OLIGARCHY CONTESTED AND INTERCONNECTED

The New South Wales Labor Party and the trade unions from 1910 to 1939

Scott Stephenson

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University.

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is the result of my own original research and that I am the sole author except where appropriately credited.

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Scott Stephenson

Thesis length: 86,257 words excluding footnotes and bibliography.
Standing in the overgrown counting pens at Yanga shearing shed, 2017.
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Writing a PhD thesis is a difficult and lonely experience in many ways so I was fortunate to meet my partner, Erin, during my first semester of doctoral studies in 2013. Thanks for supporting me Erin, I love you. Thanks also to my Dad for always encouraging me to pursue education to the highest level. Finally, thanks Mum for 29 years of love and support and for helping me to get into university, transfer to ANU in 2007 and to persevere in my studies.
The period from 1910 to 1939 was one of the most turbulent chapters in New South Wales labour history. It was defined by intense ideological conflict, winner-take-all factional warfare, widespread accusations of corruption and multiple Labor Party splits. Intertwined within these issues were questions of democracy and oligarchy within the labour movement. To what extent should members control labour institutions? Democracy within unions and parties means control by the ordinary members and, where necessary, their accountable representatives. Oligarchy sits at the opposite end of the spectrum from democracy and entails organisational domination by a small group of leaders. This thesis examines the tensions and struggles between democracy and oligarchy within three key labour organisations.

Events inside one major organisation affected what happened inside the others and my study is therefore relational and comparative, examining the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Miners Federation and the NSW Labor Party. Both the AWU and NSW Labor Party were oligarchies and became more oligarchical over time. Conversely, the Miners Federation was highly democratic, although it too became less democratic over time. The NSW Labor Party was an interconnected oligarchy, both influencing and influenced by its affiliated trade unions. These influences were complicated and sometimes counterintuitive. At times the effects were straightforward, with organisations and leaders transposing their own methods into another organisation, but in other instances the participation of oligarchical unions and union leaders enhanced democracy within the Labor Party and vice versa.

Oligarchy predominated in the AWU and NSW Labor Party but it was always contested. Countervailing tendencies against oligarchy were continuously operating in some form, even when the organisations were at their least democratic. My analytical framework comes from the sociological literature on trade union and political party democracy and I compare each organisation’s community, rules, local autonomy, rank-and-file decision-making, internal opposition, free communication and equality between officials and members. The key factor that separated the
democratic Miners Federation from the oligarchical AWU and Labor Party was that the miners worked and lived within united, stable occupational communities in which the majority of union members and officials believed in democracy and worked towards its realisation.
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PREFACE

At the end of my second year of university, Kevin Rudd led the Australian Labor Party to victory in the November 2007 federal election. John Howard was the only Prime Minister I could remember. We have since observed a “revolving door Prime-Ministership” as the Labor and Coalition party rooms deposed Prime Ministers Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott. In this context, I became interested in factionalism and the internal workings of political parties.

Democracy and oligarchy within political parties and trade unions are topical issues today in Australia and around the world. I saw something relevant in the media most days as I wrote this thesis; from self-interested politicians of all stripes, to the corrupt farce of the Health Services Union (HSU), to the voluminous and depressing details of the Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption. One thing that these parties and unions have in common is a lack of meaningful control by members.

I also worked at Woolworths supermarket while writing this thesis. Unloading trucks and stacking shelves provided physical balance to my sedentary scholarship. Labour history shows us that safety, dignity and fairness at work had to be won. Fortunately, unskilled Australian workers today enjoy relatively high wages and conditions thanks to unions and governments past and present. At the same time, however, my union, the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), leaves much to be desired.

The Fair Work Commission recently found that the SDA agreements with Woolworths and Coles have left workers worse off than the Award, which is meant to be the minimum safety net. The union somehow spent millions of dollars of members’ money to negotiate a deal that left workers worse off. And yet I expect the current leaders will be re-elected because they promote themselves tirelessly in the union publications. When I started work the SDA gave me an Entertainment Voucher Book plastered with a large photo of the current leader. I also received a pen with his name
on it. These are only slightly-updated versions of the methods that oligarchical union leaders used over a century ago and which I discuss in this thesis.

After exploring organisational democracy and oligarchy for the past four years I am not surprised by the current state of Australia’s major political parties and trade unions. I now believe that party and union democracy is unusual and unlikely, but still possible in some circumstances. Understanding these circumstances will sometimes enable us to create democratic organisations, but more often it will allow us to understand that democracy in a particular organisation (like the HSU or SDA) is unlikely and that leaders need to be held accountable by other means such as legislation and government scrutiny.
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Note: I have not used possession apostrophes in trade union names.
INTRODUCTION
Democracy, oligarchy and labour organisation

Historians have written extensively on the NSW labour movement in the interwar period. Yet they have only provided a fragmentary account of institutional democracy and oligarchy. There has been an absence of detailed explanation of how and why specific organisations were democratic or oligarchic, and of relational and comparative analysis of the ways in which democracy or oligarchy within one labour organisation affected the others. There has also been a stark lack of engagement with the extensive literature from the fields of sociology and political science on party and union democracy. This thesis will address some of these gaps in the historiography through a relational, comparative, and theoretically informed analysis.

The NSW labour movement was highly interconnected. Events inside one major organisation affected what happened inside the others. My study is therefore relational and comparative, focusing on three key institutions: the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Miners Federation and the NSW Labor Party. The AWU and Miners Federation were two of the largest and most influential trade unions in the state. They also provide for good comparison; the AWU was the archetypal trade union oligarchy, while the Miners Federation was a democratic exception to the oligarchic norm. Both unions were at various times affiliated and not affiliated to the NSW Labor Party, which was the dominant political party within the labour movement.¹

I argue that the NSW Labor Party both influenced, and was influenced by, its affiliated trade unions. These influences were complicated and sometimes counterintuitive. Usually the effects were straightforward, with organisations and leaders transposing, or attempting to transpose, their own methods into another organisation. But in other instances the involvement of oligarchical leaders from one organisation increased democracy in another and vice versa. Oligarchy was always contested and

resisted. Throughout this thesis I continually highlight the democratic impulses that were operating against oligarchy and explain why they were or were not successful in specific circumstances.

In this introduction I define these terms - democracy and oligarchy - and explain how I will consider them in practice. I then survey the organisations selected in this study, the sources used, the chronology covered and the existing historiography. I introduce my thesis argument, which is that the three labour organisations were closely interconnected, that they had significant and sometimes counterintuitive effects on one another, and that while there was a strong inclination towards oligarchy it was constantly resisted and even overcome in some circumstances.

**Democracy: definitions, types and debates**

Democracy means “rule by the people” but opinion varies widely as to what this popular rule should entail and the extent to which the people should in fact rule. There are three main types of democracy: “participatory”, “direct” and “representative”. In a participatory democracy, all members can discuss every aspect of each decision and agree on a solution for the group. In a direct democracy, all members can vote for or against a set question while in a representative democracy members can elect other members to make decisions on their behalf. 2 In practice, most democratic systems include elements from more than one type.

A decision contains three main components: “what is the question?” , “what are the possible answers?” and “which answer will be chosen?” A system is more democratic when the members have more direct control over these components. By this definition, participatory democracy is the most democratic as members can control all three components. Direct democracy is the second most democratic as members can have direct control over which answer will be chosen. Representative democracy is the least democratic as it does not give members direct control over any of the

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three components. But members can influence their representatives at each of the three stages, most obviously through the representatives’ desire for re-election.³

Democracy can range from strictly majoritarian, in which the minority have no real power or rights, to systems which provide varying degrees of minority rights and power sharing. The AWU, Miners Federation and Labor Party all promoted strongly majoritarian views of democracy. The Miners Federation’s 1916 rules succinctly advised members: “have your say during debate but cheerfully accept the will of the majority”.⁴ The three organisations ostensibly retained some minority rights such as free speech but these minority rights declined greatly during the interwar years in the AWU and Labor Party and to a lesser extent in the Miners Federation.

Elected representatives can be thought of as either “delegates”, who act on behalf of the wishes of the voters, or “trustees”, who make what they believe is the best decision, regardless of the views of their electors.⁵ Elitists argue that representatives have greater knowledge and expertise and should aim to make the “correct” decision for the good of members, even if the majority of members do not agree. Those who support popular rule counter that representative democracy only exists because of the logistical impossibility of large-scale participatory democracy, and representatives should do what the majority of members want. In practice these two views often coexist. In present-day Australian politics, for example, a combined view prevails in which representatives are thought to strive to broadly represent public views while also being willing and able to make unpopular “tough decisions” when necessary.⁶

As Robert Dahl has recognised, democracy as “rule by the people” is an “unattainable ideal”, so assessing whether a country or organisation is democratic involves evaluating whether it is near enough to the ideal to be satisfactory.⁷ The size and composition of the group sets limits on the type and nature of a democratic system;

³ Ibid., 16.
⁴ Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), 3.
⁵ Catt, Democracy in practice: 77.
participatory democracy is not a viable way to run a society of millions or even an organisation of thousands. Its focus on discussion and consensus may also be problematic in deeply divided groups. For democracy to work there needs to be a democratic culture. As Helena Catt argues, “democracy is a way of behaving and a way of perceiving, and not just participation in a set of procedures”. Democracy is a difficult goal to attain and it requires the majority of ordinary members and elected representatives to be committed to the system.

In a “model” democratic labour organisation, local branches would form the foundations of the organisation and would be run as participatory democracies. Where appropriate, local branches would consist of smaller “shopfloor” workplace units. At the district and national level as many decisions as practicable would be made by direct membership vote, and remaining decisions made by elected representatives who were as accountable as possible to the ordinary members through regular elections. Term limits for officials would prevent leadership entrenchment. The organisation would be so constituted and run as to encourage maximum and equal membership participation in these processes.

In 1963 Emanuel Stein argued against too much democracy within trade unions and labour parties, claiming that it causes inefficiency. This position contends that labour organisations require efficient and effective leadership that can make difficult decisions quickly in response to changing circumstances and with superior knowledge and experience compared with the average member. In hindsight, we can sometimes see that a democratic decision was not a good decision and that the leaders did know better. In the NSW General Strike of 1917, for example, the Miners Federation leaders pleaded with their members not to strike because the employers and government had huge stockpiles of coal. The members went on strike anyway, and it was a disaster.

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8 Catt, Democracy in practice: 14.
9 Ibid., 152.
But leaders can also make bad decisions. And leaders develop their own interests that can be at odds with the interests of members. Most obviously, the leaders want to maintain their positions and power. The increased efficiency provided by undemocratic organisation is of no use to the members if it is not directed towards their interests. The absence of democracy within labour organisations can also discourage potential members from joining and enable businesses and governments to justify anti-labour attacks.

A common argument against democracy within political parties is that politicians’ accountability to their party compromises their accountability to their electors. This position maintains that party members are usually only a small, unrepresentative section of the population and that it is therefore undemocratic for them to dictate to politicians. Members are also generally more radical in their views than the average voter, which could lead to the members insisting on policies that will make the party unelectable. These problems can certainly arise but they are largely self-correcting within a democratic electoral system. The electorate as a whole retains the final say over a party’s election or re-election, and, if the party members insist on policies that are too radical, then the party will not form government until it moderates its position.

On the other hand, party democracy can sometimes enhance electoral democracy by holding politicians accountable to their election promises. Furthermore, party memberships do not by definition need to be small, unrepresentative minorities. Enhanced party democracy could cause a large increase in membership. Even if the membership did remain small and unrepresentative, it is still far larger and more

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representative than the politicians themselves who have complete power in an undemocratic party.

Voters in general elections are forced to choose a party based on their full suite of policies, although individual voters may be influenced primarily by a small number of issues or even a sole issue. Party democracy allows voters to join a party and vote and participate issue by issue. Membership control would also remove the possibility, so often complained of within socialist, social democratic and labour parties, that initially reformist politicians will be corrupted into conservatism by their elite parliamentary lifestyle. Fully realised, democratic political parties could transform political life by empowering ordinary members and citizens to participate in governments rather than simply electing them. Thriving participatory democracy within trade unions could form the basis for industrial democracy in which workers help to manage their workplaces and industries.

In summary, while the effects of democracy on an organisation can be complicated, as a general rule, high levels of democracy are good for an organisation and its members, especially if the organisation is to be strong at the grassroots level and therefore resilient in the face of change. This is not to say that undemocratic labour parties cannot form governments or that oligarchical trade unions cannot increase their membership and win improved wages and conditions. They clearly can, have and do. The ultimate “cause” of the Australian labour movement has always been contested, but if labour’s goal is to create a society in which power and wealth are more equally distributed, and in which all people have the opportunity to live, work and participate with safety, dignity and fairness, then democracy is conducive to its realisation.

**Thesis focus and archival foundations**

This thesis focuses primarily on the period from 1910 to 1939. Analysing the movement over three decades has allowed me to study events in detail while also observing larger patterns and trends. This period includes some big world events: the First World War, Russian Revolution, Great Depression and the rise of fascism in
Europe. Largely because of these world events, it was also a turbulent and interesting time in Australia and NSW. I begin in 1910 when Labor first formed government in NSW. For the first time the party had the authority to carry out its policies, but there was disagreement about how it should proceed. Tension rapidly grew within the party and wider labour movement, leading to the factional warfare and party splits (1916, 1919, 1927, 1931 and 1938) that would define the period. My thesis concludes in 1939, the end of an era for NSW Labor and for the world. Just before the beginning of the Second World War, an alliance of trade unions and local party branches deposed Jack Lang and his “Inner Group” of allies from their dominance over the NSW Labor Party.¹⁴

My focus on NSW is motivated by that state’s importance both to me personally and to the Australian labour movement in the interwar period. I grew up in Sydney and voted in my first NSW election in March 2007. In the interwar period NSW was the most populous state in Australia; in 1925 it had 2.3 million out of Australia’s 5.9 million people. It provided an even larger share of Labor Party members as it had the greatest concentration of trade unionists in the country. This was reflected in the ALP’s dependence on NSW in federal elections. When it won federal government in 1929, Labor won 20 seats in NSW and 27 in the rest of Australia combined. Although my focus is NSW, I also devote significant attention to the federal AWU and Miners Federation, and to a lesser extent the federal ALP. This is necessary because they were all national organisations and it is not possible to understand democracy and oligarchy within the NSW branches in isolation.

The AWU began in 1886 as a shearsers union and then a rural pastoral workers union and, by the interwar period, amalgamations had also made it the chief construction labourers union in NSW. The AWU was the largest, wealthiest and most influential union in the Australia with over 100,000 members and great power within the Labor Party. The Miners Federation formed in 1915 when district miners’ unions fused into a national union. It was the dominant miners’ union in NSW and Australia; most

members were coalminers and there were also some metal miners. By the 1920s around 80 per cent of mineworkers were Miners Federation members, giving it 20,000 members in total.\textsuperscript{15}

The memberships of both the AWU and Miners Federation were based outside Sydney in rural and regional areas of NSW. It is important to acknowledge that these two unions do not represent the large proportion of NSW trade unionists who lived and worked in urban areas, especially in manufacturing. However, Sydney is not neglected in this story. Both unions had a minority of their members and their head offices in Sydney and many Sydney-based unions and unionists feature throughout the thesis. The NSW Labor Party was also based in Sydney and was easily the most successful political party within the NSW labour movement. For the entire period from 1910 to 1939 NSW Labor was either the government or, more often, the opposition.

Trade unions could pay a fee and affiliate to the NSW Labor Party. The Labor Party annual conference had unlimited power within the party and the central executive had unlimited power between conferences. Until 1927 electorate councils and affiliated unions elected or appointed delegates to annual conference according to their membership and annual conference delegates elected the central executive.\textsuperscript{16} From 1928 until 1939 the party elected annual conference delegates and the central executive in a complicated group system which I will assess in chapter seven. In theory, the annual conference and central executive controlled the politicians, but in practice they proved hard to control.

The three central research questions in this study are as follows:

1. Where did each organisation sit on the spectrum between democracy and oligarchy? How and why?


2. How did the three organisations influence one another?

3. What effects did each organisation’s internal governance have on its external behaviour?

The thesis is in three parts: part one on the AWU, part two on the Miners Federation and part three on the NSW Labor Party. There are two substantive chapters and one case study chapter for each union and three substantive chapters and one case study chapter for the NSW Labor Party. In the substantive chapters I focus on how and why the organisation was democratic, or not, and how it affected, and was affected by, the other two organisations (research questions 1 and 2). Then in the case studies I look at how each organisation’s internal governance influenced its external behaviour (research question 3).

My key primary sources are institutional archives, labour and non-labour newspapers and personal papers and memoirs. In the institutional archives rule books, conference reports, election results and internal inquiries have provided the basis for exploring issues of democracy and oligarchy within the movement. I have then further investigated specific issues and events in other sources such as meeting minutes, branch journals and newspapers. These latter sources also provide crucial details of organisational culture and democratic values, or lack thereof.

I have made extensive use of the voluminous institutional archives of the AWU and Miners Federation housed at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra. Unfortunately, there are few surviving official records for the NSW Labor Party in my period. When Lang and his Inner Group lost control of the party in 1939 they stole the party records and they were never recovered.¹⁷ Fortunately, however, there are newspapers, especially the Labor Daily, Australian Worker and Sydney Morning Herald, which provide extensive coverage of the party from a range of factional and ideological perspectives, as do the many relevant personal papers housed at the State Library of NSW and elsewhere. The

*Australian Worker* and *Sydney Morning Herald* are digitised which allowed for word searches and enabled me to find useful information that I would otherwise have missed. The text recognition software is far from perfect, however, so extensive manual searching was also necessary.

The theoretical foundation of my historical analysis is the extensive literature from the fields of sociology and political science on party and union democracy. Gender, and especially competing masculinities, is also crucial, as is the literature on nations as “imagined communities” and on localism. I outline these bodies of theory in the following sections. Finally, biography and details of what it was like to work in particular industries humanise my story, enrich my analysis and allow me to contextualise primary sources. They are also crucial to my explanation of differences in organisational culture and governance, especially in my comparison of the AWU and Miners Federation.

**The tendency towards oligarchy within trade unions and political parties**

The fields of trade union and political party governance have centred on arguments for and against Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy”. In 1911 Michels argued that all supposedly democratic voluntary organisations would inevitably become oligarchies controlled by and for a small group of leaders. He reasoned that leaders will govern an organisation not to benefit their members but to advance their own interests and entrench their positions. This stems from the members’ inability to control their officials. Few members have the time, interest, or capacity to participate meaningfully, and since most have “an immense need for direction and guidance”, the leaders’ fulfilment of this need earns them gratitude and “a genuine cult for the leaders”. As leaders have better organisation, superior knowledge and political skills, and control of sanctions, rewards, the official institutional apparatus, and formal

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communication with members, they can dominate the organisation and entrench their positions.¹⁹ He mischievously labelled this cycle the “iron law of oligarchy”.

Critics of Michels have acknowledged the propensity towards oligarchy that he identified but have argued that it can be overcome. Michels’ position does not vary dramatically from that of the earlier writing of Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the identification of the disparity of outlooks between union leaders and ordinary members. More optimistically, however, the Webbs believed that it was possible under some circumstances for ordinary members to control officials, leaders and policy.²⁰ More recent scholars have expanded on this argument. Richard Hyman, for example, argued from a Marxist perspective that “countervailing tendencies” can offset the propensity towards oligarchy. These countervailing tendencies include membership pressure on the leaders “from below” and ideological support for democracy amongst the leaders themselves.²¹ Hyman’s analysis was couched in terms of the different class interests of workers compared with those of trade union officials, and by extension labour party leaders, who occupy distinct places in the relations of production. Alvin Gouldner argued that the iron law of oligarchy only describes one half of a perpetual struggle between democracy and oligarchy, observing that if “oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly rebuild them after each inundation” and labelled this the “iron law of democracy”.²² Throughout this thesis the strong tendency to oligarchy is on constant display. However, my findings support critics of Michels who argued that this propensity is not an “iron law” and that it can sometimes be overcome. Even when the AWU and NSW Labor Party were at their most oligarchical in the late 1930s, oligarchy was resisted and contested.

My position aligns with the present-day consensus in the field of trade union governance; that there is a strong inclination towards oligarchy within trade unions but that it can be resisted and even overcome in some circumstances. Key works have focussed on one atypical union that is a democratic exception to the oligarchic norm in order to explain how that union has resisted the tendency towards oligarchy, and thereby extrapolate the conditions required in all unions to enhance democracy. The classic study is *Trade Union Democracy* by Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow and James Coleman, a study of the International Typographical Union (ITU) in the United States from 1850 to 1952. Most recently, Margaret Levi, David Olson, Jon Agnone and Devin Kelly conducted a similar examination of the US International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) from its formation in 1902 to the 2000s.23

While different scholars stress different factors, there is a consensus in the literature around seven key requirements for union democracy.

