, based on the recognition that workers--women and men, black and white--face a common, class enemy.³⁴

The existence of a substantial trade union movement and a recurrent collective activity that involves hundreds of thousands of workers--strikes--demonstrate both that class conflict at the point of production remains a fundamental feature of Australian society and the existence of widespread, if often low level, working class consciousness.

Trade unions

In a capitalist society, nothing can be produced without workers' labour. Without it, employers cannot bring the productive resources that they control into motion. By withdrawing their labour, workers can exercise enormous social power, stopping profits at source. Trade unions tap this potential to undermine the capitalist class's ability to control the intensity and organisation of work and the terms and conditions under which it is performed. Thus there is a simple reason why unions continue to attract workers and to express a basic class consciousness: even the most docile of unions gives workers greater strength to resist their employers than they would have as individuals. By uniting rather than competing with each other, workers can both gain more from their employers and start to see themselves as a class. As early as 1844, Friedrich Engels wrote that 'as schools of war, the unions are unexcelled'. Even though union action may be over seemingly narrow issues of wages and conditions, 'their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition'.³⁵

Trade unions are fundamental defensive organisations that express working class unity. They encompass over 1.8 million people in Australia. Tens of thousands of union members represent their fellow unionists as delegates. The mass working class vote for the union-based Labor Party is a weaker expression of this unity (see chapter 4).

Trade unions' very existence indicates the presence of class antagonism. Employers' desire to break down collectivism on the job springs from their recognition that unionism challenges their power. So, in 2001 for example, the Industrial Relations Commission found that the management of Blair Athol mine in central Queensland had conspired to make a blacklist of union activists redundant. Management at the State Library of Victoria made a similar attempt to sack militants in mid-2004.³⁶

Where active union organisation exists, workers are more likely to be able to improve their situation. Union members continue to earn more on average than non-members, even though the official statistics include highly-paid, managerial staff, who are not workers, amongst the non-members. In 2000, a comparison of the hourly rates paid under the Contract Cleaners Award in WA and a range of non-union individual agreements found that the award rate was always higher--for weekends and public holidays, up to three times the individual contract rate³⁷ Across the board, pay rises in union-negotiated agreements averaged 4.1 per cent during the three months to March 2004, compared to 3.4 per cent in non-union agreements.³⁸ The impact of unions has not been confined to wages: non-unionised employees had less superannuation, long service, annual and sick leave as well.

Despite the benefits of unionism, Australian trade union membership has experienced a steep decline over the last 25 years. Union coverage has fallen from 55 per cent in the mid 1970s to 48 per cent in 1982, to 23 per cent in 2002, the fastest rate of decline in the industrialised world. In the 12 months to August 2003, membership reached 1 866 700, an increase of 33 000 on the previous year, but union density remained 23 per cent.³⁹ It is important to ask what has caused the decline in union density, whether it can be reversed and if it means that class is becoming less significant in Australia.

One explanation for the stagnation of union membership points to the changing structure of the workforce. On the one hand, employment in heavily-unionised public-sector and manufacturing industries and amongst male full-time and permanent employees has fallen. The number of private-sector services and amongst female, part-time and casual or temporary employees has, on the other hand, expanded.⁴⁰ The reason for declining union coverage has, however, not been changes in the structure of the workforce *per se*. First, areas of high and low coverage are not static. Emergent industries have always been the most weakly organised. Over time, however, organising campaigns transformed them into strongholds of unionism. Wharfies were once 'unorganisable' casuals. It was union campaigning that turned them into a 'core' sector of the workforce and the union movement. The second point is that sectoral change in the workforce goes on all the time. The relative decline

in blue collar jobs has been occurring since the 1960s, but the unions' decline only set in during the 1980s. Why? Because in the 1960s and 1970s, unions were able to recruit in growing white-collar areas: white collar membership rose by 9 per cent per year between 1969 and 1976.

