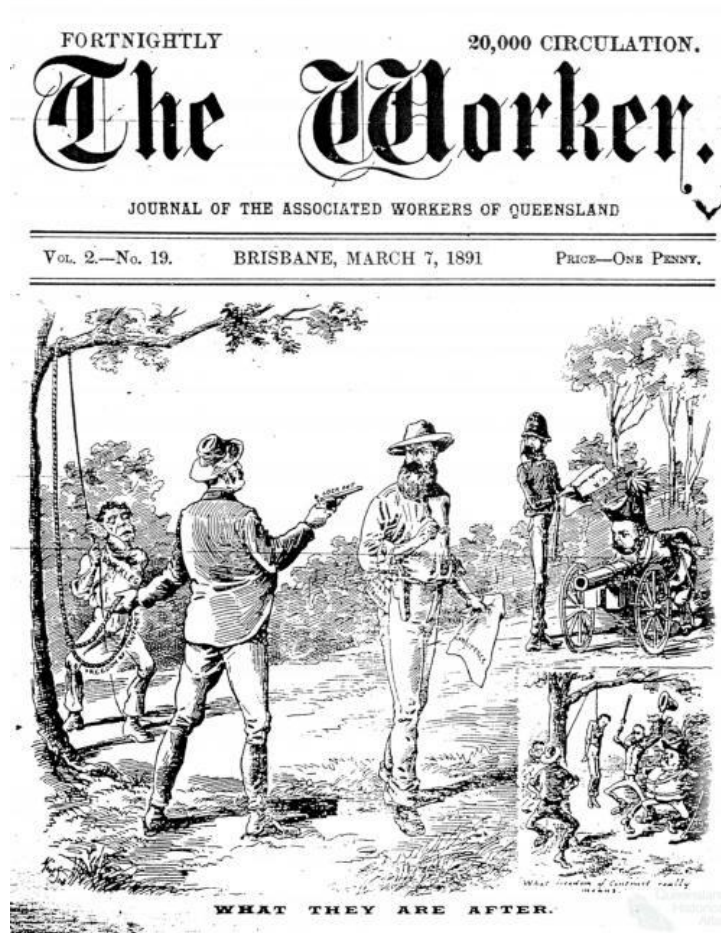


“Like all union things, blood was shed”: conflict in Queensland’s industrial landscape
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Abstract

Trade unionists, unlike politicians and other public figures, are far less likely to record details of their work in diaries or write public memoirs, a situation that has made it difficult for scholars to scrutinise their strategic and decision-making culture, not least in the midst of workplace conflict. The ‘Witnesses to Change’ oral history project (part of the *Queensland Speaks* project, www.QueenslandSpeaks.com.au), through partnership with the peak body Queensland Council of Unions, undertook interviews with selected unionists, officials and delegates to examine the recent and often fractious role of trade unions in Australian society, including reasons for diminishing union membership.

There is power in a unionist

While Queensland has been the scene of several notable industrial conflicts, including the 1980s SEQEB strikes and the Mt Isa Mines disputes of the 1960s and 1990s, few accounts of such events highlight the roles and experiences of the ordinary union members caught up in

them. Fewer still are the personal or scholarly accounts of conflict occurring between or even within unions as they deal with industrial disputes and unions' shifting roles during societal change or, more recently, the impacts of union amalgamation and declining union membership. Drawing on interview testimonies recorded for the oral history website, *Queensland Speaks*, a project at the University of Queensland (UQ), this paper touches on some of the lesser known tensions and industrial clashes in the recent history of Queensland's union movement. The paper examines the impact of changing workforce composition and workplace representation on the union movement, a group largely unrepresented on the public record, in Queensland's broader social history.