1. The union rules must be formally democratic.

2. The members must form a close-knit “occupational community” with high levels of interaction and a history of collective action which creates a culture of interest and participation in union affairs.24

3. Toleration of internal opposition organisation (factions or parties) facilitates electoral competition, keeps members informed and interested, fosters leadership and political skills outside the leadership group, and makes officials more accountable.25

4. Decentralisation through local autonomy allows for the development of local powerbases and potential opposition to the national leadership and “creates a forum for encouraging and educating members to take advantage of the procedures of democracy”.26

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5. High levels of direct rank-and-file decision-making facilitates membership control over important decisions.

6. Equality of salary, status, skill and education between officials and members minimises the gap in political skills and causes leaders to feel less pressure to maintain their positions through undemocratic means.27

7. Free communication and the existence of communication channels that are not controlled by the leadership allows for informed participation, criticism of sitting officials and enables opposition groups to communicate with members.28

I use these seven requirements as my framework to analyse each of the three organisations, with slight modifications for the Labor Party, as I explain in chapter seven.

As with trade unions, scholars have long recognised a tendency for power to become centralised within political parties. In addition to Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy”, Moisey Ostrogorski and Max Weber described a “caesaristic-plebiscitarian dictatorship”, Maurice Duverger an oligarchic “inner circle”, and Angelo Panebianco a “dominant coalition”.29 From the mid-twentieth century, political party scholarship shifted away from the study of political parties as organisations and towards the study of party systems and electoral politics. As Panebianco observed in Political Parties: Organisation and Power, itself now more than a quarter of a century old, this shift in focus has meant that the organisational theory of parties has “remained ostensibly unchanged since the works of Michels and Duverger”.30

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30 Ibid., xi-xii.
Panebianco contended that the positions for and against the “iron law of oligarchy” are implicitly based upon different conceptions of power within parties. He argued that Michels and his supporters conceptualised power as a possession that can be held and used by some people over others, while opponents regarded power as a “relation of influence”, with at least some degree of reciprocity. Both Panebianco and I subscribe to the latter view and see power as an unequal relationship of exchange in which “one can exercise power over others only by satisfying their needs and expectations”. Leaders get “more than the followers” from the interaction “but must nonetheless give something in return”. The relationship between the leaders and ordinary members within a party exists at a point along a continuum between domination at one extreme and reciprocity at the other.\textsuperscript{31}

Where a party sits on this continuum depends on what Panebianco called the “substitutability” of “organisational incentives”, which are the inducements that motivate people to become party members. In other words, the extent to which the leaders can “unbalance in their own favour the exchanges with the rank and file” depends on how readily ordinary members can abandon the party and obtain elsewhere the organisational incentives that they receive from party membership. Organisational incentives can be either “collective incentives” of solidarity with party ideology, or “selective incentives” of material gain or status. Ostrogorski’s “spoils systems”, in which politicians reward their supporters with government jobs upon election, is an extreme example of selective incentives. Panebianco held that leaders’ legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary members depends on their ability to control and distribute organisational incentives.\textsuperscript{32} I will argue that the substitutability of organisational incentives is one useful consideration in explaining internal governance of parties and unions but that it is often overwhelmed, either by the tendencies towards oligarchy identified by Michels, or by the countervailing tendencies towards democracy identified by Hyman and others.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 21-23. 
If a governing political party is internally democratic then its members will influence
government policy, albeit within the confines created by the existing economic and
political systems. This makes party democracy a potentially crucial aspect of political
governance. But some scholars argue that control of governments by political parties
is impossible. In Australia, Vere Gordon Childe argued that because Labor ministers
were “surrounded by the middle-class atmosphere of Parliament” they became more
concerned with “keeping [their] seat and scoring political points than of carrying out
the ideal that [they were] sent in to give effect to”. 33 Furthermore, Labor
governments can usually argue that any action is consistent with party policy as that
policy is “occasionally contradictory, frequently vague, rarely put in any order of
priority and almost never tied to any specific timetable”. 34 Childe concluded that
although the extra-parliamentary wing of the ALP was theoretically supreme,
concerted attempts to force the parliamentarians to act would be unsuccessful as
they would cause party splits and loss of office. 35

Parties can certainly face difficulties in controlling their politicians and these
difficulties were fully expressed within the ALP in Childe’s period, as I discuss below.
But as Lewis Minkin observed, there is danger in “ascribing either inevitability or
immutability to the various relationships which emerge [within labour parties] in any
given period”. 36 Labor politicians will usually be just as eager to avoid party splits and
loss of office as members of the extra-parliamentary party. The latter also have the
ability to embarrass and even expel uncooperative parliamentarians which,
depending on the circumstances, will often be a powerful sanction. Through party
factions, extra-parliamentary groupings can exercise significant control over pre-
selections and the choice of parliamentary leader and cabinet ministers.
Furthermore, some politicians genuinely believe in the supremacy of the extra-
parliamentary party and govern accordingly. 37 We will see that the NSW Labor Party

33 Vere Gordon Childe, How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers’ Representation in Australia
37 Ibid., 333.
from 1926 to the mid-1930s demonstrates that, in favourable circumstances and with the right internal processes, it is possible for parties to control their politicians.

There is then the issue of whether extra-parliamentary control can be exercised by the ordinary members. Robert McKenzie studied the British Labour Party in the period from 1900 until 1964 and maintained, in line with Michels, that despite its democratic constitution the party was in fact an oligarchy. For McKenzie, ordinary members were of “little importance” in “an analysis of the distribution of power within the party” which was controlled by the parliamentary leaders in coalition with some of the trade union leaders. 38 Samuel Beer countered that what McKenzie interpreted as oligarchy in the period 1918-48 was in fact the result of “a broad consensus in the party on ideology, program and strategy” in which “all major elements ... were so much in agreement” that “serious questions of power were not raised”. 39 Minkin also opposed McKenzie, arguing that while “there is much which could be used to support this perspective” it remained “a partial and in certain respects a misleading view”. He cited Gouldner’s “iron law of democracy” and argued that in the early 1970s membership dissatisfaction created “a powerful set of upward pressures” that resulted in significant reforms which promoted party democracy. 40 The findings of this thesis support Minkin’s position and suggest that membership opinion retained at least some influence in all three organisations throughout the period.

Labour parties are distinguished from other social democratic parties by the formal affiliation of trade unions. 41 Unions pay dues in exchange for authority within the party in the form of representatives and delegates on party bodies. This power is exercised by union leaderships who in theory represent their members but in practice are usually unaccountable oligarchies. Union affiliation can thereby seriously weaken party democracy by giving disproportionate power to small groups of trade

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40 Minkin, The Labour Party Conference: 316-17, 331.
union leaders. I argue, in line with most of the historiography, that the disproportionate power wielded by union leaders was a primary cause of oligarchy within the interwar NSW Labor Party, but unlike the historiography I argue that union affiliation to the Labor Party also had some positive effects for party democracy. For example, unions formed the basis for factions which provided opposition to the sitting officials. Some unions such as the Miners Federation also imported their democratic practices into the party.

**Issues of identity and community: men and women, competing masculinities, localism and imagined communities**

Issues of identity and community amongst union and party members influenced oligarchy and democracy within all three organisations. While the AWU excluded women from almost all areas of union life, the Miners Federation gradually increased the role of women, particularly through the Women’s Auxiliaries in the 1930s. In chapter five I argue that the Women’s Auxiliaries were a key component in the creation of a national mining community and that the increase in class-consciousness in mining communities in the 1930s was facilitated by the miners bringing women into their union communities. In the NSW Labor Party women took a large role in the party early on. In chapter seven we will see that, unlike in the AWU and Miners Federation, women successfully won a public role within the party in the early twentieth century and helped to shape it from the local branch communities up to the state level. Women represented the party at Annual Conference, on the Central Executive and in the NSW Legislative Council and the party rules contained affirmative action provisions for women.

Another relevant gender consideration is that the cultures of both the AWU and Miners Federation were influenced by competition between rival masculinities. Marilyn Lake argued that there was tension in late nineteenth century Australia between the rival masculinities of the “responsible domestic man” versus the “independent man” free to enjoy mateship, drinking, smoking, gambling and sex with

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women. Bohemian city intellectuals held up the bushman as their ideal independent man, mobile and free of marriage and children. They presented women as killjoys who trapped men into marriage, ignoring the fact that marriage trapped economically dependent women more than it did men.

By the 1920s, according to Lake, the responsible domestic man had triumphed and “responsible breadwinning” was the dominant Australian view of masculinity. It was promoted by employers, governments, union leaders, arbitration courts and women’s groups, all of whom desired responsible, efficient, disciplined workers and husbands to provide for their women and children. Most unionists also wanted to keep women out of the workplace because they would increase the labour supply and drive down wages and conditions. Yet the celebration of independent masculinity lived on amongst many working men and sometimes created tensions between union members and officials.

In chapter one I discuss the similarities and differences between AWU masculinity and the masculinity of Russel Ward’s mythical “typical Australian”. A competitive, independent masculinity pervaded the pastoral station and shearing shed and created a culture of hierarchy amongst pastoral workers which was well-suited to oligarchical AWU union leadership. At the same time, however, AWU leaders presented themselves in the model of wealthy, responsible breadwinners, deliberately distinguishing themselves from the ordinary members and demanding obedience from them. Competing masculinities also influenced the miners. In chapter four I argue that the Miners Federation encouraged the responsible breadwinning view of masculinity as a way to unite the union and prevent local stoppages.

44 Ibid., 124.
45 Ibid., 130.
Localism is an ideology that privileges location over other forms of identity with the effect of promoting unity between classes and concealing class interests.\textsuperscript{46} We will see that localism was a significant obstacle for union and class unity and solidarity, especially within the Miners Federation. The Miners Federation overcame localism by creating a national community of miners. This was a different kind of community from the miners’ longstanding local occupational communities because a national mining community was one in which the members could not know or interact with one another; it was what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community”.\textsuperscript{47} Just as Anderson argued that daily newspapers printed in the common tongue were the key to the formation of national imagined communities, I argue that the miners’ national newspaper, \textit{Common Cause}, was one of the key facilitators of the national mining community. Additional factors were shared entertainment and sport between regions, the national organisation of the Women’s Auxiliaries and rising class consciousness in the 1930s. State-wide “imagined communities” were also important within the AWU and NSW Labor Party and were similarly facilitated by those organisations’ newspapers, the \textit{Australian Worker} and \textit{Labor Daily} respectively, and by additional factors which I will discuss in parts one and three of the thesis.

**A brief history of the NSW labour movement from 1910 to 1939**

I will now provide a brief history of the NSW labour movement from 1910 to 1939 so as to avoid repetition and minimise descriptive history in each chapter. Labor first formed government in NSW in 1910. Excitement quickly turned to frustration for party members as the government failed to implement party policy. This dissatisfaction intensified under wartime austerity from 1914, and culminated in a party split over conscription in 1916 which caused Labor to lose office. In an attempt to control the defiant politicians, a trade union coalition called the Industrial Section had led the party’s 1916 Annual Conference to change conference representation to

\textsuperscript{46} Erik Eklund, "The 'Place' of Politics: Class and Localist Politics at Port Kembla, 1900-30," \textit{Labour History} 78(2000): 95.

the unions’ advantage, effectively transferring control of the party from the politicians and local branch members to the leaders of the affiliated trade unions.48 Labor also became more militant and more Catholic in this period, as those who split from the party were more likely to be conservative and Protestant.49

The key organisational incentive that motivated membership of the Labor Party in this period was the collective incentive of agreement with the party’s ideology and working-class identity. In terms of selective incentives of material gain, there were no significant spoils, but members did expect to gain materially in the form of improved wages and employment conditions implemented by Labor governments. The labour movement was split ideologically between what subsequent scholars have called “labourism” on one side, and various forms of socialism and anti-capitalism on the other. Labourism was a reformist ideology which held that strong trade unions and Labor governments could modify capitalism so that it would advantage workers as well as employers. To this end, the key planks of labourism were compulsory arbitration, tariff protection and White Australia.50

Tariffs would protect Australia’s manufacturing industry, thereby protecting its employees’ jobs, wages and conditions. A “White Australia” would prevent Asian workers, who often accepted poor pay and conditions, from driving down wages and conditions for white Australians. More conservative labourists advocated reform through political action and arbitration, while more militant labourists also advocated strikes. Conversely, socialists and other anti-capitalists argued that capitalism would never benefit workers and that it must be replaced with a system of collective ownership.51

51 Ibid.
Arbitration was a system of mediation in which industrial courts decided disputes between employers and employees (and their unions). It had solidified craft unionism by allowing for the survival of small and/or weak unions. Arbitration judges also deliberately favoured some unions (usually the less militant) at the expense of others. For example, NSW industrial Judge Charles Heydon transferred jurisdiction for Water Board rockchoppers and sewer miners from the militant Rockchoppers Union to the compliant Water Board house union. Officials from unions favoured by the arbitration system therefore opposed anti-arbitration militants.52

The first serious ideological threat to labourism had come in 1907, when the United States-based Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) began to organise within Australian unions. The anti-capitalist IWW argued that the interests of workers and employers were irreconcilable. It advocated the formation of One Big Union (OBU) for all workers, controlled by the rank and file. Once organised, the OBU would overthrow capitalism through a general strike.53 In December 1916, twelve IWW members were jailed for seditious conspiracy. Many within the labour movement believed that the state was persecuting the “IWW Twelve” for their high-profile opposition to the First World War and conscription. The case highlighted the growing division between the more conservative side of the labour movement, that remained committed to labourism, and the increasingly radical side, that wished to overthrow capitalism.

Conservative labourists, including most of the parliamentarians and the AWU, called for a new trial for the twelve. As well as pacifying the radicals’ call for unconditional release, the conservatives were justifying their commitment to labourist reform. An injustice had occurred, but it could be righted within the existing system. The radicals countered that a new trial was pointless within a legal system that was a tool of the capitalist class. Only industrial agitation could force the government to release the

twelve. The newly-elected NSW Labor government released the twelve in 1920 and 1921. Its judicial inquiry into the case had found multiple problems with the convictions. On its face, this was a victory for the conservative labourists, but the grassroots release campaign had pressured the politicians to act.

In August 1917 increasing working-class militancy had also culminated in a General Strike in NSW. Tens of thousands of workers, and many conservative and militant unions, joined the strike. The AWU did not participate. While large and widespread, the strike was poorly organised and ended in total defeat for the strikers. For many unionists, the failed strike demonstrated the need for greater trade union organisation and direction from above. For example, Albert Willis, Secretary of the Miners Federation, had known that the miners’ position was weak, and had tried unsuccessfully to prevent their involvement in the General Strike. These more militant unionists began organising for the creation of OBU. Their OBU would break down traditional craft unionism by organising workers by industry rather than by trade. This would prevent employers from pitting one trade against another within an industry. Willis and Jock Garden, NSW Labor Council Secretary and leader of a group of radical union leaders known as the “Trades Hall Reds”, led this OBU movement. Unlike the radical IWW which had conceptualised the OBU, Willis and Garden did not reject political action or compulsory arbitration. They also favoured hierarchical control of the OBU in place of the IWW’s emphasis on rank-and-file control.

Meanwhile the AWU leaders were also interested in the OBU concept. They wanted their union to become the OBU through the amalgamation of all other unions into the AWU. When it became clear that the OBU would not take this form, the AWU withdrew its support. Most AWU officials feared that they would lose much of their

55 Ibid., 235-45.
power and autonomy if the AWU merged into the OBU. They also believed that the OBU’s revolutionary politics would jeopardise Labor’s electoral prospects, and the arbitration system that the AWU relied upon.\textsuperscript{58}

The OBU issue dominated the 1919 NSW Labor Party Annual Conference. Led by the AWU, the more conservative, anti-OBU forces won a narrow victory. The parliamentarians and most of the local branches had flocked to the AWU faction as they believed that the OBU was electoral poison. Like the AWU, most conservative labourist mass union leaders opposed the OBU’s radical anti-capitalism, and feared that the OBU would reduce their power and autonomy. Finally, many craft unions allied themselves with the AWU faction and fought for their lives against the OBU, which would have obliterated them. All of these unions were competitors with the AWU, and/or with one another, in the workplace recruiting members, before the Arbitration Court, and for power within the Labor Party. Yet the threat of the OBU united them.\textsuperscript{59}

Throughout the 1920s the AWU led the resistance to attempts to create a national trade union organisation and in 1928 refused to affiliate with the newly-formed Australasian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).\textsuperscript{60} AWU leaders were jealous of the ACTU’s position as the nation’s largest union organisation and did not want to be supplanted by a rival national union body. Furthermore, the OBU and ACTU were organised by the AWU leaders’ factional enemies and the bodies had ties to radicalism, Communism and Asian labour organisations, all of which the AWU opposed.\textsuperscript{61}

Following their defeat in 1919, many of the more militant OBU supporters, including the Trades Hall Reds and Willis and his Miners Federation allies, left the Labor Party to form a new party. With a strong tradition of militancy, and widespread sympathy

\textsuperscript{59} Hagan, \textit{The History of the ACTU}: 21.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 142.
for revolutionary ideas amongst its members and officials, the Miners Federation took a leading role in this increasingly militant section of the labour movement. When the new party proved ineffective, in November 1920 the Trades Hall Reds helped to establish the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). The AWU faction coalition of conservative labourist unions, leagues and parliamentarians went on to dominate the 1920, 1921 and 1922 NSW Labor Party Annual Conferences. The Labor Party formed NSW governments from 1920 to 1922 under Premiers John Storey and James Dooley.62

A more militant faction took control of the NSW Labor Party from the AWU leaders in 1923. The AWU faction had alienated many of its former allies through its authoritarianism and abuse of executive power. One of the organisers of the militant faction was Labor’s new parliamentary leader Jack Lang. Other leading forces in this militant faction were Willis and the Miners Federation and Garden and the Trades Hall Reds, who had recently re-entered the party. Labor held government from 1925 to 1927 and during the tumultuous peak of the Great Depression from 1930 to 1932. Unlike previous Labor leaders, Lang delivered on industrial legislation, making him increasingly popular with trade unionists.63

Lang was born in 1876 in Sydney, the son of a Scottish watchmaker and his Irish wife. He worked as an accountant’s clerk and then as a real estate agent and became independently wealthy. Lang was active in the Labor Party from the early twentieth century and entered politics when he won the state seat of Granville for Labor in 1913. He had no real experience or connection with trade unions or the labour movement. Serious, ruthless and ambitious, Lang rarely smiled and had no close friends. Yet he attracted a political following with his imposing appearance and engaging, populist speeches. Nicknamed “the Big Fella”, he was a tall, solid man (193

cm) with a trademark black moustache and receding hairline. Bede Nairn argued that his auctioneering had produced “a crude but effective public speaking style: rasping voice, snarling mouth, flailing hands, sentences and phrases punctuated by long pauses”.  

Figure 1 John Thomas (Jack) Lang speaking to a crowd on 8 September 1934.

By 1926, the factional situation within the NSW Labor Party had returned more or less to its 1919 position. There was a conservative faction led in Caucus by deputy parliamentary leader Peter Loughlin and in the extra-parliamentary party by AWU leader Jack Bailey. A more militant faction was led in Caucus by Premier Lang, and in the extra-parliamentary party by Willis and the Miners Federation and Garden and the Trades Hall Reds, although both Bailey and Garden were expelled from the Labor Party at this stage. Garden and most of the Trades Hall Reds had left the CPA by this time and were firmly allied with Lang and Labor. Each faction controlled its own labour newspaper: the conservative faction had the Australian Worker, the militants the Labor Daily.

65 Sam Hood. State Library of NSW S1557578.
In contrast with his popularity amongst members and voters, Lang was unpopular amongst his Caucus whom he treated with contempt and did not consult. In 1924 he survived a leadership challenge by one vote and from 1926 relied on the support of Annual Conference rather than Caucus to maintain his leadership. In 1926 the militant faction controlled a Special Conference and confirmed Lang as the parliamentary leader for the life of the current parliament. This radical change removed the politicians’ right to choose their leader, and began what his opponents called the “Lang dictatorship”. The party split in 1927, this time over the militant faction’s proposed 1927 Rules which introduced a group system of party organisation. Opponents within and outside the party labelled them the “Red Rules”, falsely claiming that they would allow Communists to infiltrate the party. In July that year, a Unity Conference approved the 1927 Rules by an overwhelming majority. The AWU disaffiliated from the party in protest.