The difference today is not changing sectoral composition, but the failure of the unions to recruit in the new areas, evident also in the failure to recruit young workers. Union coverage of 15-24 year olds nearly halved during the 1990s. As a result, young workers' share of total union membership fell from 16 per cent to 12.5 per cent.⁴¹

It is not true that the 'new sectors' of the workforce are intrinsically hostile to unionism. Surveys conducted since 1996 on behalf of the Labor Council of NSW demonstrate that approximately 50 per cent of the workforce agreed with the statement 'I'd rather be in a trade union', and that this figure is increasing. This suggests that, although unions now cover only 23 per cent of the workforce, there is a significant untapped potential for membership growth. When asked why they had not joined, 28 per cent of non-unionists responded 'no need to/not worth it'. Twenty three per cent said 'don't know, no reason' and this was especially common amongst young workers. 'No relevant union, no union available' was the response of 20 per cent. Only 10 per cent said 'I don't believe in unions'. These answers suggest that many of those who are not currently union members could be recruited if union organising were more ambitious.⁴²

A factor that influenced Australian industrial relations from the mid-1990s was a more aggressive anti-union stance by the federal government and many employers. The fall in union density was less a symptom of the disappearance of class than an indicator of capitalist success in the class struggle. The *Workplace Relations Act* of 1996 imposed a number of legal constraints on unions' ability to organise and act. It also outlawed the closed shops that had underpinned union membership in a number of areas.⁴³ In September 2004, the High Court's decision in the Electrolux Case reinforced the Government's efforts to limit the kind of matters that could be included in industrial agreements and unions' ability to organise. Employers, egged on by the Coalition Government since 1996, have become noticeably more hostile towards unions. This was most evident in the 1998 waterfront dispute but has been clear in other cases of union busting and in the increased use of lockouts by employers.⁴⁴ Employer hostility should, however, be taken as a given for union organising. The fundamental issue is how to enthuse workers to join.

While union membership has declined seriously, unions are not disappearing and the fall in union density is by no means even. In both 2000 and 2001 union membership expanded. In 2002 overall membership declined once more. Yet unions in health, community services and construction grew in 2002.⁴⁵

Where and when, unions have confronted (rather than collaborated with) employers, fought to improve wages and conditions, and mobilised members in collective action they have often grown. Over the past two decades, the trend towards centralisation of power at the top and the erosion of democracy, reinforced the relative passivity of the union movement. But a revival in levels of class struggle can reverse it, in the process of more effectively defending living standards and expanding union membership. Finally, militant unionists need to learn the lessons of the Accord (see chapter 4), that the Labor Party is no friend of the working class and that evading industrial struggle in the hope of making deals with State or federal ALP governments is only guaranteed to take the conditions of workers backwards. A strategic shift within the union movement towards greater militancy, democracy and independence from Labor will require a struggle within unions against leaders who have followed the disastrous strategy of attempting to 'fix capitalism'.

Evidence of the usefulness of a fighting approach can be found in those unions that have bucked the general trend of decline. Taking industrial action builds union strength. Following a decision by unionised Victorian teachers to mount an industrial campaign in 2004, their union was 'inundated with phone calls, with over a thousand people joining the union just last week in order to participate in the March 3 action'.⁴⁶ Similarly, when the National Tertiary Education Union struck across the

country on 16 October 2003, 1 044 workers joined the union during the month, with the biggest peak in new members occurring in the few days leading up to the strike. Significantly, a large proportion of the new academic unionists were junior members of staff, showing the potential for unions to recruit younger workers when they actually fight.⁴⁷

The unionisation process both reflects the differences within the working class and shows the potential to overcome them. Surveys of attitudes to unions indicate that unions themselves can bridge the divisions in the working class outlined above. A 1992 survey of Victorian unionists, including women and men as well as those from English speaking backgrounds and various migrant groups, found a high degree of agreement about what workers wanted from their unions. Surveys between 1996 and 2002 found positive attitudes to unions among women and men, different age groups, and across white and blue collar occupations.⁴⁸

Women's increased involvement in the paid workforce is reflected in the unions. Mass recruitment pushed up the female proportion of union membership from one quarter in 1970 to more than one third 20 years later.⁴⁹ While men remain more likely to join unions (24 per cent in 2003) than women (22 per cent), this is not mainly due to an averseness on women's part.⁵⁰ Women were less unionised largely because more women were employed in small workplaces and were doing part-time work. In these situations, both men and women were less likely to belong to unions.⁵¹

Some of the gap between the unionisation of younger and older workers may be due to different experiences. Older people are more likely to have seen unions winning major improvements in real wages and conditions in the 1970s and early 1980s. Most younger workers have only witnessed unions being relatively ineffective. This problem could be overcome if unions started to win more victories. Since people of different ages often work alongside each other, the potential for a transmission of positive attitudes, in the right circumstances, remains.