The once again in vogue oral history approach – capturing 'history from below' – is adapted and expanded upon in the *Queensland Speaks* project. In this instance, for the project phase titled, 'Witnesses to Change', interviews with union officials and delegates were recorded and the audio 'broadcast' via the project's website. The interviews are accompanied by contextual, biographical and comparative information, and all are indexed, rather than transcribed, so as to compel researchers and the wider public to listen attentively to the recorded accounts of union history, and Queensland history more broadly. By addressing similar questions to people from widely differing union positions and perspectives, the project can balance and 'triangulate' its sources and provide new material for scholars to examine objectively. The oral evidence captured in our interviews with both 'ordinary' and leading unionists gives a greater appreciation of the 'bigger picture' changes in Queensland and Australia, driven by ideological and cultural differences 'from above', that have in recent times impacted upon individual union members and the union movement as a whole, changes that sometimes have embroiled unions in conflict with fellow workers' groups or even with different branches of the same union. In cases such as these, fiercely disputed boundaries of union representation can prompt industrial disquiet almost the equal of that seen on the nation's waterfronts or mine sites.



With union membership steadily declining, many younger adults don't even encounter issues involving conceptions of unionism until they are in their twenties. But before the 1980s kids by their teens would have had some direct experience of trade unionists and what unions stood for, whether favourable or not. People growing up in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s had much more direct experience of unionism, when over half of all paid workers were in a trade union. Their perceptions would be formed by older members of the household in a trade union, or if they grew up in a better-off household, they may have heard regular complaints about the demands that unionists were making of their employers. Unionism was once almost ubiquitous in the major industrial cities and suburbs of Australia. If you were brought up in Newcastle and Wollongong with their steelworks, or Broken Hill and Mt Isa with their mines, the whole atmosphere of family and social life revolved around both the dominant employers, including BHP, and the dominant trade unions.

The coal union strikes of the late 1940s had a direct impact on most households, with intermittent electricity supply. So growing up in such households, over breakfast, you either felt sympathy and support for the strikers, or if your parents kept bagging them, you may well have developed an anti-union attitude. Most kids growing up in the 1950s and 1960s knew about the 'wharfies' and the fact that maritime unions were vociferous, and ready to go on strike over a number of issues. Most trades were heavily unionised, from the meat and printing industries, to building, car manufacturing, even librarians working for local councils. While the most voluble unions were normally on the blue collar industrial side, teachers and nurses also became highly unionised.



Declining union numbers

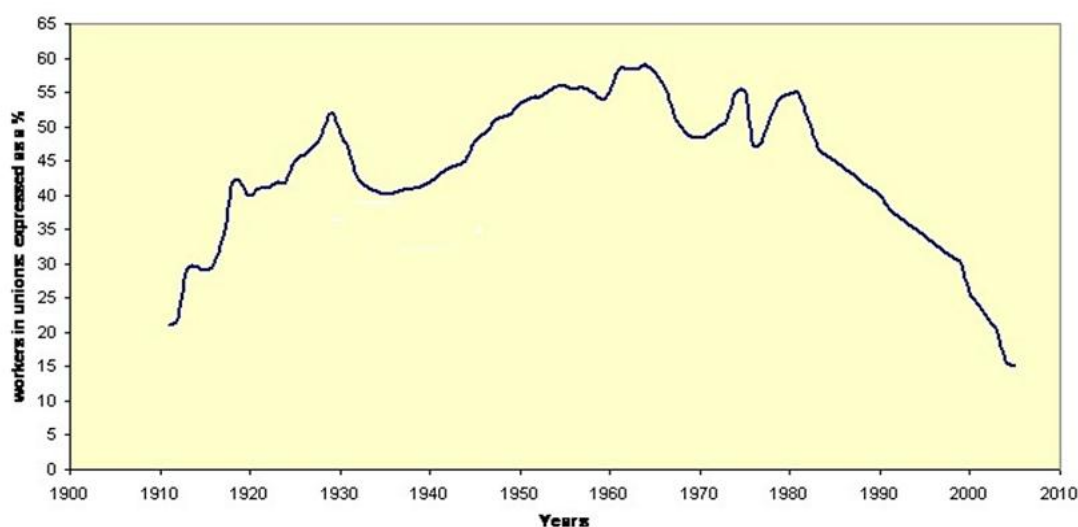
Over the past thirty years some of the largest employers with the strongest union presence have shed the great bulk of what were very labour intensive operations. The number of people working for government-owned railways in Australia has fallen from around 200,000 to under 40,000. More tellingly of late, the number of people working in car manufacturing plants has fallen from around 50,000 to under 20,000, with almost all of those jobs set to

disappear in the next few years. Today, areas where unionism remains strong vary from jobs that are still labour intensive and with massive numbers – teaching and nursing are the most notable examples – to traditional trades which have managed up-skilling. But because of increasing technology, productivity has gone up, and the number of employees (and, thus, union members) has fallen dramatically, as in the meat industry.