An uncontested aspect of labour’s ideology throughout the interwar period was that it was an egalitarian and internally democratic movement. Control by ordinary members, usually termed “rank-and-file control”, was central to its stated ideology. All leading figures within the movement claimed to support the position that the ordinary members should have as much control of labour institutions as was practically possible. The extent to which the leaders actually believed in membership control varied, and was generally less than they claimed. As we will see, the authoritarian and oligarchic behaviour of the AWU leaders within their own union and within the Labor Party reveals a weak commitment to internal democracy. The ideologies of the more militant leaders, who mostly supported various strains of socialism, suggest that they should have been more inclined towards rank-and-file control. Willis, for example, adhered to the guild socialism of English political theorist

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G.D.H. Cole who advocated a socialism of decentralised association and participatory rank-and-file democracy.\textsuperscript{70}

By 1930, Lang and an “Inner Group” of his allies dominated the party. Lang was by this time extremely popular with ordinary party and trade union members. This was based largely on his political success and legislative record, although his popularity was in part that of a demagogue in a time of crisis during the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{71} Lang’s alliance with key trade union leaders was also crucial to his supremacy, and the Trade Union Secretaries Association (TUSA) was a key site of pro-Lang organising.\textsuperscript{72} Lang’s prestige was so great that he was able to defy expulsion by the Federal ALP in 1931 and continue as leader of “Lang Labor”, which remained the dominant labour party in NSW. There had been long-running hostility between the federal and NSW ALP but the immediate cause of the split was disagreement between the Federal ALP government’s conservative, deflationary response to the Great Depression and NSW’s “Lang Plan” which most famously included the suspension of interest payments to overseas bondholders. Lang’s populist attack on the “elites” had made him an archetypal example of Michels’ “cult for the leaders”; he was immortalised in busts and praised with the slogan “Lang is right!”\textsuperscript{73}

Yet in 1930 a new and unexpected challenge to Inner Group dominance had emerged in the form of the Socialisation Units. That year the NSW Labor Metropolitan Conference had voted to form a committee to promote the party objective of the socialisation of industry. The Socialisation Committee then formed Socialisation Units based initially on the local party branches. Soon there were 180 Socialisation Units, mostly in metropolitan Sydney, and members quickly joined “in a surge of political involvement unparalleled in the party’s history”.\textsuperscript{74} The units were a reflection of growing radicalism in the Depression context and they essentially became a well


\textsuperscript{71} Nairn, \textit{The ’Big Fella’: Jack Lang and the Australian Labor Party 1891-1949}: 3, 155, 156.

\textsuperscript{72} Robinson, \textit{When the Labor Party Dreams}: 29.

\textsuperscript{73} Dixson, \textit{Greater than Lenin? Lang and Labor 1916-32}.

\textsuperscript{74} Hagan and Turner, \textit{A History of the Labor Party in NSW 1891-1991}: 86.
organised, radical faction within the party which controlled the election of many branch officers and Annual Conference delegates. Many in the ruling Inner Group coalition were former or current militants and radicals themselves and initially welcomed the Socialisation movement, not yet realising the threat it posed to Inner Group rule. In 1931 the Socialisation Units attempted to form within trade unions but were largely unsuccessful and the following year the units narrowly failed in their attempt to capture the NSW Labor executive from the Inner Group. The Inner Group suppressed the units and at the 1933 Annual Conference won a vote to dissolve them.

By the mid-1930s the threat from the Socialisation Units was over but a new threat to Lang was emerging from the unions. By this time he had made enemies of most union leaders including Garden, Willis and TUSA Secretary Oscar (Ossie) Schreiber. Communists won leadership of the Miners Federation and ARU in 1934 and 1935 and the leaders began agitating against Lang who was increasingly anti-communist and isolationist. Lang further alienated the unions by attempting to take control of the Labor Council’s radio station 2KY, as he had done with the Labor Daily. Led by Garden, the unions blocked Lang’s takeover. The Inner Group now consisted of Lang’s personal allies, most prominently: Paddy Keller, Party President; Jim Graves, Organising Secretary; “Plugger” Martin, Organiser; Harry O’Regan, Returning Officer; and Harold and Norman McCauley, former members of the Premier’s Department. As Lang increasingly cut out the unions and it became clear that he could not win a general election, his hold on power began to slip. An opposition coalition of trade unions and local branches finally deposed Lang and the Inner Group in 1939.

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75 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 266.
**Originality and arguments**

There is a historical consensus that in the interwar period the AWU and NSW Labor Party were oligarchies while the Miners Federation was democratic. This has been much noted but little analysed by historians. This thesis is the first book-length analysis of democracy and oligarchy within the NSW labour movement in this period and the first chapter-length analysis for each organisation. There has been little historiographical focus on how or why each organisation was democratic or oligarchic, what effects this had or how the organisations influenced one another. I am also the first person to situate these organisations within the international body of theory on trade union and political party democracy. I will now provide a brief outline of the historiography (which is expanded in relevant chapters) and my main arguments and conclusions.

Historians agree that trade union leaders were the most powerful extra-parliamentary actors within the NSW Labor Party. 82 Furthermore, historians recognise that union leaders’ power within the party came as a result of their positions of dominance within their unions. 83 In the 1960s Irwin Young and Miriam Dixson analysed the inter-war NSW Labor Party in terms of union power bases. 84 These union power bases were also an important component of Geoffrey Robinson’s more recent analysis of the second Lang government. 85 I too focus on union power bases but I take the analysis one step further and look at what was happening within two of the key unions. Vere Gordon Childe’s contemporary 1923 account is closer to my approach. He focused on union participation within the Labor Party and also highlighted some of the related internal conflict within the unions, especially the AWU. 86


85 Robinson, *When the Labor Party Dreams*.

I am concerned with what was happening inside each of these three organisations and how it affected what was happening inside the other two. Historians have only briefly analysed these links. Bede Nairn noted that from 1917 to 1923, “the AWU had developed its own brand of internal control and sought to transfer it to the [Labor] Party Executive”. Raymond Markey argued that upon its foundation in 1891, the NSW Labor Party based its party and local branch structure on “the urban craft unions, or maritime, coal mining and other unskilled unions” which all shared a “localised, participatory mode of organisation”. From 1895, however, with the unions greatly weakened by the failed 1890s strikes, the AWU and professional Labor politicians imposed their “more centralised, bureaucratic form of government” on the party and on the re-emerging unions. My thesis develops this line of enquiry and analysis.

Historians of this period of NSW labour history have engaged little with theory. Marxist theory underlies much of the historiography, but it is not explicitly set out or analysed. Michels is barely mentioned, despite the glaring relevance of his iron law of oligarchy. Ian Turner provided the most explicit engagement with theory, yet even he did so only briefly. In the introduction to Industrial Labour and Politics (1965), he discussed Vilfredo Pareto’s elite theory and the argument that “the leaders of the labour movement are nothing but a new elite”. Turner challenged this elite theory from his Marxist position that “the limits of the actions of labour leaders are set by the masses of the labour movement”. Unfortunately, Turner simply mentioned in the introduction that this proposition “is one of the arguments of this work” but did not return to it or examine it explicitly.

Markey noted that the history of the AWU between 1880 and 1900 “confirms Michels’ thesis” and, in her review of Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles’ history of the AWU, Verity Burgmann observed that the AWU “became a union that seemed to

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confirm the clearly iron-like nature of the law of oligarchy”. These brief allusions are the historiography’s only engagement with the extensive international sociological and political science literature on trade union and political party governance. Conversely, my analysis is grounded in this international theory which provides much of the framework for each of the three parts of the thesis.

**Part one: AWU**

The first three chapters focus on the AWU, assessing how and why it was an oligarchy and investigating oligarchical continuity and change. I demonstrate that over the first 50 years of its history the AWU changed from a federal oligarchy to a collegial oligarchy to a simple official hierarchy. The union possessed none of the seven requirements for trade union democracy. In chapter one I argue that most AWU members did not form strong occupational communities, the union’s rules were undemocratic and there was a large gap in status and skills between officials and ordinary members. In chapter two I show that the union had low levels of local autonomy and membership decision-making and how the officials stifled and suppressed internal organised opposition and free communication.

In chapter two we will see that countervailing tendencies operated against oligarchy within the union, mainly through pressure from ordinary members and support for democracy amongst a minority of leaders, but they were not enough to overcome oligarchy. I argue that four foundational elements allowed for the persistence and development of AWU oligarchy throughout the first half of the twentieth century:

1. The pastoral industry’s scattered and itinerant rural workers did not form lasting communities and were overly reliant on official union communication.
2. The aspirational, competitive and hierarchical elements of the AWU’s workplace culture made it well-suited to authoritarian leadership.
3. The union’s centralised constitution concentrated power into the hands of the top officials and undermined grassroots participation.

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4. The AWU’s commitment to industrial arbitration meant that members had no real role to play within the union other than paying their membership fees and voting in annual elections.

AWU affiliation with the Labor Party had mixed effects on the union’s internal governance. On the democratic side, factional opponents within the Labor Party publicised the AWU leaders’ undemocratic behaviour. On the anti-democratic side, however, affiliation gave AWU officials power and prestige within the Labor Party which further exacerbated the status gap between members and officials. Furthermore, the Labor Party’s requirement that all party members must also be members of their trade union reduced members’ ability to leave the AWU in protest.

Chapter three is a case study which examines the AWU’s role in the 1916 Australian conscription plebiscite. The AWU and its Worker newspapers strongly opposed conscription and historians argue that if not for the AWU’s “no” campaign, conscription would probably have been introduced.92 I argue that we do not know how most AWU members felt about conscription and that the members had little influence over the union’s stance. Furthermore, if the AWU had been a different kind of oligarchy, such as a simple official hierarchy where President William Spence had absolute power, it may have supported conscription. So from the “no” conscription campaign’s perspective, it was fortunate that the AWU was a collegial oligarchy.

Part two: Miners Federation
Chapters four, five and six focus on the Miners Federation. In chapter four I investigate why the Miners Federation was democratic by comparing it with the AWU. The Miners Federation possessed six out of the seven requirements for democracy; it had a strong occupational community, democratic rules, high levels of local autonomy and membership decision-making, internal organised opposition and free communication. The only democratic requirement that the union did not

possess was equality between members and officials. Miners Federation leaders enjoyed high pay and celebrity status within mining communities.

I argue that in the cultures of both the AWU and Miners Federation there were tensions between solidarity and egalitarianism on the one hand and aspirationalism, competitiveness and hierarchy on the other. In the AWU aspirationalism, competitiveness and hierarchy prevailed and led the union down the path to oligarchy. In the Miners Federation solidarity and egalitarianism prevailed and facilitated democracy. The most important contextual difference between the AWU and Miners Federation was that miners and their families lived and worked together within permanent communities. The fact that mining was dangerous also meant that miners relied on each other for safety and potential rescue which further discouraged individualism. 93 The arbitration system undermined Miners Federation democracy but less than it had in the AWU because the miners had a more contested relationship with arbitration and continued to strike.

The effects of Labor Party affiliation were mixed for Miners Federation democracy. On the anti-democratic side, when Miners Federation officials became powerful and famous within the Labor Party this increased the status gap between members and officials. Furthermore, when these Miners Federation leaders allied with Lang in the mid-1920s, and privileged political action over industrial action, this encouraged membership passivity. The absorption of the Miners Federation’s Common Cause newspaper into the Labor Party’s Labor Daily also reduced the utility of Common Cause as a forum for free union communication. On the democratic side, the unsuccessful attempt of Lang’s Labor Party faction to defeat the Miners Federation leadership in union elections in the mid-1930s increased membership interest and debate within the union and provided for electoral opposition.

Chapter four focuses in depth on the Miners Federation’s crucial shift from local democratic communities to a national democratic community in the decades after

93 “The price the miner pays,” CC 16 February 1923, 6.
1915. To build a national miners’ community, the Miners Federation needed to overcome localism and it did so by creating an imagined community of miners through the national newspaper *Common Cause*, class consciousness, shared entertainment and sport between regions and the national organisation of the Miners Federation Women’s Auxiliaries. The Miners Federation case study in chapter six examines the union’s five month campaign against mechanisation in the Lambton B coal mine near Newcastle from 1935 to 1936. The Miners Federation members had elected a CPA leadership in 1934 and the anti-mechanisation campaign was an early test of that leadership, with the local members refusing the leaders’ instructions to strike. We will see the complexities of Miners Federation democracy in action. Central leadership, a national mining community and working-class solidarity chafe against local community, local autonomy, membership decision-making and pragmatic concerns for jobs, wages and conditions in ways that demonstrate the union’s high levels of democracy.

**Part three: NSW Labor Party**

The final four chapters examine the NSW Labor Party. I agree with the historiography that the party was an oligarchy and that the chief cause of that oligarchy was that trade union leaders enjoyed disproportionate power within the party. The problem was not that trade unions or trade unionists had significant power: it was, after all, a *labour* party. The problem was that trade union leaders exercised power as if they were delegates faithfully representing the views of their thousands of members, when in reality the union members were often uninformed and uninterested and had no real way of influencing their leaders. Nevertheless, the historiography presents an overly pessimistic view as it fails to recognise adequately the democratic impulses that were operating within the party. This in turn has caused historians to misinterpret important events. For example, I demonstrate that both the so-called “Lang dictatorship” and the 1927 Rules actually enhanced democracy.

In chapter seven I focus on the NSW Labor Party’s community and rules. I argue that while some local branches possessed strong communities, most did not, and that while the party rules became more democratic in 1927, they continued to give too
much power to union leaders. In chapter eight I argue that the party’s toleration of internal opposition (factions) and defence of NSW local autonomy against the federal ALP enhanced democracy. Unions provided the foundations for the factions and must therefore receive much of the credit for the democracy-enhancing effects of factionalism. But each union also came into the party as an individual “quasi-faction” of its own, and this sometimes enabled them to exercise undemocratic influence on the party.

Within the NSW Labor Party, local branch autonomy and membership decision-making declined and only a minority of branches had strong enough communities to resist. In chapter nine I argue that the so-called “Lang dictatorship” enhanced democracy by establishing effective extra-parliamentary control over the politicians for the first time in the party’s history. By the mid-1930s, however, the increasing power of Lang and his Inner Group of personal allies had made this extra-parliamentary control illusory. The Inner Group eroded free speech and increasingly used corruption and violence to maintain power.

Overall, union affiliation had mixed effects on NSW Labor Party democracy. Union leaders’ immense power was the primary source of party oligarchy but the unions also provided an effective check on Inner Group oligarchy in the late 1930s. Turning to the AWU and Miners Federation specifically, usually the effects of their affiliation were straightforward as they transposed, or attempted to transpose, their own rules, methods and cultures into the party. But sometimes the oligarchical AWU and its Australian Worker newspaper actually enhanced Labor Party democracy by providing opposition to the ruling faction, holding the leaders to account and stimulating member interest and debate. On the other hand, the democratic Miners Federation sometimes undermined Labor Party democracy by, for example, using its money to take control over the party newspapers.

In the NSW Labor Party case study in chapter ten I examine the effects of the party’s internal governance on its general election prospects. I argue that the Labor Party’s internal oligarchy was a primary cause of Labor’s defeat at the 1938 NSW election.
Lang and his Inner Group had become so undemocratic that a large section of the party had broken away to form a rival Industrialist Labour Party which campaigned under the slogan “Labor without Lang”. The majority of voters refused to vote for Lang who was increasingly criticised as a tyrant even by those within his own party.

Conclusion
This thesis examines democracy and oligarchy within the AWU, Miners Federation and NSW Labor Party from 1910 to 1939. It is the first detailed examination of this topic within each organisation and the first to conduct a relational and comparative analysis within the three. Unlike previous histories, my analysis is enriched by an extensive engagement with the relevant theoretical literature on party and union governance as well as gender, localism and imagined communities. I argue that the NSW Labor Party both influenced and was influenced by its affiliated unions. These effects were complicated and mixed. Within all three organisations the pro and anti-democratic effects of trade union affiliation with the Labor Party were approximately equal.

The AWU and NSW Labor Party were both oligarchies from 1910 to 1939 and both became more oligarchical as the interwar period progressed. Even the Miners Federation’s democracy declined somewhat, especially under the Communist leadership from 1934. This thesis could therefore be interpreted as evidence that democracy within political parties and trade unions is a hopeless cause. Michels, a democratic socialist when he first formulated the iron law of oligarchy, stared too long into this pessimistic void and converted to fascism. I will demonstrate, however, that oligarchy was always contested and that these organisations all provide examples of how oligarchy can be successfully resisted. There is a strong tendency towards oligarchy within parties and unions, but oligarchy is not always inevitable. The first step in counteracting oligarchy is to understand it.
CHAPTER I
Foundations of oligarchy: the AWU

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) was the largest and most influential trade union in Australia throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It was also the archetypal trade union oligarchy. Both this chapter and that which follows analyse the circumstances that allowed for the creation, persistence and development of that oligarchy from the union’s formation in 1886 through to 1939. Like union democracy, union oligarchy requires certain conditions to thrive, and this chapter explores the contextual factors that allowed the AWU to become and remain an oligarchical union.

The sociological literature identifies seven key requirements for trade union democracy: democratic rules, a close-knit occupational community, internal organised opposition, local autonomy, membership decision-making, equality between officials and members and free communication. These requirements provide a useful framework for analysing democracy and oligarchy within the AWU, which did not possess any of the seven. This chapter focuses on the AWU’s occupational community, rules and equality between officials and members while the following chapter examines local autonomy, membership decision-making, internal organised opposition and free communication.

AWU oligarchy was not static; it changed and adapted to new circumstances. But four contextual elements continued to allow for its persistence and development throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Time and again we will see how the aspirational and hierarchical elements of the AWU’s founding ethos, the pastoral industry’s scattered and itinerant rural membership, the union’s centralised constitution and its dedication to compulsory arbitration enabled the union’s leaders to entrench their rule. We will also see that affiliation with the Australian Labor Party

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(ALP) had mixed effects, at certain times facilitating oligarchy, and at others promoting democracy.

**A short history of the AWU from 1886 to 1939**

Shearers in the south-eastern state of Victoria founded the Australasian Shearers Union (ASU) in 1886 and it quickly amalgamated with similar unions and spread throughout Australia.\(^3\) In 1890 the ASU leaders created the General Labourers Union (GLU) to unionise shedhands and in 1894 the ASU and GLU amalgamated to form the AWU. It was structured federally with regional branches controlled by the national annual convention and executive council. By the twentieth century the AWU published the *Australian Worker* newspaper in Sydney, the NSW state capital, the *Worker* in Queensland and the *Westralian Worker* in Western Australia. These newspapers were widely read by AWU members and the general public.\(^4\)

By 1910 there were two AWU branches in NSW. Both primarily enrolled pastoral workers with the Bourke Branch covering western NSW and the Central Branch covering the rest of the state.\(^5\) In 1913 the annual convention retitled the Bourke Branch as the Western Branch, extended its boundaries to include Northern NSW and moved its headquarters to Armidale in the state’s New England district (figure 2).\(^6\) In 1916, the NSW AWU doubled its membership when the state’s largest union, the 18,000-member Railway Workers and General Labourers Association (RWGLA), amalgamated with the AWU to form the Railway Workers Industry Branch (RWIB). Attracted by the enhanced career opportunities within the AWU, RWGLA organiser George Bodkin led the push for amalgamation within his union. The following year, the Rockchoppers and Sewer Miners Union (RSMU) fused into the RWIB. The AWU was henceforth the principal construction labourers’ union in NSW.\(^7\) The Central Branch (12,000 members) absorbed the Western Branch (6,500 members) in 1920.

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in an effort to suppress Western Branch radicalism, and there were once again two
NSW AWU branches. The Central Branch had approximately 18,500 members and
the RWIB had 6,000 (figure 3).  