Casualisation has particularly affected younger workers. It is true that people in part-time or precarious employment can be more difficult to organise, if their hours of work make it harder for them to have contact with the union movement. But most workers in this kind of employment still work with full-time and permanent workers. If the union takes action, the possibility of involving them exists.

Immigration helps unions grow. In every census of union membership between 1976 and 1994, workers born abroad were more likely to be members. This was because new migrants entered highly unionised industries and occupations, and reflected the trade unionist or left-wing political traditions that migrants brought with them from such countries as Italy and Greece.⁵² There was no evidence that an influx of migrants into an industry dampened the strike rate.⁵³

It is indicative of indigenous oppression that ABS rarely produces separate figures about the unionisation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Nonetheless, as chapter 8 demonstrates, trade union activity by Aborigines themselves and by non-Aboriginal workers in support of Black rights, has helped to break down racist attitudes.⁵⁴

The balance of class forces

By expressing and shaping workers' sense of their common interests, unionism also points to the counterposed interests of employers. It is not possible to understand the working class in isolation. Conflict with the capitalist class and shifts in the relative strength of the two classes affect workers' wages and conditions, their organisations and their consciousness. If it escalates into large struggles, this conflict can highlight the working class's interest not only in winning short term improvements but ultimately in overthrowing capitalism.

Official statistics for the share of national income going to each class reflect the reality of the struggle between capital and labour. The proportion going to wages peaked during periods of industrial militancy in the mid-1970s and again in the early 1980s. On the other hand, between

1982-83 and 1991-92, labour's share fell as real wages were driven down by over 10 per cent, while profits rose. The wages share recovered a little from the low point of 1988-89 (52.8 per cent) to 54.4 per cent in 2002-03, but remained below the levels of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁵ What is more, studies in the late 1990s suggested that 10 per cent of employees now fell into a growing category of the 'working poor'.⁵⁶

Class conflict and a shifting balance of class forces can be seen at the level of the workplace too. Employers since the early 1990s, for example, have attempted to meet increased demand by intensifying the efforts of the existing workforce or by using dependent contractors, casuals or labour-hire firms, rather than by creating new jobs.⁵⁷ But only one in five self-described casuals wanted to work on an intermittent basis, while two-thirds wanted predictable patterns of work.⁵⁸ So the push for non-standard hours and working arrangements has not come from the workforce. Their growth indicated that employers were pushing out their 'frontier of control'.⁵⁹

Popular perceptions of rising inequality also reflect this shift. In 2000, 55 per cent of people surveyed felt that the distribution of wealth had become less fair over the past decade and only 10 per cent thought it had become fairer.⁶⁰

While aggregate data shows average real wages for full time employees rose by over 25 per cent during the 1990s, this was mainly due to a wages explosion at the very top, i.e. amongst people who are not members of the working class.⁶¹ Real wages fell between 2000 and 2003 in several of the areas of employment growth: accommodation, cafes and restaurants, communications, property and business services, and personal and other services.⁶² Executive pay increased from being 'only' 22 times average weekly earnings in 1992 to 74 times by 2002. In the finance sector the gulf was even wider. The CEOs of the four major banks received an average of 188 times the pay of customer service workers.⁶³

Even the much-vaunted growth of share ownership in Australia hid inequality. Many Australian workers only became shareholders through privatisation, demutualisation and compulsory superannuation, losing pay and social benefits in the process.⁶⁴

The shifting balance of forces has also been reflected in patterns of working hours. Over the twenty years to 2002, average hours worked per week in Australia rose, while paid overtime fell. In other words, there was a rise in unpaid hours.⁶⁵ Similarly, in 2002, 57 per cent of employees did not take all their available annual leave. While some were saving it up for later use, 42 per cent cited work-related reasons for their inability to use their entitlements.⁶⁶ Very long working hours involve significant risks to workplace health and safety, as well as to family and other social relationships. Employers' costs are reduced by shifting the burden onto working class families.

The incompatible interests of capitalists and workers result in industrial conflict, whether open or hidden. Class resentments are expressed in overt activities such as strikes and work bans, as well as in a range of covert forms. Strike statistics clearly demonstrate the social weight of Australia's working class and the continued significance of industrial struggle. This is despite the fact that industrial disputes remain at historically low levels.⁶⁷ The decrease in strike activity is clearly related to the fall in union density and shares some of the same causes: the growth of non-union and individual bargaining, the expansion of jobs in traditionally poorly-organised sectors; and restrictions on legal rights to undertake industrial action and for unions to enter workplaces.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, during 2003 there were 643 disputes, involving 275 600 workers and 439 400 strike days, i.e. hundreds of thousands of workers took serious action, as they tried to defend and improve their wages and conditions.⁶⁹ There was no other collective effort to improve life in Australian society that so actively or consistently involved as many people as striking.