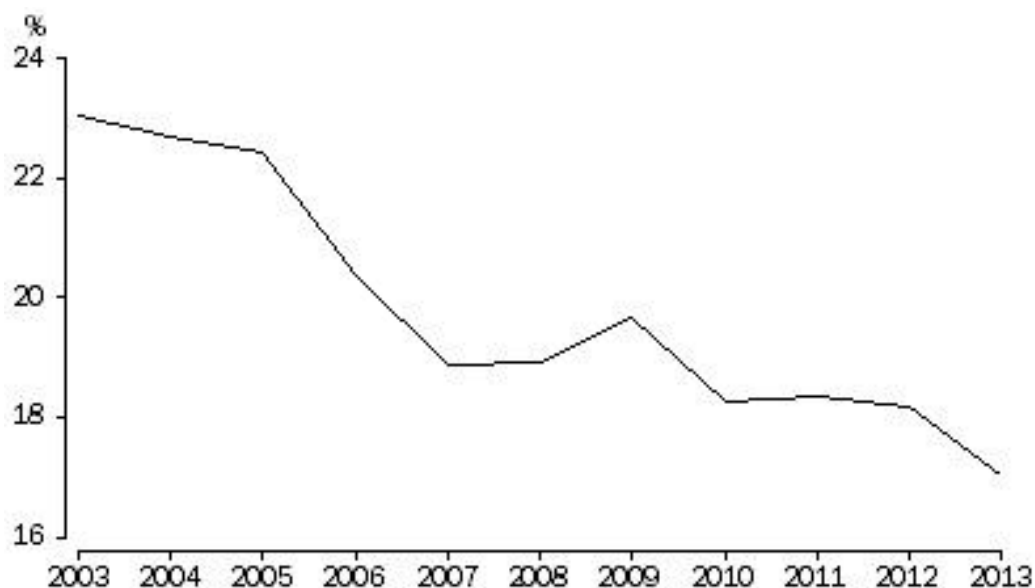
Traditionally, most union histories have had the union, key administrators and key activists at the centre of the narrative. Seldom, in Australia at least, has the focus of union literature been on influential groups, union cultures or the cumulative events that have helped shape the direction of the union movement today. Our oral histories also explore the relationship between an individual unionist's life, especially their early work experiences and early encounters with trade unionism, as a foundation for their later attitudes to unionism. The project is also particularly interested in key political and industrial turning points that trade unionists identify in both their personal and their union history. Wilf Ardill, former State Secretary of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union in Queensland, outlined in his interview how not just a single event, but the political conditions generally under a long-entrenched conservative government, could alter people's perspectives on unionism:

Look, it was a difficult time because the Bjelke-Petersen government went out to destroy the power of unions, there was no doubt about that. But there was a counter to it; a lot of people could see that, and a lot of people actually came onside with the unions on those particular issues, and I felt that at that particular time there was more opposition from the unions to that government than there was from the Labor Party opposition.

Analysis of ABS statistics and union records shows us that trade union membership in Australia has dramatically risen, and just as dramatically declined, over the last 100 years. The following graph represents union membership from 1911-2005 expressed as a percentage of the labour force. Over the last ten years this rapid decline has continued.