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Figure 2 AWU branches in NSW from 1913 to 1920.9

Figure 3 AWU branches in NSW from 1920 to 1933.10

9 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1914.
10 AWU Constitution and General Rules 1923-1924, AWU, E154/25, NBAC.
For most of the period from 1910 to 1939 Jack Bailey was the state’s most powerful and prominent AWU leader. Born and raised in rural NSW, he left school at a young age to work as a shearing shed tar boy, and was later employed as a farm labourer, shearer (and bare-knuckle boxer) and then AWU organiser. He was president of the Central Branch from 1915 to 1933, and used this position to gain election to the NSW Legislative Assembly from 1918 to 1925. A tough man of stern expression, muscular build and violent temper, Bailey possessed a rugged personal magnetism.\(^{11}\) He did not drink, smoke or gamble, and rarely gave speeches or sought publicity, preferring to utilise his impressive political organising skills discretely (figure 4).\(^{12}\) Bailey’s chief lieutenants were Central Branch Secretaries William Lambert from 1915 to 1921 (figure 5) and George Buckland from 1921 to 1933 (figure 6).

\[\text{Figure 4} \text{ John (Jack) Bailey c. 1917.}\(^{13}\)\]


\(^{13}\) “Labor’s candidates,” *Australian Worker*, 12 April 1917, 7.
From the late 1910s to the early 1930s Bailey and his Central Branch allies joined with fellow conservative reformist branch leaders from Victoria, Queensland and South Australia to form a collegial oligarchy and control the AWU at the federal level. Ernest Henry Lane, a rebel Queensland Annual Convention delegate who opposed the ruling

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15 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1924, 15.
group, recalled that there was not a single convention resolution in the period from 1918 to 1926 in which this “old guard” and “their henchmen” did not “score a victory”. The key members of this controlling group were national General Secretary and former Secretary of the Victoria-Riverina Branch Edward Grayndler, national President and former Secretary of the Victoria-Riverina Branch Jack Barnes, NSW Central Branch President Bailey, NSW Central Branch Secretaries Lambert and Buckland, Queensland Branch Secretary William Dunstan, Queensland Branch President William Riordan and Adelaide Branch Secretary Frank Lundie.

Ideologically, most AWU officials in NSW and nationwide were conservative labourist reformists who advocated modifications of the existing political and economic systems to win greater wages and safety for workers. Shearers’ unions had participated in a series of massive but unsuccessful strikes in the 1890s and, defeated by the combined power of employers and the state, most AWU leaders had become convinced that future success would be achieved through arbitration and political action rather than strikes. In 1927 Bailey still maintained that “in tracing the history of the AWU back to the [1890s] the argument [is] a long way in favour of arbitration”. Membership voting suggests that the majority of members shared this view, but a significant minority did not. In 1920 members voted 16,138 to 10,157 to maintain AWU support for arbitration over direct action.

There was always a radical minority of officials and members who opposed arbitration. Within the AWU and the wider labour movement militant reformists promoted strikes and radicals worked to overthrow capitalism. Militant members formed internal dissident groups within the NSW AWU, most notably the

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18 Harry Knowles, "Comparative Labour Biography: An Historical Study of Leadership in the Australian Workers’ Union" (University of Sydney, 2003), 112.
19 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 26 January 1927, 18.
Bushworkers Propaganda Group (BPG) in 1922, before breaking away in the 1930s to form a rival Pastoral Workers Industrial Union (PWIU) which had strong links to the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{22}

Taking advantage of the split in the NSW Labor Party over conscription in 1916, Bailey and the AWU leadership in NSW led a coalition of conservative labourist trade union and local branch delegates to take control of the party. This “AWU faction” or “Bailey faction” exercised a conservative influence on the NSW Labor Party and labour movement, refusing to participate in the huge but disastrous 1917 General Strike and blocking attempts to form the One Big Union (OBU).\textsuperscript{23}

From 1919 to 1923 the AWU-controlled NSW Labor Party Central Executive engaged in increasingly authoritarian abuse of its power in which it expelled the NSW parliamentary Labor leader, appointed a new leader over the heads of caucus, barred members and local branches from discussing the issue and then, when they refused to comply with the gag order, expelling scores of branches from the party. A more militant faction deposed the conservative faction in 1923 and the AWU leadership remained politically ostracised in NSW for the remainder of the interwar period. The loss was especially damaging for Bailey personally as, despite a lack of conclusive evidence, the militant faction found him guilty of conspiring to build ballot boxes with secret sliding panels in order to corrupt internal party elections. They expelled him from the party and he did not contest his Legislative Assembly seat at the next state election.\textsuperscript{24} When the militant faction instituted new party rules in 1927, the AWU labelled them the “Red Rules”, falsely claiming that they would allow for the entry of Communists, and disaffiliated from the party in protest. The AWU re-affiliated the following year but in 1931 the federal Australian Labor Party (ALP) expelled Lang and

\textsuperscript{23} Irwin Young, "Changes Within the NSW Branch of the Australian Workers' Union 1919-1924 " Journal of Industrial Relations 6, no. 1 (1964): 52-59.
his supporters and established a new official NSW Branch of the federal ALP with which the AWU quickly affiliated.

By the mid-1930s the Queensland Branch of the AWU had more members than the rest of the branches combined. Its Secretary Clarrie Fallon used this massive membership to govern the union in an unofficial dictatorship. By 1932 NSW AWU membership had collapsed from 35,000 to 5,000, primarily due to the Great Depression.\(^{25}\) Fallon blamed Bailey and the other NSW leaders for the severity of the membership decline, the union’s political isolation from Lang Labor and the growing anti-AWU militancy within the pastoral industry. In 1933 the federal executive council removed the NSW leaders by combining the Central Branch and RWIB into one “NSW Branch” and appointing new officials.

At the 1938 NSW Branch election Bailey made a surprise comeback and won the presidency. This reflected the members’ growing anti-Lang sentiment and resentment of federal AWU domination, and perhaps some nostalgia for the 1910s and 1920s when Bailey reigned supreme in the NSW AWU. Many of his former enemies and critics inside and outside the labour movement praised Bailey as a returning anti-Lang hero. The *SMH* editorialised that “Mr Bailey's battle against the Langist challenge and the Communist influence … was Homeric”.\(^{26}\) But the federal executive council voided Bailey’s victory for supposed “ballot irregularities”. The executive council governed the NSW Branch for most of the period from 1933 until Fallon died in office in 1950.\(^{27}\)

**Oligarchy within the AWU: much noted but little analysed**

There is a historical consensus that the interwar AWU was the archetypal trade union oligarchy.\(^{28}\) Yet it is only possible to piece together a partial account of this oligarchy from the AWU’s extensive historiography. Vere Gordon Childe began the scholarly


\(^{26}\) “The return of Mr Bailey,” *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* 19 January 1938, 16.


\(^{28}\) Ibid., 136.
organisational study of the AWU in his 1923 classic *How Labour Governs*, and historians since have generally followed his analysis.²⁹ For Childe, oligarchy was the “natural outcome of the AWU structure”. The union’s supreme governing body was the annual convention at which branches were represented by delegates elected by a vote open to all members of the branch. However, “owing to the vast area of these branches”, power was by necessity centralised and the branch officers had “an incalculable advantage over the ordinary working members who can only be known as a rule to their actual workmates in a limited area”. Thus “the majority of the delegates to the annual convention are organisers or other employees even more directly under the control of the [Branch] executive” and “the official junta can control a large bloc vote at that gathering”.³⁰

Raymond Markey examined (lack of) democracy within the AWU and its forerunners from 1886 to 1900. In addition to Childe’s observations, Markey also situated the AWU’s centralism in terms of two broader trends within Australian trade unionism. First, the increasing tendency towards “larger unions spread over a number of localities” which meant that “the opportunity for old craft-style participatory democracy based on small localised union membership was receding”. Second, the arbitration system’s “court-room method of operation” discouraged membership involvement as it was performed by experienced union officials and did not require the participation of ordinary members.³¹

I follow Childe and Markey and highlight the AWU’s scattered membership, centralised constitution and devotion to arbitration as explanations of the union’s oligarchy. I expand on their analysis, in particular demonstrating additional anti-democratic effects of arbitration, while also analysing the influence of the aspirational and hierarchical aspects of the AWU’s founding ethos and the union’s strong connection to the ALP. Where Markey studied the AWU to 1900 and Childe

²⁹ Ibid.
studied it to 1923, I continue the analysis to 1939, and, unlike the previous historians, I assess oligarchical continuity and change over time.

Historians have focussed little on the ways in which oligarchy changed within the AWU. Harry Knowles noted that because from the mid-1930s the Queensland Branch had more members than the rest of the branches combined, it naturally “dominated the politics and direction of the national union”. Due to his position as Queensland Branch Secretary and his personal leadership qualities, Fallon became “undoubtedly the powerhouse” of the AWU. In line with Michels, but without engaging with him, Knowles also observed that over time the AWU leadership was able to “take advantage of a substantially quiescent rank and file to extend its authority as well as its tenure”.

**Occupational communities within the AWU**

Union democracy requires a strong “occupational community” which creates a culture of membership interest, involvement and empowerment. By the 1920s the AWU was a massive union of 100,000 members covering a multitude of jobs across a vast continent. Members clearly did not form a single occupational community. The majority were either rural “bushworkers” such as shearers, farm-hands, rabbit-trappers, sugarcane cutters and fruit pickers or “navvies”, short for navigators, who performed manual labour for civil engineering projects like railways and roads. A minority of AWU members also worked in mining, metals, factories, cooking, baking, hotels, clubs, restaurants and more.

Shearers enjoyed a robust culture of mateship. The AWU shearers were as much an imagined community as a community built on face-to-face interactions. When he arrived at a shed a shearer would show the others his cardboard AWU membership card (“ticket”) and they would get to work. AWU shearers were diverse but, at least

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according to the stereotype promoted by the union, they worked hard, played hard, stuck together loyally and did not believe anything unless they read it in the *Worker*. This stereotype both reflected and shaped the imagined community.

The shearsers worked together all day in the burning hot sheds, shouting over the screaming of the shearing machines and the bleating of scared sheep. Originally shearsers used blade shears similar to large scissors but from the 1880s they were replaced by machine shears. Each handpiece (similar to human hair clippers) was powered by an overhead gear. Jim Casteen recalled shearing in Northern NSW in the 1930s:

> You’re bent double all day while struggling with hundreds of hot sheep, often with fleeces matted with wiregrass seed and galvanised burr thorns. When the seed is bad, your arms and underarms and all down the left side get rubbed raw by millions of needle-sharp barbs. In the stifling hot conditions of a woolshed, you’re perpetually dripping with salty sweat that’s rubbed into all the raw places by wool abrasion and bur. It felt like being scrubbed down with sandpaper and coarse salt. At the end of each day you’re so sore and your back is so stiff it takes a good while and a lot of determination to straighten up to a normal position. Most shearsers end up with crook backs.  

Adding to the heat was the steam engine which powered the machine shears. Occasionally shearsers and shedhands were killed or maimed when an engine exploded and sprayed the shed with fiery shrapnel.

Controlling the frightened sheep was difficult work and it took skill and strength to avoid being bitten or kicked. The shearing combs would become so hot that they smoked and burnt the sheep’s skin on contact. George Smith, an Englishman who wrote a memoir recalling his time as a jackeroo in Australia in the 1920s, recalled that if a shearer cut a sheep he would further scare it by yelling “keep still ya silly bitch or I’ll shove it up ya bloody snatch!” Things were even worse when sheep had fly strike. Casteen reported that “the sticky putrid mess where the maggots are working creates an unbearable itch that the sheep keeps biting at for relief. As the machine

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works through the nest of maggots, accentuating the itch, the minced up bits fly up into your face, over your lips and in your nostrils”.

At sundown the shearers ate, spoke and sang together around the fire and then slept side by side in the rough and ready shearers’ quarters. Bonds were forged in hardship as the work was tough, the conditions were basic and the sleeping quarters often housed animals for most of the year. Bailey recalled that

at Gobaralong, owned by Mr Quiltie, in the Gundagai district [southern NSW], a stable was given to the men, and they had to hunt pigs out of the place and frequently found them in possession when they returned from work. Surely it was never intended that men should have to sleep and have their meals in the same quarters as where pigs disputed proprietorship with them?

Friendships formed quickly but even at the largest stations shearing lasted for less than two months. Some shearers would travel together in groups and others would work with the same shearers multiple times along a “run” of sheds. But in general the seasonal and itinerant nature of the work was not conducive to the formation of strong, stable occupational communities. The roving nature of shearing was, however, conducive to the spread of unionism and helps to explain how the shearers’ unions grew so quickly in the late nineteenth century. Unlike shearers, other bushworkers rarely worked together in significant numbers. Scattered across thousands of pastoral stations, most were too isolated to form occupational communities.

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37 Gasteen, Under the Mulga: 235.
38 “Stables and pigs,” Worker (Wagga) 28 February 1912, 5.
Navvies were similar to the shearsers in that they lived together in camps and enjoyed a strong culture of mateship and loyalty, working hard and playing hard, but their work too was short-term and itinerant which prevented the formation of lasting occupational communities. William Morrow was an AWU navvy on the Queensland railways in the early twentieth century. He recalled that the navvy was “the most loyal of men”. They worked hard clearing land, digging roads and laying railway tracks for 48 hours per week. The work was all manual with pick, shovel, hammer and drill; the best assistance a navvy could hope for was explosives and a horse and dray. In 1912 the Wagga Wagga Worker published a song by A.E. Yarra titled “Australian Navvies on the Line”:

Dig, dig, lift and throw!
Into the dray we make it go;

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43 Ibid., 16.
Boulders and sand and roots and stones,  
We swing with the knack that the navvy owns;  
We loaf in wet and work in fine,  
Australian navvies "on the line."  

Morrow began work at 10 years old as a “nipper” delivering water to the rail lifting team and by the time he was 16 he was digging and carting with the men. He recalled “very primitive” conditions:

every fortnight we’d shift our camps. Our camps consisted of tents, no boarding houses. We had to cook all our own meals, and I, at ten, used to cook mine. Our main diet was corn beef, bread and golden syrup, potatoes and tea and sugar. We had no cooling system then. We’d hang our food up in a bag under the tent.

Navvies were fully exposed to the elements from heat to cold, weeks of rain to dust storms. Morrow recalled “very, very bad” working conditions. Eye disease from the dust and flies was a regular discomfort and was known as “bung eye” or “sandy blight”. Serious injury and death was common, mostly from being crushed by equipment or rock. Such intense and sustained physical labour took a heavy toll on the men’s bodies and many of those who lived to see retirement must have suffered horribly from arthritis, bad backs and other overuse injuries. Facing these hardships together, in the face of uncaring managers and employers, fostered solidarity and militancy which led to high rates of unionism. Morrow recalled “if anything bad goes on long enough, people will revolt against it. The result of that revolt [amongst navvies] was trade unionism”.  

While most AWU members did not work in lasting occupational communities, its members shared an imagined community based around the AWU ticket, the Worker newspapers and a “bushworker ethos”. This ethos is at the core of Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles’ history of the AWU and they argue that it was created during the 1890s shearers’ strikes and continued to define the union into the mid-twentieth century and beyond. The ideological heart of the ethos both reflected and helped

44 “Australian Navvies on the line,” Worker (Wagga) 5 December 1912, 10.  
46 Ibid.  
47 Ibid.  
to shape the wider national consensus of the “Australian Settlement”, chiefly White Australia, compulsory arbitration and tariff protection. The mateship of white, male unionists and solidarity in defeat during the 1890s strikes long remained the mythological glue that united the union. 49

Fierce racism, especially against Asians and Pacific Islanders, also formed a key component of the ethos. The AWU feared cheap “coloured” labour would drive down wages and conditions for whites, but there were also concerns about the influence of foreign cultures. For the AWU, Western culture was the moral light in a dark world. In 1908 Mary Gilmore, writer of the Australian Worker Women’s Page, wrote of the White Australia Policy: “once we let that break down, and the white man’s civilisation will pass from the black as the white light of day passes from the sky, to be followed by blackness and night”. 50

The AWU ethos was mythologised by poets such as Henry Lawson, promoted by the union’s Worker newspapers and employed towards a large variety of causes by generations of AWU officials. Even by the 1940s, the majority of officials continued to come from a shearing background, despite the fact that shearsers were by this time less than five per cent of members. 51 The existing leaders promoted fellow shearsers and clearly believed shearsers best embodied the ethos of the union.

The AWU’s masculinity was based on the “gun” shearer who, with his physical strength and skill, demanded high wages for hard work and maintained his independence and autonomy. This was in keeping with some aspects of what Russell Ward famously described as the “Australian Legend”; the qualities of the mythical “typical Australian” in the late nineteenth century. He was “quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others”, “a great 'knocker' of eminent people” unless they were sports stars and “a fiercely independent person”. AWU cartoonists

49 Ibid., 12.
50 Gilmore in ibid., 104.
51 Ibid., 7.
regularly depicted the AWU as a muscular rural man with a gun or other practical tool (figure 8).

Figure 8 The practical AWU man “guarding” the labour movement “camp” from “treachery”, “slander” and a “bogus party” (the break-away militant faction).\(^{52}\)

\(^{52}\) Will Donald, ‘Guarding the Camp’, *Australian Worker*, 25 May, 1927.
Bravery and physical and mental strength were also key components of AWU masculinity. Joan Austin Palmer recalled men shearing at her father’s farm when suddenly the steam engine began to shake violently. The shearsers and shed-hands quickly evacuated the shed; they had all heard stories of exploding engines. Palmer’s father was the only one who remained in the shed and fortunately for him the engine did not explode. Later the men were full of respect: “my word your father’s game. He never budged”. But Joan’s friend Frank later told her: “I don’t really think he knew what danger he was in. The shearsers and shedhands fled because they knew better”. This respect for bravery (or stupidity) in the face of danger exemplifies the more macho elements of AWU masculinity. This was further displayed by the prevalence of bare knuckle boxing in the shearing sheds as both entertainment and to settle disputes.

Ward’s “Australian legend” thesis has generated a large historiographical debate. Coral Lansbury, for example, went to the opposite extreme and argued that signs of mateship and solidarity “were singularly absent among the bushworkers” who, she argued, were competitive and distrusting of one another; “nomads who slept with their moneybelts strapped under their shirts”. The AWU ethos sat somewhere between these two extremes. Where it diverged from Ward’s “typical Australian” was in the prevailing attitude to work. While capable of great exertion in an emergency, Ward says, the “typical Australian” generally felt “no impulse to work hard without good cause”. Conversely, the AWU ethos celebrated hard work as the source of a man’s independence. This was best demonstrated by the union’s strong support for piecework rates where men were paid for their results (such as per sheep shorn) rather than hourly wages. Another divergence was that in the AWU ethos egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism were more contested than in the Australian Legend, and the union was closer to the competitiveness described by Lansbury.

Within the AWU ethos there were contradictory impulses towards egalitarian mateship on one side and aspirationalism, competitiveness and hierarchy on the

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53 Palmer, Memories of a Riverina Childhood: 139.
other side. AWU culture was based on exclusivity and hierarchy: unionists over non-unionists, men over women, whites over non-whites. 56 As the bushworkers felt increasingly marginalised following the strike defeats of the 1890s, they were desperate to distinguish themselves from other marginalised non-white workers and women and maintain their position in the hierarchy above these “inferior” groups. 57 There was also a clear hierarchy on the pastoral stations. Workers accepted pragmatic workplace discipline and authority from the pastoralist and his jackaroos where it was necessary. 58 This also reflected the bushworkers’ aspirational culture.

The majority of shearers up to the early twentieth century were smallholders and their sons who went shearing part-time for a few months a year. These smallholders identified as much with the boss as with their fellow workers; they wanted to be the boss themselves someday, perhaps shearing to make extra money towards that end. Many station hands and shedhands were equally aspirational and hoped to climb the ladder themselves by becoming a shearer and/or landholder. 59 Many, perhaps most, AWU members were drawn into the union less by class solidarity and more because they thought it was to their advantage or because they were afraid of recrimination as a “scab”. 60

Sheep occupied a paradoxical position on the station. They were completely powerless and at the bottom of the hierarchy but they also symbolised the pastoralist’s authority. If shearers were unhappy with the owner they could take it out on his sheep. Smith recalled an owner warning him: “take your eye off a shearer and he’ll have his knee in the groin of a wether just for the pleasure of hearing it grunt. He’ll half break its bloody neck just because its mine and I am what I am see?” 61 Sheep were treated as property but there was also the acknowledgement, at least tacitly, that they were sentient. Minimising or at least managing the sheeps’ fear,

57 Ibid., 30.
58 Ibid., 33.
61 Smith, Once a Green Jackaroo: 151.
pain and discomfort were part of the skillset of a good shearer while maximising the sheeps’ unhappiness could be a means of revenge against the boss or simply a source of sadistic humour.

In addition to the hierarchy of the pastoral station, there was also an accepted hierarchy amongst the unionists themselves. The well-paid shearers considered themselves “bushworker aristocrats” and lived and ate in their own accommodation with their own cook. Below them were the station hands and shedhands who were fed and housed separately and at the bottom were Aboriginal workers, a small number of whom were AWU members. Shearers looked down on shedhands and often treated them badly. Shedhand Phil Mowbray complained that shearers employed double standards, condemning shedhands who worked with non-union shearers as “scabs” but then working with non-union shedhands themselves. Shedhands simultaneously disliked and admired the arrogant shearers and many shedhands hoped to better themselves by learning to shear.