The levels of union membership and strike activity in Australia are low. But the problems that unions face are not insurmountable. Rank and file militancy has rebuilt Australian unionism in the past, after the smashing of the nascent union movement in the great strikes of the 1890s and again

in the wake of the 1930s depression. Working class organisation, combativity and self-confidence peaked in the late 1940s and again in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

More recently, developments in the Italian union movement show the possibilities for renewed growth here. While the decline in union density had not been as steep in Italy as in Australia, it had still fallen from 49 to 37 per cent in the twenty years to 2000.⁷⁰ Yet the following years saw a resurgence of union activity: general strikes in April 2002, October 2003 and March 2004 involved tens of millions of workers, and ‘wildcat’ strikes occurred, as rank and file workers took action independently of union leaders. The process involved the interaction of local economic demands, for example over redundancies or wages at Alitalia or Fiat, with widespread political hostility to the Berlusconi government over the war in Iraq. In 2003, over 60 per cent of strike days were due to industrial campaigns over issues ‘not connected with the employment relationship’, as workers took action against government attacks on pension rights.⁷¹ While we cannot predict the precise combination of issues that will regenerate union activism in Australia, the continued existence of union organisation and the inevitability of class antagonisms under capitalism mean the working class can step back onto centre stage. What is more, their role in producing the wealth of society means they have at their disposal an unequalled power to bring about social change. Whether workers confine their goals to defending their immediate interests or seek to replace capitalism and the oppressions it reproduces with a society based on collective decision making, that is socialism, will depend on how they deal with the structural weaknesses (discussed in chapter 4) of their industrial and political organisations.

Further reading

Bearfield, Sue ‘Australian employees’ attitudes towards unions’ Working Paper 82 Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching, University of Sydney, March 2003

Braverman, Harry *Labor and monopoly capitalism* Monthly Review Press, New York 1974

Chamberlain, Chris *Class consciousness in Australia* Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1983

Engels, Friedrich *The condition of the working class in England*

www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class, first published 1845

Watson, Ian et al. *Fragmented futures: new challenges in working life* Federation Press, Annandale 2003

Wright, Erik Olin ‘Intellectuals and the class structure of capitalist society’ in Pat Walker (ed.) *Between labor and capital* Black Rose Books, Montreal 1978.

Zweig, Michael *The working class majority. America’s best kept secret* ILR Press, Ithaca 2000

Endnotes

- 1 Michael Pusey *The experience of middle Australia* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 2003 p. 3.
- 2 Don Aitken ‘The new electorate’ in Dennis Woodward, Andrew Parkin and John Summers (eds) *Government, politics and power in Australia: an introductory reader* 3rd edition Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1985 p. 213.
- 3 Randy Hodson and Teresa A. Sullivan *The social organisation of work* 3rd edition Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont 2002 p. 215.
- 4 Erik Olin Wright ‘Intellectuals and the class structure of capitalist society’ in Pat Walker (ed.) *Between labor and capital* Black Rose Books, Montreal 1978 p. 194; Michael Zweig *The working class majority. America’s best kept secret* ILR Press, Ithaca 2000 p. 3.

- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Census of population and housing: selected education and labour force characteristics Australia 2001*, catalogue 2017.0.
- 6 Data on the various categories are available in Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year book Australia 2004*, catalogue 13101.0.
- 7 See, for example, Andre Gorz *Farewell to the working class: an essay on post-industrial socialism* South End Press, Boston 1982; Alain Touraine 'Triumph or downfall of civil society?' *Humanities in review* I Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982; Alain Touraine 'An introduction to the study of social movements' *Social research* 52 (4) Winter 1985; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* Verso, London 1985; Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters *The death of class* Sage, London 1996.
- 8 Alex Callinicos *Making history* Polity, Cambridge 1989 p. 188.
- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics. Feature article—spotlight on occupation*, April 2004, catalogue 6105.0; Leonard Broom and F. Lancaster Jones *Opportunity and attainment in Australia* ANU Press, Canberra 1976 pp. 35-36.
- 10 Harry Braverman *Labor and monopoly capitalism* Monthly Review Press, New York 1974 pp. 293-301.
- 11 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics. Feature article – trade union membership*, August 2003, catalogue 6105.0; Andrew Scott *Fading loyalties: the ALP and the working class* Pluto, Sydney 1991 p. 12.
- 12 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Labour force, Australia* February 2003, catalogue 6203.0; Keith Norris *The economics of Australian labour markets* Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1993 p. 10.
- 13 Erik Olin Wright *Class, crisis and the state* NLB, London 1978; Wright 'Intellectuals' op. cit. Also see Guglielmo Carchedi, On the economic identification of the new middle class. *Economy and Society* 4 (1975), pp. 1-86.
- 14 *ibid.* p. 194.
- 15 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year book Australia 2003. Industry Overview. Number of businesses and employment by size of business*; Morehead et al *Changes at work* op. cit. p. 340.
- 16 Martin J. Watts and William Mitchell 'Wages and wage determination in 2003' *Journal of Industrial Relations* 46 (2) June 2004 pp. 162-163.
- 17 Australian Bureau of Statistics *The labour force 1964 to 1968 historical supplement* catalogue 6.22; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Labour force, Australia* February 2003, catalogue 6203.0; Scott *Fading loyalties* op. cit. P. 12.
- 18 Ian Watson et al. *Fragmented futures: new challenges in working life* Federation Press, Annandale 2003, p. 46.
- 19 *ibid.* pp. 17, 38, 53, 147.
- 20 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Labour force, Australia* February 2003, catalogue 6203.0; Constance Lever-Tracy and Michael Quinlan *A divided working class?* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1988 p. 2.

- 21 Earnest Healy 'Unemployment dependency rates amongst recently arrived migrants: an update', *People and place* 2 (3) 1994 p. 49.
- 22 Watson et al, *Fragmented futures* op. cit. p. 34.
- 23 Tom O'Lincoln *Years of rage: social conflicts in the Fraser era* Bookmarks, Melbourne 1993 pp. 7-8; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year book Australia. Article--labour force status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, 2004, catalogue 1301.0.
- 24 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year book Australia*, 2002, catalogue 1301.0 p.141.
- 25 Laclau *Politics* op.cit; Laclau and Mouffe *Hegemony* op.cit.
- 26 Braverman *Labor and monopoly capital* op. cit.; Evan Willis *Technology and the labour process* Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1988.
- 27 Lever-Tracy and Quinlan *A divided working class?* op. cit.; Morehead et al *Changes at work* op. cit. p. 603.
- 28 Sol Encel *Equality and authority: a study of class, status and power in Australia* Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1980 p. 31.
- 29 Chris Chamberlain *Class consciousness in Australia* Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1983, pp. 130, 132. For an indication of the widespread phenomenon of self-identification with 'the middle', see M.D.R. Evans and Jonathan Kelley 'Subjective social location: data from 21 nations' *International journal of public opinion research* 16 (1) Spring 2004.
- 30 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Sydney...a social atlas* 2001, catalogue 2030.1 and *Melbourne...a social atlas* 2001, catalogue 2030.2.
- 31 Murray Phillips 'Rugby', in Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart (eds) *Sport in Australia: a social history* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 1994 p. 211.
- 32 'The new class divide', editorial, *Sydney morning herald*, 10 August 2004.
- 33 Diane Fieldes *Land rights now* Socialist Alternative, Sydney 1997; Diane Fieldes 'Some are more equal than others: analysing equal pay in Australia' in Douglas Blackmur (ed.) *Contemporary Australasian industrial relations research* AIRAANZ, Sydney 1992 pp. 96-98.
- 34 Diane Fieldes 'The fight for equal pay in the Australian insurance industry, 1972-1975' in Ron Callus and Michelle Schumacher (eds) *Australian industrial relations research* AIRAANZ, Sydney 1994.
- 35 Friedrich Engels *The condition of the working class in England* chapter 10 'Labour movements', www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class, first published 1845.
- 36 Watson et al *Fragmented futures* op.cit. p.76; Bruce Hearn Mackinnon 'Employer matters in 2003' *Journal of industrial relations* 46 (2) June 2004 p. 238; Jill Sparrow 'White collar workers striking back' *Socialist alternative* July 2004 p. 22.
- 37 Watson et al *Fragmented futures* op. cit. p. 129.
- 38 Health Services Union website, www.hsua.asn.au/news/1086650633_14753.html, accessed 8 June 2004.