Union membership, Australia, 1911-2005 [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013]



Union membership, Australia, 2003-2013 [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013]

With the exception of a small spike in 2009, union membership in Australia has fallen to seventeen per cent of all employees, which the ABS notes is the lowest recorded in their series (although an additional four per cent of employees didn't know if they were a union member or not!). While the first graph depicted union membership peaking in Australia at just below sixty per cent in the 1960s, when analysed state-by-state Queensland emerges as the most highly unionised state in Australia in the middle years of the twentieth century, with close to eighty per cent coverage of all workers. Since that time it has fallen to less than twenty per cent, on a par with levels across the nation.

What has caused this decline?

Without digging down into the statistics, the ABS identifies three main changes to explain the shift in union density in Australia: change in gender distribution (women's participation in the labour force is now almost double what it was fifty years ago); change in Industries (for example, fifty years ago almost half of all employed people in Australia worked in labour intensive production industries, but that proportion has now halved); and change in types of jobs – the shift away from production to service industries has reduced the opportunities for blue collar workers and increased the opportunities for 'white collar' workers.

Andrew Leigh, writing in the *Australian Financial Review* in March 2005 under the byline, 'The Decline of an Institution', gave the following reasons for declining union membership: "In an era of casualisation, computerisation and feminisation, deunionisation is probably the most significant change to have hit labour market over the past generation." He added that, "declining unionisation is a common pattern across the developed world," with the exception though of Scandinavia.



This graph of union density shows the position of Australia relative to other OECD countries in 2012. Australia (17.9%) sits well behind the union densities of Sweden (67.5%) and Norway (54.7%), and clearly behind Ireland (31.2%), the UK (25.8%) and New Zealand (20.5%). Equally as telling, each of these countries showed a marked decline in these numbers from the position a decade earlier. Leigh concludes that the decline of Australian unions comes down to four factors: changes to the laws governing unions; more product market competition; rising inequality; and, structural change in the labour market.

John Battams, former General Secretary of the Queensland Teachers Union and currently President of the Queensland Council of Unions, gave us a somewhat more blunt assessment of the reasons for diminishing union membership, explaining it mainly in terms of political influences and 'unavoidable' consequences of structural transformations:

We've got some very powerful and well-resourced forces working against [unions], the Murdoch press for example, but that's only part of the answer [for declining membership]; it's the nature of work these days. Australia, after Spain, has the most insecure workforce in the world ... So the proliferation, and you'd know this in the tertiary sector, of fixed-term contracts and casual work in Australia is unheard of in most other places in the world. Now those modes of employment don't work well for trade unionism; if you're a part-time casual [worker], that doesn't make it easy to actually recruit you [to a union] ... full-time permanent work is decreasing, and that traditionally has been our 'bread and butter'. So I think that's the greatest reason why we haven't been able to

recruit [more members], though obviously [the union movement] need to take some responsibility; we have taken some responsibility for that ourselves.

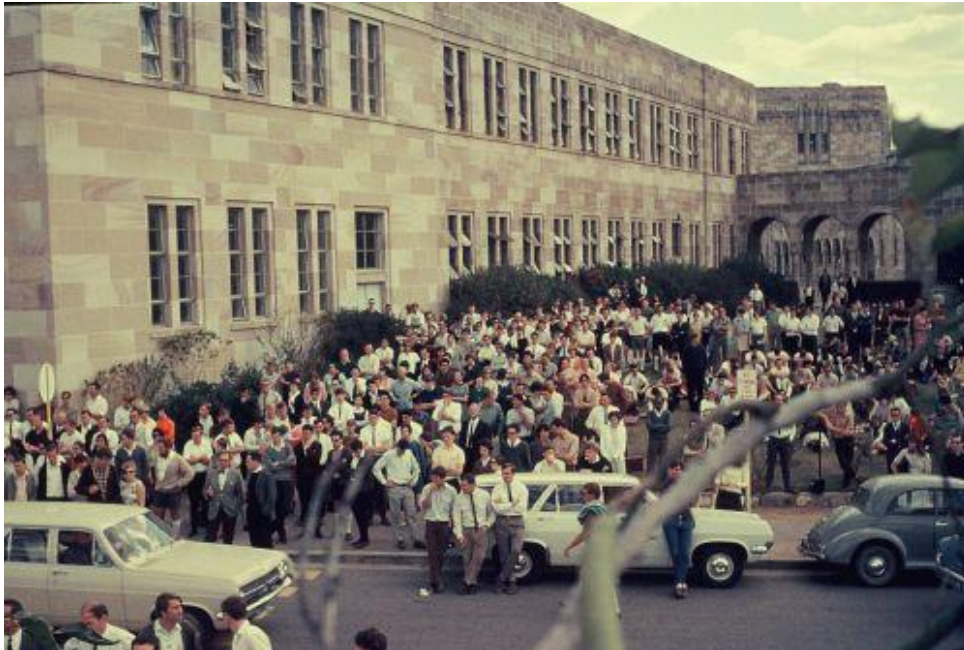
Jeffrey Lassen, in his Master's thesis in Economics at UQ in the mid-1990s, titled 'Trade Union Membership in Australia', concluded that "compositional changes in gender and industry employment have the largest long run effect on trade union membership ... the union movement's strategy of union amalgamation is unlikely to arrest the decline in union membership."