The divide between shearers and shedhands was demonstrated most clearly by the ASU’s formation of the GLU in 1890. The ASU had wanted the shedhands unionised so they would not act as strikebreakers, but they would not accept these “inferior” unskilled workers into their own union. Eventually the two unions combined in 1894 but this was a defensive act by the shearers designed to contain shedhand militancy which was threatening the ASU’s agreement with the pastoralists. Throughout the 1890s the shedhands remained second-class members of the AWU and only shearers could be annual convention delegates.

A clear pecking order existed amongst the shearers themselves, from the “gun” shearers down to the beginners. Shearers were paid piecework rates per sheep

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63 Phil Mowbray, “The AWU and the rouseabout,” Worker (Wagga), 26 October 1895, 4.
64 Hearn, “Mates and Strangers: The ethos of the A.W.U.,” 26; Joseph Furphy, Such is Life (1903).
66 Phil Mowbray, “The AWU and the rouseabout,” Worker (Wagga), 26 October 1895, 4.
shorn, 14s per 100 in 1889, which facilitated sports-like competition. Each man strived to be the first to 100 sheep in a day or, for the best shearers in the best conditions, the first to 200 sheep. Record tallies became legendary. Decades later Palmer still recalled that the best tally she ever saw on her farm was 204 sheep in a day set by Albert Hurst of Wagga Wagga in 1896.

In relation to nineteenth-century Australian bushworkers, Linzie Murrie argued that “men continually need to seek approval of their masculinity from other men”, directing their behaviour at “the authorising male gaze”. Competition in the shearing shed was centred on this authorising male gaze. Shearing quickly and well was about earning respect and maintaining or improving your ranking as much as it was about making money. Shearers worked side by side in the shed and the shearers and shedhands were all aware of each shearers’ speed and skill, or lack thereof (figure 9). Each shearer knew where he had placed in the daily tally, who was at the top and who was at the bottom, or “on the chain”. Smith described when a shearer finished shearing a sheep: he “gives a quick look at his ‘enemy’ (his neighbours right and left) staggers back to the board with his aching back, selects the next victim and drags it out onto the board”. Hierarchy was also based on a man’s ability to fight and a below-average shearer could regain some respect with a strong bare-knuckle boxing display. The shearers’ competitive hierarchy was compounded by a further, more contested hierarchy which existed between smallholder and roving shearers. Smallholders looked down on rovers as aimless wanderers while rovers considered smallholders stingy and stupid and trapped on their meagre properties.

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68 Palmer, Memories of a Riverina Childhood: 138.
71 Smith, Once a Green Jackaroo: 150.
72 Merritt, "Shearers, Mountain Stockmen and the Australian Legend," 64.
The aspirational, hierarchical culture of the shearing shed and pastoral station was perfectly suited to top-down oligarchical union leadership. Leaders took their position at the top of the pile with political and legal power to rival the pastoralist. The fact that many AWU leaders became Labor parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers was inspirational to bushworkers. AWU leaders had begun as shearers and had bettered themselves to become part of the ruling elite. The process by which shearers became AWU officials also made them well-suited to become union oligarchs. Officials began as union organisers and for a man to do this work effectively he needed to be tough with both words and fists. Most early organisers travelled the vast distances between pastoral stations alone on foot or bicycle. The organiser would turn up at a pastoral station and, assuming he could talk or force his way past the pastoralist and his jackaroos, would begin the process of signing up new members and chasing up existing members for their union dues. This work required a combination of charisma and intimidation. When these organisers later became union officials they brought with them this authoritarian attitude towards the

Figure 9 An unknown Australian shearing shed c.1900.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{73} Henry King, Australian sheep shearing new style, NLA 24867867.
members. Bailey is the archetypal example with his history as a tar boy, shedhand, shearer, legendary bare-knuckle boxer, union organiser and then oligarchical union official.

Smith recalled working at a farm near Dirranbandi in south west Queensland when an AWU organiser visited his farm’s shearing shed. The men seemed to dislike the organiser but were also scared of him. Smith wrote that the shearsers greeted the organiser “with civility but without enthusiasm ... no one wanted any truck with this man but they had no choice... he went from man to man like an aging butterfly lollaping from bloom to bloom. It was all so false”.74 The organiser said he was there to ensure working conditions were safe and legal but he was there primarily to collect union dues.75

The AWU newspapers, always more radical than most members and officials, encouraged the elements of egalitarianism and solidarity in the union’s ethos and criticised the more hierarchical and aspirational sentiments. In 1890 the Brisbane Worker satirised the “respectable member” as “an individual who declaims in and out of season that he belongs to what he is pleased to refer to seriously as the artisan class, but which in his jocular moments he mentions as the ‘aristocracy of labour’”.76 Yet in other ways the newspapers reinforced the aspirational and hierarchical aspects of the ethos by, for example, idolising the “gun” shearer. A fictional story in the Wagga Wagga Worker in 1900 began: “Our hero was a big gun in the manipulation of the blades; for a century and a half and well into the third quarter was an ordinary tally for him” (over 150 sheep in a day).77 There were no equivalent heroes for the shedhands. The AWU newspapers also acknowledged that many members either were or aspired to be smallholders, and highlighted the common interests of the workers and smallholders against the large landholders.78

74 Smith, Once a Green Jackaroo: 152.
75 Ibid., 154.
76 “Seen in societies,” Worker (Brisbane) 1 March 1890, 4.
77 “A Christmas Scare,” Worker (Wagga), 22 December 1900, 3.
78 “To the working farmer,” Worker (Wagga), 23 June 1894, 2.
Most AWU bushworkers were scattered, itinerant and dependent on the *Worker* for union information and therefore in a weak position to resist the oligarchy. Furthermore, voting numbers suggest the majority of members were uninterested, as Michels would predict. Even with postal voting and ballot papers printed in the *Worker* newspapers, overall participation in both the Central Branch and RWIB elections only peaked at around 25 per cent. In 1925 an AWU workplace representative wrote to the *Labor Daily* blaming the “apathy and indifference of many members” for oligarchy in the union. John Merritt argues that for many members, and especially part-timers who were also smallholders, acquiring a union ticket was little more than a business transaction. Perhaps some members were also satisfied with the union and were happy to defer to the expertise of the current leadership.

Those AWU members who did resist the oligarchy tended to be from the minority of members who worked and lived in strong occupational communities. These were most likely to develop where a significant number of members settled in the same place for an extended period. AWU members at Port Kembla in Wollongong provide a useful case study. The local press referred to the Pork Kembla “branch” of the AWU, but it was actually a section of the Central Branch. The Port Kembla members mostly worked in smelting, metal work and fertiliser manufacture, lived in the surrounding area and regularly attended mass AWU meetings in their hundreds. They were highly organised and by their own initiative had elected a local president and secretary and a representative in each of the major enterprises that employed AWU members. The Port Kembla members would often strike, and even sympathy strike, in defiance of the union’s arbitration policy and without Central Branch permission.

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81 Merritt, *The Making of the A.W.U*.
84 Port Kembla, *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, 22 July 1927, 10; “AWU members locked out,” *Australian Worker*, 13 August 1924, 16.
For the Central Branch officials the Port Kembla members were an inconvenient source of militancy and democratic practice which they sought to placate as far as possible. But the Pork Kembla members still resisted the officials at times. In the fight over the 1927 NSW Labor Party “Red Rules”, for example, the Pork Kembla members sided overwhelmingly against the AWU leadership. A meeting of over 700 members booed a speech by Buckland and passed a motion supporting the new rules. In 1929 local Port Kembla leader John Mathews stood against Bailey for Central Branch President but his local popularity was not enough to win the state-wide ballot. In addition to the Port Kembla members, four groups of railway workers, AWU timberworkers and AWU Nepean Dam members declared in favour of the 1927 Rules. These were all groups of members who worked and lived with one another for extended periods. Fortunately for the AWU oligarchs, such occupational communities were rare within the union.

**AWU Rules**

At first glance the AWU appeared to be a representative democracy. Members directly elected their branch executive, annual convention delegates and federal executive council members in an annual postal ballot. This appearance was deceptive, however, as a series of undemocratic rules undermined the legitimacy of elections. As part of the registration process, arbitration courts had the power to disallow union rules that were tyrannical or oppressive or contrary to law and to order the union to obey its own rules. This was very limited legislative protection for democracy within trade unions, as is demonstrated by the failed attempts by several AWU members to have the union’s anti-democratic rules disallowed. The ALP imposed no democratic requirements on affiliated unions.

Each AWU branch was governed by a branch executive headed by a secretary, president and two vice-presidents and, from 1914 to 1920, one representative from

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88 Sections 58D, 58E Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act (1904).
89 “Federal Arbitration Court Decision in the O’Sullivan Case,” Australian Worker, 8 June 1938, 17.
each of 15 local committees. Because of the AWU’s scattered, itinerant membership, many local committees failed to elect a representative and the branch Executive appointed one instead. The power of office allowed the sitting officials to further manipulate these appointments to their advantage by altering local committee boundaries, changing their own places of residence and packing local committee meetings. The Branch Executive also appointed replacements for any officials who left office mid-term and appointed all non-elected branch staff in a patronage system.

Officials stacked the union with their friends and family who they knew would be personally loyal. Several of Bodkin’s sons became RWIB officials. Bailey hired his teenage son to work in the Central Branch office, made his brother-in-law Harry Elphick an organiser and representative on the branch executive and then drafted Elphick’s brother-in-law onto the branch executive. The leadership also found jobs for loyal political allies. In 1921 the Central Branch leaders employed their friend Tom Holloway, a Victorian AWU convention delegate, in the Central Branch office and then as an organiser. Opponents claimed this employment was “in exchange for voting to close the [dissident] Western Branch” in 1920.

Where officials were elected these ballots were undermined by a series of undemocratic rules that made it very difficult for outsiders to defeat the incumbents. An individual needed to be a financial member of the AWU for at least the past two years (three years from 1937) before nominating for any position. This debarred many working members from running for office as periodic unemployment often

90 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 12 March 1914, 22.
91 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 23 January 1924, 18.
92 Bailey, Lambert and Co. Ltd. Secrets Exposed, 1922, George Waite papers, MSS208/1, ML, NSW; “Conspiracy against the AWU exposed,” Australian Worker, 21 September 1916, 1 (supplement).
93 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker 12 February 1914, 23.
94 “Railway Industry Branch NSW,” Worker, 28 March 1928, 16.
95 A.B. Berry, The Infamous Iron Hand; Rank and File Bulletin, 19 May 1931; Bushworkers Propaganda Group (BPG), How the AWU treated Bowen, 7 July 1925, George Buckland papers, MSS4320, ML.
96 A.B. Berry, The Infamous Iron Hand.
97 Rule 69 AWU Constitution and General Rules, 1909-10, AWU, E154/1-2, NBAC; AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 16 March 1938, 18.
caused a break in membership. It was also common for the sitting officials to refuse rival candidates on technicalities such as failing to renew their membership before a certain date or neglecting to pay a voluntary levy.\textsuperscript{98}

The rules required both the branch executive and the federal executive council to approve all electoral candidates on their “ability” and “good behaviour”.\textsuperscript{99} Pleading fear of libel lawsuits, the officials did not provide reasons for rejecting candidates.\textsuperscript{100}

The current leaders were able to decide who was allowed to run against them, and bar any who posed a genuine threat, without providing any justification. In 1924 leading BPG member John Bowen nominated for Central Branch president, but his name never appeared on the ballot paper which stated that Bailey had been re-elected “unopposed”. Buckland eventually informed Bowen that in the opinion of the Branch Executive he did not “possess the necessary qualifications to fill the position”.\textsuperscript{101}

The AWU’s simple first-past-the-post voting system further favoured the incumbents. The candidate/s with the highest number of votes were elected with no preferences and no proportional representation. This meant that the well-known sitting officials did not need majority support but simply more votes than any other individual candidate. The officials exacerbated this problem by having their allies run as “dummy” candidates, further splitting the vote.\textsuperscript{102} For example, in the 1923 election for the NSW representative on the executive council, Holloway won with only 22 per cent of the vote (1504 out of 6849) because the opposition vote was split evenly between six other candidates.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{98} AWU Annual Convention Report, \textit{Australian Worker}, 12 February 1930, 15.
\textsuperscript{100} AWU Annual Convention Report, \textit{Australian Worker}, 17 February 1937, 16.
\textsuperscript{101} BPG, \textit{How the AWU treated Bowen}.
\textsuperscript{102} BPG, \textit{The AWU and Faked Ballots}, 1924, T. J. O’Sullivan Papers, A2756, ML.
\textsuperscript{103} AWU Annual Convention Report, \textit{Australian Worker}, 20 February 1924, 19.
Opponents at the time, and historians since, have argued that the ruling group officials corrupted the union elections to ensure their continual re-election.\textsuperscript{104} The AWU’s key accuser was the BPG. A 1924 BPG leaflet claimed that, for the previous five years, postal votes for Bailey and his allies had come from non-existent shearing sheds. In 1922 AWU organiser and BPG member, A.B. Berry, wrote that in the 1919-20 Central Branch ballot, 33 out of 34 postal votes from “Elburn Wheat Yard” recorded votes for Bailey. Berry claimed that his extensive research had “proved beyond doubt” that no such place ever existed. In 1924, Group member John Bowen took the Central Branch to the NSW Equity Court for ballot corruption. He claimed that AWU membership voting slips had been removed from a bundle of votes at “Til Til” shearing shed and attached to fraudulent votes from a non-existent shed called “Bongo”. Chief Justice Street found that “for the purposes of the demurrer, the facts alleged ... must be assumed to be true”. However, as the alleged number of fraudulent votes were not enough to change the result of the ballot, it was not clear who had committed the fraud, and the AWU had mechanisms in place for dealing with the matter internally, Street found in favour of the Central Branch.\textsuperscript{105} There was never any conclusive evidence against any individual officer, although most fingers pointed at Bailey and his allies.

In 1924 AWU member “Old Mac” complained to the \textit{Labor Daily}: “if it were possible for a straight out vote to be taken without any monkeying I feel sure there would be a new set of officers”.\textsuperscript{106} An AWU member from Orange recalled that “on one job I recorded my vote the ‘ballot box’ consisted of an open kerosene tin, with a movable covering board, which suggests peculiar possibilities”.\textsuperscript{107} There was certainly some ballot corruption within the AWU, to which postal voting was especially conducive, but it was not the primary cause of oligarchy. In general, the officials did not need to

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\textsuperscript{104} Hearn and Knowles, \textit{One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers’ Union 1886-1994}: 139.
\textsuperscript{106} Letters, \textit{LD} 12 May 1924, 5.
\textsuperscript{107} Letters, \textit{LD} 30 December 1924, 3.
\end{flushright}
rig the ballots to win re-election. The union’s rules made it almost impossible for an outsider to depose the incumbents. As Childe recognised, the massive areas covered by AWU branches made it difficult for non-officials to become known throughout a branch. The union rules exacerbated this problem by outlawing electoral campaigning and canvassing. The justification for this was that election campaigns would be divisive and would give an unfair advantage to candidates with superior organisation and funds. But the ban on campaigning gave the serving officials an almost insurmountable advantage as they were well-known to the membership and, as Michels would anticipate, used their positions to promote themselves and their views in the union’s newspapers and other communications, while opponents had no way to make themselves known.

The cult of the AWU official

Equality of salary, status, skill and education between members and officials is a further requirement of union democracy. There is a historical consensus that that the AWU officials were “exceedingly well-paid”. Some members at the time also complained of the leaders’ high salaries. This was in stark contrast to the opinion of the officials themselves who often complained that they were poorly paid considering their hours and expenses. Some leading officials such as branch presidents were not paid at all. The secretary was the best paid position in a branch and in 1911 the Central Branch secretary received £237 per annum or £4/12 per week (double the minimum wage) while an average shearer who sheared 90 sheep per day for a 6 day week received considerably higher pay of £6/10. By 1939 the Central Branch secretary earned £647 or £12/9 per week (triple the minimum wage)

108 Rule 66 AWU Constitution and General Rules, 1919-20, AWU, E154/25, NBAC.
109 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 12 April 1917, 7.
111 Letters, LD 30 December 1924, 3.
and an average shearer earned significantly less at £9/12 per week.\textsuperscript{113} The NSW AWU officials received good salaries but they were not as extravagant as the historiography suggests or as high as present-day Australian union officials. Nevertheless there was a significant pay gap between the officials and most of the members and the fact that the gap increased as oligarchy became further entrenched accords with the expectations of the theoretical literature.

More important was the large gap in status between AWU members and officials. The AWU oligarchs played on the aspirational and hierarchical elements of the union’s culture and deliberately distinguished themselves from the ordinary members. Here the body of theory on the relationship between the working class and the “professional-managerial class” is useful. Barbara and John Ehrenreich sum up this relationship as “a complex mixture of hostility and deference on the part of working-class people, contempt and paternalism on the part of the professional-managerial class”.\textsuperscript{114} Officials presented themselves tacitly as part of the professional managerial class. Photographs in union publications featured the leaders in expensive suits and hats with hair combed and moustaches waxed and often fraternising with elites such as politicians and barristers (figures 10 and 11).


\textsuperscript{114} Pat Walker, \textit{Between Capital and Labor} (Boston: South End Press, 1979): 17.
Figure 10 Dr H.V. Evatt, A.C. Roberts and Jack Bailey in 1928.  

Figure 11 A well-dressed labour delegation in 1930. George Buckland is fourth from left and Jack Bailey is furthest right.

115 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1928, 11.
They argued that it was the duty of members to follow their leaders’ instructions unquestioningly. There was a pseudo-militaristic element to this discipline and at the 1926 Annual Convention, President Barnes stressed the need for drilling:

> each member of our organisation must respond to discipline, and if necessary he will have to drill himself as every man of you had to drill yourself when you came into the AWU ... they will have to realise that when AWU decisions are made there is no questioning them, there is no falling back from anything. The AWU has to stand for what is said here at your convention.\(^\text{117}\)

The officials expressed these elitist views openly and clearly believed that the members were sympathetic to such hierarchical organisation. A 1930 *Australian Worker* cartoon reminded members to “act only as your accredited officials advise” and depicted a member militaristically saluting the union flag (figure 12).

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Figure 12 Obedience was an AWU virtue.  

"Stick to the old flag boys," Australian Worker, 23 July 1930, 19.
Ideas of masculinity within the AWU are also important here. As we saw in the introduction, Marilyn Lake argued that there was a tension in late nineteenth-century Australia between the rival masculinities of the “responsible domestic man” and the larrikin, hedonistic “independent man”. By the 1920s, the responsible domestic man had triumphed and responsible breadwinning was the dominant Australian view of masculinity, but the celebration of independent masculinity lived on amongst many workers. The AWU leaders in their suits fraternising with university-educated professionals were on the side of respectable, responsible breadwinning. They were certainly no hedonists and Bailey, for example, proudly advocated teetotalism.\(^{119}\) This “respectability” was unacceptable to some militant members who saw it as proof the officials had “duchessed” (sold out) to the ruling class.\(^ {120}\) But the fact that the officials continually publicised photographs of themselves in suits suggests that they believed respect and/or deference was a more common response than hostility amongst the members and that it fit well with the aspirational aspects of the AWU ethos. Perhaps it was only acceptable to the members, however, because the officials had previously been practical men who had served their apprenticeships as shearers and organisers, who could shear a sheep in under three minutes and hold their own in a bare-knuckle boxing match. If they had been upper-class “toffs” who had gone straight from school to university to union officialdom it seems unlikely that the members would have accepted them so readily.

AWU officials built a pseudo-religious cult of leadership. The dissident Ernest Lane referred disparagingly to the ruling group as “the AWU high priests”.\(^ {121}\) The leaders made pilgrimages to the graves of former leaders and the hotel in Ballarat where the union was founded.\(^ {122}\) When a leading official died it was common to call for donations to build a memorial monument in his honour. AWU buildings were also named for late former leaders; after General Secretary Donald Macdonell died in

\(^{119}\) Reminiscences of John Bailey with references to historical events, ML, MLDOC531.
\(^{120}\) BPG, How the AWU treated Bowen.
\(^{121}\) Lane, Dawn to dusk: reminiscences of a rebel: 305.
1911, the union erected a ten tonne granite memorial in his honour in Stuart Mill, Victoria, and named its Sydney headquarters Macdonell House (figure 13).

Figure 13 Macdonell House in Sydney in 1924.\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{quote}
MACDONELL HOUSE FROM GEORGE STREET.

"Like our Union, it towers above its fellows."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{123} Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1924.
The leaders’ self-aggrandisement infuriated militant members who perceived it as a break with the union’s glorious past. Lawson’s 1920 poem “The Delegates” compared the heroic AWU leadership of the 1890s with the self-serving leadership of 1920. He recalled that in the 1890s:

We had no grand head-office,  
Where staffs are mild and meek,  
And bosses fight for freedom  
On fifteen pounds a week;  
Where pen-cranks blur the lessons  
We’d learned in ‘Ninety-Three,  
And well-dressed Union bullies  
Bludge on Democracy.  