- 39 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Employee earnings, benefits and trade union membership, Australia* August 2003, catalogue 6310.0.
- 40 Peter Berry and Gerry Kitchener *Can unions survive?* BWIU ACT Office, Canberra 1989 chapter 3.
- 41 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics* August 2003, catalogue 6105.0.
- 42 Sue Bearfield 'Australian employees' attitudes towards unions', Working Paper no. 82, ACIRRT, University of Sydney, March 2003.
- 43 David Peetz *Unions in a contrary world: the future of the Australian trade union movement* Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 1998, p. 3. Peetz goes so far as to argue that government and employer hostility to compulsory unionism is the critical factor in explaining union decline. However, the cases of union recruitment out of industrial action suggest that the long period of union quiescence has been more important.
- 44 Chris Briggs 'Lockout law in Australia: into the mainstream?' ACIRRT Working Paper 95, Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching, University of Sydney 2004.
- 45 Rae Cooper 'Trade unionism in 2003' *Journal of industrial relations* 46 (2) June 2004 p. 214.
- 46 AAP 'Teachers vow strikes to continue' *The Age* 29 February 2004.
- 47 NTEU *Advocate* November 2003 p.12.
- 48 Santina Bertone and Gerard Griffin *Immigrant workers and trade unions* Bureau of Immigration Research, Melbourne 1992 pp. 90-92; Bearfield 'Australian employees' attitudes' op. cit. 11-14
- 49 Martina Nightingale *Facing the challenge: women in Victorian unions* Victorian Trades Hall Council, Melbourne September 1991 pp. 10-11.
- 50 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics. Feature article – trade union membership*, April 2004, catalogue 61050.
- 51 Nightingale *Facing the challenge* op. cit. p. 11.
- 52 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Social indicators Australia* 1994, catalogue 4101.0.
- 53 Lever-Tracy and Quinlan *A divided working class?* op. cit. p.141.
- 54 Fieldes *Land rights* op. cit.
- 55 Frank Stilwell *Economic inequality: who gets what in Australia* Pluto Press, Leichhardt 1993 p. 19; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian system of national accounts* 2002-03, catalogue 5204.0.
- 56 Watson et al *Fragemented futures* op.cit. p.123.
- 57 *ibid.* pp.43-45.
- 58 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Employment arrangements and superannuation, Australia* 2000, catalogue 6361.0.
- 59 On the 'frontier of control', see Carter L. Goodrich *The frontier of control: a study in British workshop politics* Pluto, London 1975, first published 1921.
- 60 Pusey *The experience of middle Australia* op.cit. pp. 39-40.
- 61 *ibid.* p.121.
- 62 Watts and Mitchell 'Wages' op. cit. p. 172.

- 63 John Shields, Michael O'Donnell and John O'Brien *The bucks stop here: private sector remuneration in Australia* a report prepared for the Labor Council of NSW 2003 p. iii.
- 64 Simon Kelly 'Trends in Australian wealth--new estimates for the 1990s' presented to the 30th Annual Conference of Economists University of Western Australia 26 September 2001, www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/pubs/cp01/2001_008/cp2001_008.pdf, accessed 18 August 2004; Watson et al *Fragmented futures* op. cit. p.177.
- 65 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Employment arrangements and superannuation, Australia* 2000, catalogue 6361.0.
- 66 Richard Denniss 'Annual leave in Australia: an analysis of entitlements, usage and preferences' The Australia Institute Discussion Paper no. 56 July 2003 p. 9.
- 67 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Industrial disputes, Australia* March quarter 2004, catalogue 6321.0.55.001; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics* July 2004, catalogue 6105.0.
- 68 Burgess et al 'Australian labour market' op. cit. p.143.
- 69 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Industrial disputes, Australia* March quarter 2004, catalogue 6321.0.55.001; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics* July 2004, catalogue 6105.0.
- 70 Bernhard Ebbinghaus 'Trade unions' changing roles: membership erosion, organisational reform and social partnership in Europe' *Industrial relations journal* 33 2002 pp. 465-483.
- 71 European Industrial Relations Observatory Online *2003 Annual review for Italy* www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/01/feature/it0401204f.html, accessed 18 August 2004; Tony Barber 'Italians face strike over pensions' *The financial times* 10 March 2004.