This, it is noted, counters the view of one of our union interviewees, Kevin Carroll, a former union delegate of the CFMEU in Queensland, who contended that union amalgamation was an effective strategy since "small unions were always destined to disappear, under what will continue to be efforts by employers and conservative governments to take away the collective bargaining strength of trade union members." Despite the worldwide decline in union membership, as one scholar noted recently, trade unions 'are still the largest membership organizations in most societies' and this at a time when political party membership is falling precipitously.

To recap, our interviews explored the impact on unionists of decreasing union membership levels, highlighting conflicts taking place between or within certain unions, especially relating to demarcation disputes over industry workers or battles for administrative control over state or federal union branches (such as with Norm Gallagher and the BLF in the 1970s). The interviews also exposed personal tensions inherent in unions and within the unions' administrations, regarding troublesome amalgamations and the frequently 'testy' question of political affiliations.

Vince Dobinson, former State Secretary of the Builders Labourers Federation in Queensland, described administrative battles within his union, highlighting the often broad political spectrum to be found within union memberships, and also underlining how some unionists have perhaps struggled to incorporate changing societal norms:

Oh, we had [communist members of the BLF], but they couldn't get over the top of us, that was the trouble. We had about six or eight [communists] in our [branch] meetings and they'd be at every meeting; at one [meeting], one of them moved for a vote of 'no confidence' in me and we made him write it down and bring it up to the meeting. He got a seconder and with the others, four or five or six of the other 'coms' that were there, but when the vote went up by hands he only got two votes, him and his seconder. And I said to him, 'when we get outside I'm going to belt shit out of you', and he took off, he didn't wait! [laughs] Yeah, we had 'em ... but some of them were quite good blokes.



As seen in this image from the late 1960s, UQ has not been immune to industrial action and worker disquiet either. In more recent times, tensions have arisen after the ACTU strongly ‘encouraged’ amalgamation between administrative services unions and academic unions at universities in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Conflict has also erupted between the NTEU and UQ management – and among NTEU members – during the mid- to late-1990s restructuring of faculties and changes to work definitions that followed on from John Dawkins’ earlier higher education reforms.

Howard Guille, former State Secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union in Queensland, discussed the amalgamation of higher education sector unions to form the NTEU in the early 1990s, describing how the process played out between academic and administrative services unions at UQ. He told us, and without a hint of melodrama, that “it was a very difficult process. And, like all union things, blood was shed.”

Janice Mayes, former President of the Australian Services Union in Queensland, described from another side of the amalgamation debate how troublesome a process it could be:

The problem that we had in our union, it wasn’t so much [about] demarcation ... the issue for us was when the ACTU started to go for union amalgamations, and then it was really trying to push in effect one union at each site, you had all of the greenfield site agreements. What we had was in places like universities, the NTEU which was the academics’ union, they decided to go after our [ASU] members. So there were lots of skirmishes with the NTEU, they were probably the worst union we dealt with in that respect.

It appears that universities are not only a place for the contest of ideas, but also for contested union loyalties.

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