If the union’s founding culture had been solely one of egalitarian mateship then the leaders’ actions would constitute a clear break with the past, as Lawson and others claimed. However, the leaders’ behaviour fits neatly within the aspirational and hierarchical elements of the AWU ethos. Barnes exemplified this aspect at the 1911 Annual Convention where he gave an impassioned defence of delegates riding first-class to convention. He said that the union was aiming for “all the benefits it could get” for members and officials. “Workers made first class carriages” so why should the union only “let the fat fellows ride in them?” He said that the members of his Victoria-Riverina branch “believed in first class fares” for officials “and recognised the principle it involved”. The implication being that ordinary members were asserting their own dignity and status in providing for their leaders in this manner. Delegates frequently made similar arguments regarding raising or maintaining officials’ salaries.  

Officials were the elite at the top of the AWU hierarchy and should be treated accordingly.

Affiliation with the ALP further exacerbated the status gap between officials and members and encouraged union officials to behave oligarchically. AWU officials often became Labor Party officials and/or politicians, even Premiers and Prime Ministers, which greatly increased their status. The AWU leaders’ union positions were the source of their power within the party as it allowed them to control union delegates.

and representatives on the party’s governing bodies. This made AWU officials more desperate to keep their union positions even if it meant resorting to undemocratic means. Careerist involvement in the Labor Party also meant that AWU officialdom was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Many officials were less concerned with winning improved wages and conditions for their members and more concerned with maintaining their dominance of a stable union with a large membership as their power base within the Labor Party.\(^{126}\)

Both officials and members had minimal formal education. But the officials developed skills and informal education on the job that created a significant skill and education gap between themselves and ordinary members. This was especially facilitated by the arbitration system. AWU official Tom Dougherty argued that it took three years for an ordinary member to become a “competent organiser” because of the “many and varied [arbitration] awards and matters affecting members”.\(^{127}\) This was especially the case for branch secretaries “who had to prepare and present cases to the [arbitration] court” and developed skills similar to those of a lawyer.\(^{128}\) Members’ lack of understanding of the complicated arbitration system made them dependent on the officials and removed them from the bargaining process, thus creating a passive and uninvolved membership.

**Conclusion**

Most AWU members did not form strong occupational communities, the union’s rules were undemocratic and there was a large gap in status and skills between officials and ordinary members. These three observations take us some way towards demonstrating how the AWU was an oligarchy, and I will complete my argument in the following chapter. Four contextual factors, all founded in the 1890s, facilitated and reinforced the oligarchy. Most of the scattered, itinerant membership was unable to form occupational communities, participate in the short-lived local branch

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committees or generally participate in the union in any way beyond postal voting. The aspirational and hierarchical elements of the AWU ethos enabled the leaders to deliberately extend the status and skills gap between themselves and the membership. The union’s founding constitution either contained or facilitated the development of a series of undemocratic rules and the arbitration system made members dependent on officials and further undermined participation and interest as most members did not understand the complicated arbitration system and had no role within it. This chapter has also demonstrated some undemocratic effects of affiliation with the ALP as it further exacerbated the status gap between members and officials and encouraged the officials to behave oligarchically in order to maintain the union as their power base within the ALP.
CHAPTER II

The infamous iron hand: resisting oligarchy within the AWU

“The infamous iron hand”; an appropriate metaphor for the oligarchy that gripped the AWU from the 1890s to 1939 and beyond. The description was first used by the dissident AWU Bushworkers Propaganda Group (BPG) in the 1920s as part of their campaign against the AWU leadership. One focus of this chapter is internal opposition within the AWU from individuals and groups like the BPG. We see that countervailing tendencies were constantly operating against oligarchy, chiefly through pressure from ordinary members and support for democracy amongst a minority of leaders such as Jack Cullinan and Arthur Rae. We also see, however, that these tendencies towards democracy were not strong enough to overcome the foundations of AWU oligarchy.

This chapter analyses local autonomy, membership decision-making, internal organised opposition and free communication within the AWU. The analysis of local branch autonomy means that a key focus in this chapter is how and why AWU oligarchy changed over time through three oligarchical types; from an organisation of significant branch autonomy to one of centralised national control. I continue my argument from the previous chapter and show how the AWU’s oligarchy was supported by its scattered and itinerant membership, the hierarchical and aspirational aspects of the AWU ethos, its centralised constitution and its dedication to compulsory arbitration. I also demonstrate that affiliation with the Labor Party had democratic as well as oligarchic effects on the AWU.

Variations of trade union oligarchy

Most trade unions are oligarchies, but the nature of these oligarchies differs enormously and can change over time. It is therefore surprising that little work exists on different kinds of oligarchy within labour organisations or transitions between kinds. In their classic study *Union Democracy*, Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow and James Coleman briefly stated that “almost all” union oligarchies were “one-party
This claim implied that there were other types of oligarchy but the authors did not explore this possibility. David Edelstein and Malcolm Warner were the first to identify and distinguish various forms of oligarchy within trade unions. This was a crucial first step but unfortunately no subsequent scholars have engaged with their models.

They define seven models based on who exercises power and how they do so: federal oligarchy, collegial oligarchy, simple official hierarchy, summit oligarchy, one-party system, externally appointed oligarchy and neo-classical oligarchy. I will focus primarily on federal oligarchy, collegial oligarchy and simple official hierarchy as the AWU moved through these three models from 1886 to 1939. A federal oligarchy is one in which power is dispersed amongst autonomous regional branches, each controlled by independent rulers. In a collegial oligarchy power is shared equally amongst a central group of leaders, while a simple official hierarchy is dominated by a single dictatorial leader. While acknowledging that “in practice there must be considerable variability even amongst unions approximating one model fairly well”, Edelstein and Warner contend that the simple official hierarchy has the “greatest potential for the arbitrary exercise of political power against internal dissidents” and that federal oligarchy and collegial oligarchy along with summit oligarchy are “probably less oppressive and exploitative than the remaining models”.

The decline of AWU branch autonomy
The autonomy enjoyed by each AWU branch decreased over time. This undermined democracy as it concentrated power into an ever-smaller group of top officials, further and further removed from the ordinary members. It meant that the officials of an increasing number of branches had no real say in running their own branch, which in turn meant that the members of that branch who elected their officials had no real say in who ran their branch or how they did so. Union decisions were made

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3 Ibid., 52.
at the federal level, far removed from the local workplace units of the union which often operated as participatory democracies around the campfire but had no real power.

In its early years the AWU sat somewhere between a collegial oligarchy and a federal oligarchy. The key distinction between the two is that in a collegial oligarchy the central authority controls the entire organisation while in a federal oligarchy branches are autonomous. According to the AWU constitution, AWU branches had no local autonomy and were completely subservient to the federal annual convention and executive council. This centralisation was legally cemented in the 1890s and remained unchanged in its essentials well into the second half of the twentieth century. The annual convention was the highest authority in the union and had unlimited power. Only convention could make, change or remove union rules, and members had the right to challenge the decisions of branch officials at the annual convention. Branches with 1 to 500 members sent one delegate to convention, 500 to 1000 members two delegates and over 1000 members three delegates. Convention delegates also elected the president, two vice-presidents, treasurer and secretary and set the salaries of all federal and branch officials. The executive council was the union’s highest authority between conventions and consisted of the five officials elected at convention plus one representative from each branch.4

Despite the appearance of the AWU constitution, however, the union initially retained some of the features of a federal oligarchy. Paradoxically, the rules concentrated complete power in the federal annual convention and executive council but also appeared to give branches significant autonomy. The union rules gave each branch “control of affairs in its own district” with which other branches could “not interfere in any way”. The branches also managed their own finances, only forwarding funds “over and above the amount required for working expenses” to head office. Branch members elected their own branch officials and the rules were

ambiguous as to whether the central authorities had the power to close a branch.\(^5\) The AWU’s early convention decisions further supported branch autonomy. At the 1890 Annual Convention the delegates voted that each branch could adopt its own employment agreements and shearing shed rules suitable to its region and decide whether union rules should be displayed at sheds within branch boundaries.\(^6\)

But in the early 1890s the AWU became increasingly centralised, shifting away from federal oligarchy and closer to collegial oligarchy. This centralising process began before the commencement of compulsory arbitration in NSW in 1901 and federally in 1904. In 1891 the Wagga Wagga branch had started a radical newspaper called the *Hummer*. Most officials from other branches worried that the radicalism of the Wagga officials and their newspaper would alienate potential AWU allies. At the annual convention in February 1892 the neighbouring Goulburn Branch officials challenged their rival Wagga counterparts over their use of union money on the *Hummer*.\(^7\) This was the issue that would resolve the contradictions in the union constitution with regard to branch autonomy.

The Wagga officials claimed that they had the authority to spend their branch’s money in any way they chose, but only the Bourke Branch agreed. Convention passed a motion by 16 votes to 6 that effectively prevented such expenditure in future. The Bourke and Wagga delegates temporarily withdrew from the convention in protest over the removal of their “branch rights”. While the conflict had been primarily over ideology and personal rivalries, the result was to expose the real limits of branch autonomy.\(^8\)

In the early twentieth century a conflict with a rival union within the newly-established arbitration system caused power within the AWU to become further centralised. The employer-friendly Machine Shearers and Shed Employees Union

\(^5\) By-law 50, rule 31, by-law 12 and 41 ASU Rules 1890.
\(^7\) Ibid., 205.
(MSU) formed in 1902. The AWU applied to the newly-established NSW Arbitration Court for deregistration of the MSU on the grounds that the AWU already covered these occupations. The Arbitration Court refused to deregister the MSU, and thereby force its members to join the AWU, because the MSU members said they found some of the AWU’s rules objectionable. The AWU executive council promptly deleted the offending rules, but the arbitration court found, correctly, that the rules had not been properly removed because only the annual convention had that power.\(^9\) Delegates to the following convention changed the rules to give the executive council plenary powers to avoid repetition of the problems encountered in the MSU case. The arbitration courts later reinforced this centralisation by requiring registered unions to give their committee of management full power to alter rules and impose levies.\(^10\) This allowed unions to quickly and easily adopt the instructions of the courts, but it also undermined democracy and local autonomy by giving almost complete power to a small group of federal officials.

By 1910 the AWU was more clearly a collegial oligarchy. The executive council and annual convention remained supreme; each branch sent one delegate to convention for every 2,000 members uncapped, and delegates were elected by a postal vote open to all members of that branch. The executive council consisted of the president and general secretary, elected annually by a postal vote open to all AWU members in Australia, one vice-president for each state elected by a postal vote open to all members in the relevant state, and one councillor from each branch elected by a postal vote open to all members of that branch.\(^11\) The same branch officials were elected to the annual convention and executive council year after year, and a majority coalition of these officials formed a controlling group, or collegial oligarchy, and dominated the union.


\(^11\) Rule 63 AWU Constitution and General Rules, 1909-10, AWU, E154/1-2, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), ACT.
As we saw in the previous chapter, in 1916 the AWU became easily the biggest union in NSW when the Railway Workers and General Labourers Association (RWGLA) joined the AWU as the NSW Railway Workers Industry Branch (RWIB). The following year, the Rockchoppers and Sewer Miners Union (RSMU) had merged into the RWIB.\textsuperscript{12} Prior to its fusion, the RSMU had been a militant union that advocated job control and direct action. Less militant, the RWGLA had still been willing to strike, and had fostered a strong culture of membership involvement. Once it became a branch of the AWU, however, the collegial oligarchy was easily able to stifle militancy and democracy within the RWIB, encouraging a reliance on arbitration, and establishing an increasingly hierarchical power structure.

The RWIB officials were easily outnumbered on the annual convention and executive council by the existing officials. The RWIB episode is also a further example of the arbitration system’s facilitation of union oligarchy. Industrial judges deliberately altered jurisdictional boundaries to weaken militant unions, allowing conservative unions such as the AWU to absorb them. Judge Charles Heydon limited the jurisdiction of the militant RSMU, “hemming it in on all sides”, and weakened it to the point that it was forced to amalgamate with the AWU in 1917.\textsuperscript{13}

As late as the 1920s the AWU retained some features of a federal oligarchy. There was an “understanding” that the federal bodies would not intervene in a branch if its leaders were members of the controlling group. To that extent, Edelstein and Warner’s description of a federal oligarchy applied: “‘live and let live’ would be the motto within the oligarchy” or “to each his own territory”.\textsuperscript{14} The best example of this occurred in NSW from 1923 to 1933 when the federal AWU continued to support the NSW officials despite their obvious inability to repair relations with Jack Lang and the NSW Labor Party.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 128-29.  
\textsuperscript{14} Edelstein and Warner, \textit{Comparative Union Democracy: Organisation and Opposition in British and American Unions}: 44.
In NSW, a complicated interaction between the state and federal spheres of the AWU worked to increase the autonomy of the Central Branch and reduce the autonomy of the Western Branch and RWIB in the 1920s. As we saw in chapter one, from the late 1910s to the early 1930s Jack Bailey and the Central Branch leaders were part of the federal collegial oligarchy, while the Western Branch and RWIB officials were not. The Central Branch leaders could therefore use their power at the federal level to assert their own branch autonomy while simultaneously bringing the other NSW branches increasingly under federal control. The most significant example of central rule by the collegial oligarchy occurred in June 1920 when the executive council merged the Western Branch into the Central Branch in NSW, thus doubling the power and prestige of the Central Branch officials and eliminating the Western Branch officials.\(^\text{15}\) The executive council said it was “of the opinion that by closing the branch practically the whole of the administration expenses would be saved, and more effective and cohesive organisation created”.\(^\text{16}\) But this was really a coup by the ruling group as, unlike previous branch mergers and closures, this was not in response to financial emergency. It occurred in the face of firm opposition from the Western Branch officials. Lane reflected that:

> the mills of the AWU bureaucracy, though sometimes they grind slowly, yet sooner or later crush their victims. Unable to defeat Cullinan at the annual ballots ... or to in any other way prevent him holding office, it was brilliantly conceived that his elimination could be effected by the abolition of the Western Branch office.\(^\text{17}\)

The deposed Western Branch leaders were not part of the ruling group and had been a constant source of opposition, radicalism and attempts to enhance union democracy.\(^\text{18}\) Secretary Jack Cullinan had also increasingly threatened Bailey in elections for the NSW representative on the executive council.\(^\text{19}\) One of the key advantages of local autonomy for union democracy is that it allows the growth of alternative领导s which can potentially challenge the federal leadership. If the

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15 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1920, 12.
16 Ibid.
AWU had possessed branch autonomy, Cullinan and the Western Branch would have remained as a force for democracy within the union.

Cullinan had been born about 1871 and worked as a labourer and then shearer in the Queensland pastoral industry where he was heavily involved in the strikes of 1891 and 1894. By 1900 he was shearing around Armidale on the northern tablelands of NSW before travelling to New Zealand shearing and union organising. By 1907 he was back in NSW as an AWU representative in the western NSW sheds. He was elected a Bourke Branch organiser in 1911 and was Bourke Branch representative to the 1911 NSW Labor Party Annual Conference where he proposed militant reforms. Cullinan was a popular organiser; in August 1911 he visited a shed in Wilcannia and the local AWU representative wrote to the Worker saying that Cullinan had “put in some good work and made friends”. In 1917 he was elected Western Branch secretary when Arthur Blakeley left the position to enter the House of Representatives for Darling.

Lane praised Cullinan for his “pugnacious militancy, unshakable adherence to principle, and hatred of the intrigue and trickery of the AWU heads”. Year after year Cullinan had gone to annual convention and embarrased the leadership by arguing for reforms which would have undermined the oligarchy. For example, he suggested that branch officials should not be allowed to sit on the executive council and that no paid official should be an annual convention delegate. The fact that the executive council could use such blunt suppression against Cullinan and the Western Branch without suffering a significant membership backlash demonstrates disempowerment and lack of interest amongst the ordinary members.

21 Correspondence, Worker (Wagga), 24 November 1900, 8; Correspondence, Worker (Wagga), 29 March 1902, 7.
22 “Bourke Branch,” Worker (Wagga), 15 August 1907, 15.
23 “Bourke Branch,” Worker (Wagga), 12 July 1911, 1; “Saving their faces,” Worker (Wagga), 9 February 1911, 15.
24 “Wilcannia,” Worker (Wagga), 9 August 1911, 4.
26 Lane, Dawn to Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel: 188.
27 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 8 February 1917, 19.
In the 1930s the collegial oligarchy transformed into a simple official hierarchy under the domination of the Queensland Branch and its leader Fallon. The union’s centralised constitution allowed Fallon to use his branch’s massive membership to control the AWU nationally. By 1929 each AWU branch sent one delegate to annual convention for every 4,000 members uncapped. 28 Favourable conditions in Queensland, most notably compulsory unionism from 1932 and the state’s extensive public works, caused the Queensland Branch to grow larger than the rest of the AWU branches combined. 29 Of 27 delegates to the annual convention in 1910, twelve were from NSW, six from Victoria and four from Queensland. By 1935 Queensland’s ten delegates outnumbered the combined total of eight from all other branches.

Fallon also possessed the necessary personal characteristics required to transform the AWU into a dictatorship (figure 14). He was born about 1890 in Central Queensland, son of an Australian-born shearer who participated in the decade’s big strikes. A strong young man with an impressive physique, Fallon left school at a young age to work in the transport, mining and pastoral industries. He enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in 1916 but was quickly dismissed due to poor eyesight. The following year he was employed as a municipal worker and joined the AWU. He became an AWU organiser in 1921 and rose through the ranks to become Queensland Branch Secretary in 1933. 30

28 Rule 60 AWU Constitution 1909-10; Rule 32 AWU Constitution 1929-30.
The red-haired Queenslander was nicknamed “the red terror” by friends and enemies alike. He was cold and ominous and demanded unconditional loyalty. Fallon was an unapologetic elitist who was confident that he knew best and that others should simply obey. He ruled the AWU through fear, openly boasting that he would dismiss any official who refused to conform. He surrounded himself with thuggish lieutenants such as the infamous “Midnight Joe” Bukowski, so named for his habit of visiting dissidents at night and bashing them.

Fallon’s dictatorship was the ultimate outcome of an aspirational and hierarchical ethos and a disempowered and/or uninterested membership which had enabled the

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officials to gradually increase their authoritarianism over several decades. Throughout the 1930s Fallon became increasingly elitist and moved the AWU further away from democracy. When it came time to review the union rules, for example, he did not consider membership involvement in the process. He acknowledged that the constitution “should be scrutinised and brought up to date” but said that even the 27 union officials who were annual convention delegates were too inexperienced to do the job. Instead, the 13-man executive council should complete the task because it was “composed of men with wide experience in the union and who understood the anomalies and good points of the constitution”.³⁴ Fallon and his allies were also unapologetically authoritarian; when NSW delegates complained about the executive council governing their branch, Queensland delegate John Campbell dismissed their concerns and said that the executive council was merely “using a little parental control”.³⁵

The Queensland Branch controlled the annual convention but not the executive council which had one representative from each state and one representative from each branch. It seems counterintuitive, then, that Fallon chose to control the union through executive council. He often successfully moved that matters be referred from convention to executive council for decision.³⁶ Fallon preferred to operate from the executive council because it was smaller at 13 members, met more frequently and its business was secret until 1939 when it began to release censored meeting reports to members (figure 15).³⁷

Control by the executive council, which had equal representation from each branch, also concealed Queensland’s domination. The key to Fallon’s power on the executive council was that if he did not get his way, he could wait until the next annual convention, or call a special convention, and pass a resolution to force the executive council’s hand, or even reconstitute it. At the 1938 annual convention Fallon

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³⁴ AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 8 February 1939, 17.
³⁶ AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 12 February 1936, 17.
³⁷ AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 15 February 1939, 17.
successfully blocked an attempt to have Convention held once every three years. He knew that his power came ultimately from regular, Queensland-dominated Conventions.  


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By repressing the NSW Branch Fallon further entrenched his domination of the AWU nationally. He blamed NSW leaders Bailey and Buckland for the union’s falling membership and political isolation in that state and set about eliminating them by combining the Central Branch and RWIB into one NSW Branch in 1933.\(^{40}\) NSW delegates strongly opposed the fusion but there was nothing they could do.\(^{41}\) The AWU had promised the RWGLA local autonomy when it entered the union as the RWIB in 1916, but because the AWU’s centralised constitution gave the federal annual convention and executive council unlimited control over the branches they could remove RWIB autonomy any time they chose.\(^{42}\) The executive council had gradually taken away RWIB autonomy in the 1920s and in 1933 destroyed it. RWIB officials unsuccessfully protested that the RWGLA had entered the AWU on condition of autonomy and accurately predicted that the merger would cause some members to defect to the ULU.\(^{43}\)

Completing the coup, the executive council failed to appoint any of the existing Central Branch or RWIB officials to administer the new branch. John McNeill, former Charleville (Queensland) and Victoria Branch secretary was NSW secretary, and RWIB member Chris Dalton was president. But this was not enough for Fallon; the executive council took control of the NSW Branch and maintained that control until 1938, despite continual calls for branch autonomy from NSW officials and members. The repression of the NSW Branch strengthened Fallon’s dictatorship by neutralising NSW, the state most likely to challenge Queensland for AWU dominance, and by demonstrating to other branches the consequences of disobedience. Fallon ruled the AWU at the apex of a simple official hierarchy until he died suddenly in 1950 aged 63.\(^{44}\)

The AWU’s lack of local autonomy continued within each branch. The branch executive ran the branch and consisted of a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary and 15 executive members. Until 1914 the entire branch executive was elected at the annual meeting of the branch. Annual convention changed this system because most of the widely dispersed members could not attend the annual meeting which was easily stacked by the sitting officials. Henceforth the president, vice-presidents and secretary were elected annually in a postal ballot open to all branch members while each branch was divided into 15 sections and the members in each section formed a local committee and elected a representative to the executive. The establishment of local committees could have marked the beginning of a move towards local autonomy within the branches. But the scattered, itinerant membership was unable to participate and the local committees were poorly attended and collapsed. From its entry into the union in 1916 the entire membership elected the RWIB executive in a single ballot and the Central Branch did likewise from 1920.

Some AWU worksites operated as local participatory democracies. Groups of shearsers or navvies would elect a union representative (“rep”) and would make workplace decisions collectively. But as we have seen the AWU’s centralised constitution meant that these local participatory democracies had no power over wider union issues or the state-wide and nation-wide elections. The fact that these local arrangements usually only lasted a few months also limited their ability to organise or challenge the state and national leaders. The arbitration system’s industry-wide awards limited the possibility of local workplace negotiation or of members voting on local employment contracts. At best, they might fiddle at the margins.

45 Rule 34 AWU Constitution 1909-10.
47 Rule 58 AWU Constitution 1919-20.
48 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 8 February 1917, 19.
49 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 8 February 1917, 19; AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 26 February 1920, 17.
Membership decision-making

We have already seen that direct membership decision-making was minimal within the AWU and that where it did occur, such as in the election of state and federal officials, it was undermined by undemocratic rules. In this section, the focus is on the most fundamental membership decision of all: whether to join a trade union. Throughout the interwar period many AWU members from NSW and elsewhere were dissatisfied with the union but compulsory unionism removed their ability to leave the AWU even if they were unhappy with its management.

If workers in industries covered by the AWU wanted to join a union they usually had to join the AWU. The arbitration courts would only recognise one union in each area of employment which meant that the first union in a field was very difficult to displace. This lack of competition reduced the need for unions to appeal to members by satisfying their demands. Furthermore, preference for unionists, and compulsory unionism in some jurisdictions such as Queensland from 1932, forced workers in relevant industries to join the AWU. In the 1930s the rival, radical PWIU attempted to replace the AWU in the pastoral industry by operating outside the arbitration system but the AWU leaders cooperated with the pastoralists to defeat this challenge.50

Most Australian unions including the AWU advocated and pursued compulsory unionism. The Australian Worker argued “nothing could be dearer to the heart of trade unionists than the recognition of their right to say that they will not work with blacklegs, who take all the benefits the organisation can give, and yet are too contemptibly mean to contribute their [money] for its maintenance.”51 Throughout the interwar period the AWU was able to win preference for unionists and sometimes compulsory unionism in its arbitration awards. Compulsion had obvious advantages for unions as it ensured large memberships, full coffers and prevented “free riders” from receiving the benefits of unionism without paying their share of the costs.

51 Australian Worker, 23 October 1935, 11.
Yet compulsory unionism also meant that union leaders had no incentive to consult members or promote democracy in order to retain members, and that the members had no sanction with which to punish anti-democratic officials.\(^\text{52}\) In relation to political parties, Angelo Panebianco argued that the ease with which members can leave the party and obtain the inducements of membership elsewhere is the key determinant of where a party will sit on the continuum between democracy and oligarchy. The more “substitutable” the party’s “organisational incentives”, the more democratic an organisation will need to be in order to retain members. We can apply this same reasoning to trade unions, and the low to non-existent substitutability of the AWU’s organisational incentives created by compulsory unionism allowed its officials to govern oligarchically without fear of resignations.\(^\text{53}\) Clyde Cameron, South Australian AWU official from 1939 to 1961, recalled that “when I first joined the AWU its officials were little more than glorified public servants willing to accept whatever pittance arbitration might give, relying on preference to unionists to prevent mass resignations”. For Cameron, this was part of the “paralysing price unions must pay for a registered monopoly to cover given callings or industries”.\(^\text{54}\)

The NSW Labor Party exacerbated the problem of compulsory unionism by requiring all party members to be a member of their trade union. For example, in 1913 Mr Abigail won a place on the party’s Central Executive as a league representative but he was removed because he was not a member of his trade union, the Typographical Association. Abigail said he and others had resigned from the Typographical Association due to a dispute within the union but the central executive ruled that this was not acceptable.\(^\text{55}\) Both the arbitration courts and the Labor Party did not consider leaving one’s union to be a valid expression of dissent, despite the fact that it was the only option open to members of undemocratic unions. In 1926 “A Railway Worker” wrote to the SMH distancing himself from his union’s policies: “what we

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\(^{55}\) Letters, SMH 20 February 1913, 19.
‘compulsory unionists’ are sore over is that we are all branded ‘crooks’ when we have no say in anything’.  

In office, the Lang Labor government displayed contempt for AWU members’ freedom of choice. In 1931 it influenced the arbitration system to transfer jurisdiction for various construction labourers from the AWU to the ULU, thus forcing hundreds of AWU members to join the ULU. Chairman of the Conciliation Committee, Samuel Bird, a Lang loyalist and former Miners Federation official, refused to sign the rockchoppers’ award for the RWIB of the AWU. Several witnesses claimed Bird had said he was following the instructions of “the powers that be”, meaning Lang, by transferring preference to the ULU which was loyal to the Lang party. This is one of many examples of the entanglement of union and ALP factional politics.

Organised opposition

By the 1920s much of the militancy that had remained in the AWU membership after the strike defeats of the 1890s was gone. Yet militancy lived on amongst a minority of members. The AWU openly proscribed internal groupings or factions; the clear message from officials was that factions were detrimental to the union and would not be tolerated. Officials were supposed to be elected as individuals on their merits rather than as representatives of “divisive” groups. The first opposition grouping that the leadership attacked in this period was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) which had made some headway in the pastoral industry during the First World War in the context of a radicalising labour movement. The Central Branch 1917 Annual Report warned members to look out for the IWW “ticket of candidates” and their “conspiracy to get control of the union”.

Militant AWU members and rebel officials continually protested the oligarchy’s increasingly undemocratic actions. The One Big Union (OBU) movement formed a
flagship for AWU militants around 1919. In 1922, a group of militant, dissident AWU members founded the BPG to try to reform the AWU from within. The 1923 Central Branch Annual Report stated that “we must have more solidarity in our union” as “we cannot afford to have sections and factions within our ranks each fighting differently to the other”. The BPG sent a long list of reform proposals to the 1925 Annual Convention which unsurprisingly were not adopted and, in a typical case of AWU suppression, the Australian Worker did not even print the proposals in its detailed annual convention report.

The BPG was of particular concern to the leadership because it was led by former AWU President and Secretary Arthur Rae (figure 16). Born in 1860 in New Zealand, he was the son of a painter and glazier. Rae worked as a labourer and shearer before moving to Australia in 1889 where he organised for the Wagga Wagga branch of the ASU and wrote for its Hummer newspaper. The following year he was jailed for one month for his role in the 1890 Maritime Strike. He was president of the AWU in 1895 and secretary from 1898 to 1899. His militancy turned to radicalism in the 1910s, in part due to the death of two sons in the First World War, and he increasingly opposed arbitration. This put him in conflict with the AWU leadership and in 1919 he sided with the militant faction in its unsuccessful attempt to win control of the NSW Labor Party from the AWU faction. The following year he was expelled from the AWU when he refused to sign a pledge of loyalty to its leaders. In 1928 he wrote an article titled “The curse of compulsory unionism” in which he argued that arbitration had “doped” the workers with “legalism” and they had lost their independence and grassroots organisation.

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60 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1923, AWU, E154/41/1, NBAC.
Buckland argued strongly against the existence of the BPG. He said “the keynote of our organisation must be unity, but there can be no proper unity whilst such a body as the BPG exists”. 64 The leaders misrepresented the BPG’s attacks on themselves as attacks on the union as a whole. 65 The BPG complained that “whenever the AWU officials are denounced for their misconduct or neglect, they raise the cry that we are the enemies of the union and are seeking to destroy it, whereas we are serving the true interests of the union by exposing those who are living on the game”. 66 Officials bluntly repressed opposition groups such as the BPG by banning them and expelling their members from the union. 67 They even barred known dissident members from attending annual convention as spectators. 68

In 1930 the persistent Rae led the BPG militants to form the rival PWIU and challenge the AWU oligarchy from without. At its first meeting Rae emphasised the “class character of the new union and its fight against arbitration and the anti-working-class

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63 “Labor’s candidates,” *Australian Worker*, 12 April 1917, 7.
64 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1925, AWU, E154/41/1, NBAC, 7-8.
65 Central Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1923, AWU, E154/41/1, NBAC.
66 BPG, *Knowledge is Power*, 1922, George Buckland Papers, MSS4320, ML.
policy of the AWU officials”. The CPA had a strong presence within the PWIU and a majority of its executive were CPA members. At its height it reached 2000 members, a fraction of the AWU’s membership of over 100,000, before disbanding in 1936. Andrew Moore argues that it “lost the will to live” and that its leadership came to believe its struggle against the AWU and Graziers Association was bound to fail. That failure was based on the simple fact that the PWIU was too radical for most AWU members. Those AWU members who were interested in the union’s internal politics may not have been happy with the oligarchy but that did not mean they were Communists, revolutionaries or even that they opposed arbitration. The overwhelming majority of AWU members chose to remain in the oligarchical AWU rather than join a union of Communist radicals outside the arbitration system.

In the late 1920s a grouping called the “Rank and File Committee” emerged within the RWIB. It collected membership dues from RWIB members and held £1 per member in a fund to be paid to the AWU only if it made a series of democratic amendments to its constitution. The Rank and File Committee was backed by the NSW Labor Council and NSW Labor Party, which were both in conflict with the AWU leadership. The RWIB secretary condemned the Committee as an “insidious plot to lead [members] into a maze of scabbery”. Australian Worker editor Henry Boote falsely claimed that the Committee had “resulted from efforts of an alien body in China [the Chinese Communist Party] to control the Labor movement in this country”. The AWU was supposedly “the only body courageous enough and powerful enough to combat the conspiracy”. It was common for AWU officials to falsely label dissidents as Communists, foreigners and traitors. This propaganda played upon the nationalist xenophobia of the AWU ethos; anything “foreign” was highly suspicious and anything Asian was inherently foul.

While organised opposition within the AWU was suppressed, involvement in NSW Labor Party factional conflicts caused the AWU leaders to face organised opposition

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70 Moore, "The Pastoral Workers’ Industrial Union 1930-37," 72.
71 AWU Annual Convention, Australian Worker, 23 January 1929, 17.
72 AWU Annual Convention, Australian Worker, 6 February 1929, 17.
from outside the union. The militant faction’s *Labor Daily* in Sydney, for example, regularly attacked the AWU oligarchs and described the union as “an organisation whose rank and file consists of some of the best unionists in Australia, but which has had the misfortune to suffer from the blight of political bossism”.73 Affiliation also brought Labor Party disputes into the AWU. For example, the AWU’s long-running conflict with Lang caused some pro-Lang AWU members to join opposition groupings within the union or rival unions such as the ULU or the PWIU.74

This external organised opposition could be highly damaging to the NSW AWU oligarchs. Bailey’s expulsion from the Labor Party in the 1923 ballot-box scandal is the most prominent example.75 The previous year Bailey had received 63 per cent of the vote (936 out of 1477) in the ballot for Central Branch president but, following the ballot-box scandal in December 1923, his vote declined more than 20 per cent (1379 out of 3331). Yet because the anti-Bailey vote was split between eight other candidates, he still won.76 Even though he was able to use the AWU’s undemocratic rules to stay in power, “Ballot-box Bailey” never regained his legitimacy within the AWU or the NSW labour movement.

The AWU tried to use its influence within the Labor Party to silence dissenters within the AWU. In 1930 the union sought to have the NSW Labor Party central executive withdraw the endorsement of Senator Rae due to his connection with the BPG which the AWU claimed was a “bogus organisation” as it was seeking to replace an established union. Rae countered successfully that the BPG was a rank-and-file reform movement within the AWU.77 In 1931 the AWU tried again, now pointing to Rae’s association with the PWIU which the AWU said was a Communist organisation. But again, the union was unsuccessful.78 Depending on circumstances, Labor Party affiliation could either provide a platform for union dissenters or be used to silence

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76 Central Branch minutes 1910-44, AWU, M44/13, NBAC.
The former applied more than the latter in the AWU in this period because the AWU’s militant opponents controlled the NSW Labor Party.

The absence of free communication

Communication within the AWU was tightly controlled by the sitting officials. The *Australian Worker* was the main avenue for official communication in NSW and the leadership governed it closely. There was no culture of debate or free speech within the AWU and the union rules openly stated that the *Australian Worker* could not print anything that contradicted union policy.⁷⁹ Member letters critical of the union or officials were rarely printed.⁸⁰ Henry Boote, its editor, pled lack of space and argued that the *Australian Worker* should be “a propagandist instrument in the Labor Movement” rather than a “mere trade chronicle” which it would become “if more space had to be given to members”.⁸¹

Although it was published in Sydney, the NSW officials did not have complete control over the *Australian Worker*. On the newspaper’s board of control were the secretaries of each of the branches in which the newspaper was distributed, Central, RWIB, Victoria-Riverina, Adelaide and Tasmania, who each had votes on the board in proportion to their branch’s membership.⁸² Boote was also a complicating factor (figure 17). By 1920 he had gained such respect throughout the labour movement, especially for his influential role in the 1916 and 1917 anti-conscription campaigns, that it became problematic for the AWU officials to discipline or dismiss him. He was also far more radical than the AWU leaders and expressed this radicalism whenever he could. Nevertheless, when they were united the officials could control him. Most famously they forced him to stop advocating the OBU in 1919 and from one issue to the next the *Australian Worker’s* stance switched from strong support to condemnation.⁸³

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⁸⁰ BPG, Knowledge is Power, 1922, George Buckland Papers, MSS4320, ML.
⁸² Rule 161 AWU Constitution 1919-20; Rule 166 AWU Constitution 1929-30.
⁸³ Clyde Cameron, “Henry Ernest Boote: It’s Wrong to be Right,” *Labour History* 80(2001): 205.
Boote’s talent as a propagandist was doubly impressive because he was self-educated. Born in England in 1865, the son of a textile dealer, he left school at age ten and was a printer’s apprentice. He loved to read and write and spent much of his spare time in libraries educating himself. Working-class liberalism and the radical libertarianism of Charles Bradlaugh especially influenced Boote. In 1889 he migrated to Australia and worked as a compositor in Brisbane where he discovered socialism and was, he recalled, “born again” as a radical author and activist. He edited some smaller labour newspapers in the 1890s and then became Brisbane Worker editor in 1902, thus beginning his lifelong connection with the AWU. In 1911 he separated from his wife of twenty years and moved to Sydney to write for the Australian Worker which he then edited from 1914 to 1943 when he retired due to illness.

In 1916 Boote became a household name as the leading propagandist in the no conscription campaign during which he was prosecuted under the War Precautions

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86 AWU NSW Branch Annual Report, 31 May 1934, 15.
Act and fined. Henceforth his weekly *Australian Worker* editorials, signed “H.E.B.”, set the tone and parameters for much of the debate within the labour movement. His ideology was radical but gradualist and he opposed Communists and revolutionaries whom he regarded as unnecessary and dangerous within Australia’s democratic political system. His internationalism was confined to white workers and he opposed the communist arguments for racial equality. For Boote “coloured” immigration was a tool of capitalism which would destroy white workers’ wages and conditions as well as Australia’s moral purity.\(^{87}\)

A rare example of Boote and the *Australian Worker* acting directly against the NSW AWU leadership occurred in 1923. As we have seen in previous chapters, a conservative faction led by Bailey and the NSW AWU leadership controlled the NSW Labor Party executive and had engaged in increasingly authoritarian behaviour. Eventually the rival militant faction capitalised on the reaction within the party against this authoritarianism and defeated the AWU-led coalition at the 1923 Annual Conference. In the lead up to the conference, the *Australian Worker* had been one of the most vocal critics of the executive which had, according to Boote’s editorial, combined “absurdity and tyranny in equal proportions”.\(^{88}\)

An unusual confluence of factors allowed Boote and the *Australian Worker* to take a position against the NSW AWU leadership. Boote was personally opposed to the AWU officials’ actions and he was able to act accordingly because, first, it was not technically an AWU matter as Bailey and the other AWU officials on the executive were acting in their capacity as NSW Labor Party officials. Second, the federal AWU leaders were divided on the issue and ultimate power within the union resided at the federal level. Some of the federal leaders thought that Bailey and his allies were being unreasonable and self-destructive and national AWU President Arthur Blakeley said so publicly at the 1923 NSW Labor Party Conference.\(^{89}\) In this sense, Boote was

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87 Cameron, "Henry Ernest Boote: It’s Wrong to be Right," 201.
intervening in a dispute within the AWU leadership rather than opposing its oligarchy.

Historians have exaggerated the extent to which Boote was a radical rebel within the AWU. Harry Knowles, in a typical example, argued that Boote “was a thorn in the side of a succession of AWU leaders as he followed his strong socialist beliefs and pursued causes to which his masters were often vehemently opposed”. 90 The BPG, conversely, claimed at the time that “the [Australian] Worker is not run for the members but for the officials” and that while “Boote the editor is an able man” he “belongs to the gang in office body and soul and uses his abilities to twist everything to their advantage”. 91 The Labor Daily similarly argued that Boote “prostitutes his pen at the behest of the Macdonell House junta”. 92 It is true that Boote wrote many great socialist articles but he did nothing to oppose the AWU oligarchs. He attended annual conventions, often served as returning officer in union elections and was a confidant of officials including Fallon, so he knew very well how undemocratic the union was while supporting it unwaveringly. His priority was remaining editor of the Australian Worker where his writing could reach as many workers as possible. 93 He knew that to keep that position he needed to conform to the ruling group on internal union issues. Perhaps he believed strong leadership was beneficial for members or maybe he thought he could steer the AWU in more democratic directions from within, but the ultimate result of his work was to give undeserved credibility to the oligarchy.

Boote also became more conservative over time. In 1923 he had criticised the AWU-controlled NSW Labor executive and had described that year’s NSW Labor annual conference as a story of “ballot-faking crooks and a tyrannical Executive”. 94 But by 1927 he was arguing that:

90 Knowles, "Comparative Labour Biography: An Historical Study of Leadership in the Australian Workers’ Union," 206; Cameron, "Henry Ernest Boote: It’s Wrong to be Right," 201, 02, 07.
91 BPG, The AWU and Faked Ballots.
92 LD, 17 May 1928, 4.
93 AWU Annual Convention Report, Australian Worker, 14 February 1918, 19.
it was at this [1923 NSW] ALP Conference that the ballot box scandal was brought forward in order to discredit the AWU. The two things went together; the attack upon the AWU and the effort of the Communists to burst into the citadel of the ALP because it was realised by these schemers that the AWU was a great bulwark of constitutionalism in the Political Movement.95

From the mid-1920s Boote became increasingly hysterical in his anti-Communism and faction-fighting for the AWU and frequently bent the truth towards these ends.96 His claim that the Chinese Communist Party was controlling the RWIB Rank and File Committee discussed earlier is one of many examples of his extravagance.

In addition to the *Worker* newspapers, AWU organisers were the other vital component of official union communication. The branch secretary, supervised by the branch executive, had tight control over the organisers who were union employees who travelled their region collecting membership dues, enrolling and assisting members and organising the Labor vote in elections. In theory, branch members elected the organisers in the annual ballot but in practice the organisers were mostly allies of the secretary as he could sack them at any time and appoint as many additional organisers as he chose.97 From 1933 the annual convention barred organisers from sitting on the branch executive to prevent the secretary from being “controlled by the people he was supposed to control”.98 The top officials used the organisers as travelling campaigners, promoting the incumbent officials and union policy.99

A minority of isolated AWU members in NSW only received information about the union through official channels. But most members had access to rival labour and commercial newspapers and other sources of information that were often highly critical of the AWU oligarchs. AWU workplace meetings and individual members often sent letters to the *Labor Daily* criticising the AWU leaders.100 However, the

96 “Why the AWU is Attacked and Vilified,” *Australian Worker*, 23 February 1927, 18-19.
99 Lane, *Dawn to dusk: reminiscences of a rebel*: 305.
AWU’s ban on campaigning in elections limited the opportunity for this criticism to be translated into leadership change. As Central Branch Secretary Ike Smith admitted in 1910, many members “voted for the secretary because they knew his name best and were prepared to take on the devil they knew as against the one they did not”.  

Furthermore, the bar on canvassing “against any candidate” in effect banned criticism of the sitting officials around election time. If any electoral rival had used non-AWU communication to promote himself or criticise sitting officials, the incumbents would have declared his candidacy void. The leaders were able to take advantage of most members’ disempowerment, lack of interest and deference, and use the power of incumbency to defeat their rivals.

**Conclusion**

The AWU did not possess any of the seven requirements of union democracy identified in the sociological literature. Most of the union’s members did not form lasting occupational communities, its rules were undemocratic, there was a large gap in status and skills between officials and ordinary members, local autonomy and membership decision-making were almost non-existent, the officials crushed opposition groups and union communication was strictly controlled by the leaders. Groups like the BPG and prominent dissidents such as Cullinan and Rae fought for democratic control but the leadership suppressed them, slandered them, expelled them and ultimately defeated them. The AWU experience accords with Michels’ expectations as the members were unable to control their leaders who operated further to entrench their own power.

The officials, however, were only able to do so because of additional contextual factors. I have shown how four contextual factors facilitated AWU oligarchy. The aspirational and hierarchical elements of the AWU ethos enabled the leaders to supress rank-and-file decision-making and deliberately extend the status and skills gap between themselves and the membership. The nationalist and xenophobic aspects of the ethos allowed the leaders to discredit dissidents by presenting them as the agents of foreign Communists. The union’s founding constitution either

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contained, or facilitated the development of, a series of undemocratic rules and it prescribed a highly centralised organisation with minimal local autonomy or rank-and-file decision-making. Most of the scattered, itinerant membership was unable to form occupational communities, participate in the short-lived local branch committees or generally participate in the union in any way beyond postal voting. The arbitration system’s industry-wide awards prevented local employment negotiation and membership votes on employment contracts. Arbitration also made members dependent on officials and further undermined participation and interest, as most members did not understand the complicated arbitration system and had no role within it.

Affiliation to the ALP had mixed effects on AWU democracy. Factional opponents criticised the AWU leaders and the Labor Daily provided a forum for dissenting voices within the AWU. There was also support from within the Labor Party for the BPG and RWIB Rank and File Committee. On the anti-democratic side, affiliation with the ALP further exacerbated the status gap between officials and members and made AWU leaders more desperate to keep their union positions even if it meant resorting to undemocratic means. The party’s requirement that members also belong to their union further undermined members’ ability to quit the AWU in protest. Finally, the AWU leaders could use their influence within the party to try to silence union dissenters.
In October 1916 the Australian government asked the electorate to approve the conscription of Australian men to fight overseas. The plebiscite vote occurred at the end of the bloody Somme campaign on the Western Front and followed a divisive debate over conscription which had split the Labor Party and the nation. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) was a leading force in the campaign against conscription, particularly through its Worker newspapers. The “no” conscription campaign won a narrow victory by 72,476 votes out of 2.2 million nationwide (51.6 per cent to 48.4 per cent).¹

The AWU was the largest and most politically and industrially powerful trade union in Australia at the time, so it was well placed to influence the conscription debate. Given the closeness of the vote, historians have argued that conscription would probably have been introduced if not for the AWU’s strong campaign.² But the AWU’s anti-conscription campaign did not reflect universal opposition to conscription within the union. Many ordinary members supported conscription and so did the president and several other key officials.

This case study assesses the AWU’s anti-conscription campaign through the lens of democracy and oligarchy within the union. Understanding the internal governance of trade unions can help us understand their actions. More specifically, the particular model of oligarchy that exists within a union has important implications for its external behaviour. We will see that the AWU’s decision to oppose conscription was not inevitable and did not necessarily reflect the opinion of the majority of members, who had little effect on the outcome. Instead it reflected the views of a handful of state branch leaders who formed a collegial oligarchy and dominated the union.

**Australian labour, the First World War and conscription**

Most Australians supported the First World War, at least at the beginning, as did most labour movement leaders including those from the AWU. In September 1914 the AWU had announced that it was “calling a truce” with employers to assist the war effort. General Secretary Edward Grayndler said that the AWU “does not intend to do anything that will cause any disruption but will do everything it can to assist in the gathering of Australia’s rich products”. ³ By September 1916 the union proudly claimed that 30,000 of its 100,000 members had joined the armed services. ⁴ There was a small minority of AWU leaders and members who opposed Australia’s involvement in the war. Most notable was former AWU President Arthur Rae; despite his opposition to the war, three of his sons enlisted and two died.⁵

Most prominent individuals in the labour movement supported Australia’s involvement in the war but opposed conscription. Labour leaders opposed conscription for a range of reasons: nationalism, the belief that Australia was already doing its share, civil libertarian concerns about military compulsion, concerns about employers replacing conscripted workers with cheaper non-white and female labour, and anger that conscription applied to human life but not to capitalist wealth. The AWU played on all of these concerns in its campaign. Conservative politicians, most commercial newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, and a minority of labour leaders supported conscription.

Arguments for conscription centred on the grave threat from German autocracy and the need for all military-age Australian men to do their fair share in defence of nation and Empire. Labor Prime Minister William Morris (Billy) Hughes said that “in June, July, and August [1916] fewer than one-third of the number required have enrolled. If voluntaryism fails, is the nation to fail, when to fail is to perish? No patriot can deny the necessity of reinforcements; no democrat can impugn the right of the nation to

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⁴ “The AWU. Hostile resolution,” SMH, 26 September 1916, 8.
demand this duty from its citizens”. Many ordinary trade unionists also supported conscription, although it is difficult to estimate what proportion. In April 1916 the Age in Melbourne claimed that “if a vote were taken of the rank and file of the entire [labour] movement there would be an undoubted demand for conscription”. The Age was pro-conscription and while the claim was plausible it was as yet untested.

Hughes wished to introduce conscription but Labor enjoyed a supermajority of 31 out of 36 seats in the Australian Senate and most of those Labor Senators opposed conscription. Hughes therefore saw a plebiscite as a way to pressure them to change their votes. The fact that Labor enjoyed a supermajority in the Senate may well have prevented conscription and demonstrates the importance of voting systems. At the time the Senate was elected by block voting in each state, giving the party with the majority in a state all of its Senate seats. Had the Senate been elected by proportional representation within each state, as it is today, Labor’s Senate majority would have been much smaller and Hughes and his Labor Party allies may well have voted with the Liberal opposition and introduced conscription.

The historiography
Graeme Freudenberg described the AWU’s Arthur Rae as “unusual among Labor leaders in having opposed Australian participation in the war from its outbreak”. John Hirst argued that Henry Boote also opposed sending men overseas from the outset and that the Australian Worker ignored the thousands of enlisted AWU members for the first year of the war before Boote begrudgingly began a weekly page titled “Fighting in the Old World for the New”. He discontinued this page in early 1916 around the time the conscription debate began.

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6 “Mr Hughes’ Manifesto,” AW 21 September 1916, 18.
7 “Labor and Conscription,” Age 13 April 1916, 6.
Ian Turner argued that the underlying cause of the Labor split over conscription was a power struggle between Labor’s trade union leaders and politicians for control of the Labor Party. For Turner, the primary motivator to oppose conscription for many Labor politicians was pressure of parliamentary deselection by this trade union base.\textsuperscript{11} John Hirst agreed and stated that “conscription was as much the occasion of the Labor split as the cause of it”.\textsuperscript{12} Hirst also argued that the labour movement used liberal arguments rather than more class-based, socialist arguments against conscription primarily for tactical reasons; liberal arguments were more palatable to the majority of voters.\textsuperscript{13} Nick Dyrenfurth went further and argued that the “labour movement was not in theory opposed to conscription” because it fitted well within their trade unionist and socialist ideologies of compulsion, fairness and state organisation. Instead, labour “objected to a form of conscription which applied to human life but excluded the nation’s wealth”.\textsuperscript{14}

Recently Archer has argued against all of these positions and posited that “liberal arguments were central to how labour anti-conscriptionists understood their opposition”.\textsuperscript{15} Archer showed that the Australian labour movement had been greatly influenced by a British liberal tradition which saw militarism, and therefore conscription, as opposed to a free society. He also convincingly countered Hirst and demonstrated that Labor’s liberalism was not newly “discovered” during the conscription campaign but went back to the Labor Party’s foundation and had been especially evident in the first decade of the twentieth century in the New Liberalism of both the Deakinite Liberals and the Labor Party. New Liberalism held that true individual freedom required strong unions, government welfare and state economic intervention.\textsuperscript{16} Frank Bongiorno agreed and argued that “we should take seriously

\textsuperscript{11} Ian Turner, \textit{Industrial Labour and Politics}: 113.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 617-18.
\textsuperscript{14} Nick Dyrenfurth, "Conscription is not abhorrent to laborites and socialists": revisiting the Australian labour movement’s attitude towards military conscription during World War I," \textit{Labour History} 103(2012): 147.
\textsuperscript{15} Archer, "Labour and Liberty: The origins of the conscription referendum," 40.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 46.
Australian anti-conscriptionists’ professions of a love of freedom” and not see them as “mere window dressing for economic or industrial goals, but the very essence of the anti-conscriptionist cause”.  

17 Archer’s argument is convincing but he overcorrects by underemphasising the extent to which the conscription split was the culmination of years of conflict within the Labor Party, especially in NSW, between the more radical trade unionist wing and the more conservative politicians. He also dismisses too easily Dyrenfurth’s argument that conscription was consistent with trade unionist and socialist values, which I will return to below.

There is a historical consensus that the AWU’s Worker newspapers were instrumental in the successful fight against conscription.  

18 Coral Lansbury argued that the Australian Worker was “the most vehement antagonist of conscription and the majority of AWU members opposed ‘the blood vote’ [conscription]” but she does not provide evidence for this claim of AWU membership opinion.  

19 Dyrenfurth, on the other hand, pointed out that some AWU members wrote to the Australian Worker advocating conscription.  

20 Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles also observed that several key officials supported conscription, namely founding President William Spence, his son-in-law and Australian Worker manager Hector Lamond and Women’s Page editor Mary Gilmore.  

21 So in the historiography there is some acknowledgement that opposition to conscription was not unanimous within the AWU but there is no real exploration of the internal debate within the union or why the opponents of conscription won that debate. There is also no significant analysis of the opinion of the membership other than a general assumption by all, except perhaps Dyrenfurth, that a large majority of AWU members opposed conscription.

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20 Dyrenfurth, "Conscription is not abhorrent to laborites and socialists": revisiting the Australian labour movement’s attitude towards military conscription during World War I,” 160.  
AWU leaders

In January 1916 the AWU annual convention unanimously passed a motion that “this convention is absolutely opposed to the principle of conscription as being opposed to the spirit of our time and race; more especially is this so in Australia, which has contributed more men under the voluntary system in proportion to its population than any other portion of the British Empire”. 23 This unanimous vote by the convention delegates implies more unity than actually existed, however. Spence,

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22 *AW 21 September 1916*, 1.
Lamond and Gilmore supported conscription and so did a large number of the ordinary members, but it is impossible to say what proportion. Other key proponents of conscription such as NSW Labor Premier William Holman also had strong AWU backgrounds.

AWU conscriptionists appealed to the union’s history and culture. Lamond called on the AWU’s mythology of bushworker mateship. “I refuse to believe that the mates of the ... 30,000 AWU men at the front are prepared to desert them,” he declared, “that has never been in the spirit of the bushman as I have known him ... Shall we who pride ourselves that we have never deserted a mate in his hour of need, desert him now?” Lamond further argued that under the voluntary system there were three classes of men who enlisted: the unemployed, the young and impressionable and those who felt it was their duty to enlist. He argued that either the labour movement should oppose the war altogether or, if it was going to support the war, it should send “proper fitting forces amongst those best fitted to undertake the campaign”, and that meant conscription.24

Labour movement advocates of conscription also argued that conscription was ideologically consistent with socialism and unionism. Hughes argued that “compulsion is the essence of unionism”. D.H. Newman of the Federated Clerks Union similarly contended that

socialism is based on compulsion, and assumes always the paramountcy of the common cause. It is a policy of discipline, allowing no more liberty than is consonant with justice. All its energies are directed to the elimination of the shirker and the equitable distribution of the social burden. Compulsory unionism is pure conscription. It insists on the obligation of militancy in a state of war. The whole crime of the non-unionist is his non-compliant position.

Boote replied, however, that to brand conscription as socialist was “the devil in disguise”. “Socialism will free men not enslave them”, he wrote.25 Boote challenged “the suggestion that because compulsion is justifiable in certain circumstances it

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24 “Mr Lamond and Conscription,” SMH 19 October 1916, 11.

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must be just and proper under other circumstances.”

But he did not explain how the former circumstances were to be distinguished from the latter.

Lamond campaigned hard for conscription. He supplied the *SMH* with a message from Lieutenant Albert Jacka, an AWU member who had won the Victoria Cross at Gallipoli. Jacka’s appeal read: “ANZACs demand to be reinforced. Trust Australia will not leave us in the lurch. Strong regiments mean light losses.” Lamond added, “In face of such an appeal, how can any AWU man refuse to vote for reinforcements?”

When Jacka had won the Victoria Cross initially the commercial press had failed to report that he was a unionist. During the conscription debate, however, the press emphasised that Jacka was a unionist who supported conscription to influence labour voters in favour of conscription. The *Australian Worker* retaliated by reporting that Jacka’s father opposed conscription and wanted his three serving sons to return to a “free country.”

**AWU members**

Grayndler wrote that “the opinions in favour of conscription expressed by Mr Lamond, and the attitude attributed by him to Mr Spence, President of the AWU, are in direct conflict with the views and policy of the members and governing body of the AWU”. But what do we actually know of the opinion of members? The *Australian Worker* published many letters from members against conscription but surprisingly it also published some letters supporting conscription until September 1916. The proportion of letters for and against conscription is no guide to overall membership opinion as the newspaper could pick and choose what it published, and those who wrote letters to the editor were not necessarily a representative sample of the membership anyway.

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H. Vivash wrote that the *Australian Worker’s* position against conscription “does not represent the opinion of the rank and file”. He pointed to the ideological consistency between compulsory unionism and conscription: “in our labour organisations we do our utmost to compel every employee in shop, factory, warehouse or public works to join their union, so that he does his share of militancy in the fight to keep up wages and conditions”, the same logic, he said, should apply to military service. He concluded with an accurate prediction of the coming Labor split: “I think that your [the *Australian Worker’s*] attitude is illogical and full of unnecessary spleen, and if persevered with will rend the movement in twain”.30 “A Member of the AWU” similarly wrote, “in our unions we have no time for men who will not come out and fight for a just cause. We will not tolerate any person who has personal objections. We term him a ‘scab’ and a ‘parasite’”.31 The writer also argued in class terms, saying that to date the vast majority of volunteers had been workers and conscription could force some of the “idle squatters and others who are everlastingly resting their feet” to do their share.32

Some AWU members acknowledged that conscription was distasteful but nevertheless necessary. T. Reynolds wrote to the *Australian Worker* that “the socialists of Germany, of England, France, Russia, and other countries are up against something far stronger and worse than even the Fat Man [capitalism], and instead of helping his tongue-tied brother socialist in Germany, the Australian is trampling him underfoot by trying to prevent conscription”.33 T.C. O’Brien of Queanbeyan added that “compulsion is a nasty medicine, and we British-born hate it, still at times for our own good, for the good of the community, or the good of the nation we bow to it”.34 Corporal G.F. Davis, Secretary of the Returned Service Association, played on these sentiments when he told a meeting at the Sydney Domain “the AWU and [Labor Party] are anti-conscriptionist yet 50,000 unionists in NSW have gone to the

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front”. “Are you men going to uphold the traditions of your union? If so assist to bring about conscription’.”

The *Australian Worker* published numerous organiser reports claiming that member opinion was strongly against conscription. NSW Western Branch organiser Jack Cullinan reported in September 1916 that “the feeling in the back country is very strong against conscription”. Central Branch organiser A.B. Berry similarly said that “everywhere the members are unanimous against conscription”. Victoria-Riverina organiser Jack Ryder was less emphatic: “conscription is the burning question in the sheds and on the track, and, if the feeling in most of the districts I have travelled through is any criterion, Hughes will not have the cakewalk he anticipated”. These organisers’ reports should not be considered proof of membership opinion, however, as the organisers did not necessarily speak to a representative sample of members, members were not necessarily honest with the organisers and the reports were written and published as part of the AWU’s anti-conscription campaign.

The *Australian Worker* reported various anti-conscription resolutions passed at AWU workplaces around the country. These “unanimous” resolutions are more a reflection of the undemocratic nature of open votes than proof of unanimous opposition to conscription at those workplaces. Interestingly, Gurley shearing shed in north-west NSW adopted a resolution that “all AWU members be advised to fall into line” with the leaders’ position against conscription. As well as being consistent with the union’s authoritarianism and lack of free speech, this resolution also suggested that not all AWU members had yet “fallen into line” against conscription.

In September 1916, in the final two months of the campaign, the *Australian Worker* stopped printing any support for conscription from AWU members. Boote admitted that “scores have sent in more or less [pro] conscription verse since the war started;

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35 “Domain meeting,” *SMH* 3 July 1916, 10.
and the volume has grown with the months”. But he said “I have not given it space because while it would please some it would displease others”; a weak justification for censorship. The fact that the paper published any opposing viewpoints is surprising given its usual closure to dissenting voices within the AWU. As we have seen in previous chapters, Boote used the *Australian Worker* as his personal propaganda instrument. He was not really interested in member opinion if it did not agree with his own. Nor was he interested in facilitating a membership debate on the issue and letting members make up their own minds. He believed he knew what was best for AWU members and the working class more broadly.

**Power within the AWU**

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, by the late 1890s the AWU was an undemocratic oligarchy both federally and within each individual branch. Therefore the opinions of the 100,000 members did not have much influence on the debate in 1916. But it is not enough to simply say the AWU was an oligarchy; we need to know what type of oligarchy it was in order to know exactly which union officials decided whether the union would support conscription.

As we saw in the previous chapter, branches each had one representative on the executive council and a maximum of three convention delegates. This meant that no one branch or official could control the union alone. Instead, it was governed by a majority coalition group of leading officials from the various branches who sat on the executive council. The union was therefore a “collegial oligarchy”: a collective oligarchic leadership in which power is shared equally amongst a central group of leaders.

So who were these leaders? There was the national general secretary and former secretary of the Victoria-Riverina Branch, Edward Grayndler; national president and former secretary of the Victoria-Riverina Branch, John Barnes; NSW Central Branch president, Jack Bailey; NSW Central Branch secretary, William Lambert; Queensland

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Branch secretary, William Dunstan; Queensland Branch president, William Riordan and Adelaide Branch secretary, Frank Lundie. These seven men opposed conscription, so the AWU opposed conscription.

Most of the seven did not publicly provide their arguments against conscription but left that to the *Worker* newspapers. Grayndler was an exception and said: “I hope the representatives of Labor everywhere will prove loyal to the trust reposed in them, and will throw themselves vigorously into this fight for the preservation of our civil liberties now threatened by military domination. It now devolves upon us to save Australia from the impending evil of militarism”. Presumably each of the other AWU leaders opposed conscription for a combination of the various reasons I discussed earlier. They also thought conscription could seriously weaken the AWU which would have endangered their positions. More cynically, conscription provided the officials with an ideal issue on which to fight the politicians and win control of the Labor Party, especially in NSW where their Industrial Section was solidifying its control of the party. They might also have seen the developing conscription split as their chance to get into parliament, which most of them subsequently did.

The executive council quickly removed Spence and Lamond from their positions. This is typical of the AWU’s hard majoritarian view of democracy which did not tolerate dissent from the majority view on any issue. Spence was by this time the grand old man of the AWU. He was 70 years old and ill but he had still been elected president for 1916 by membership vote and was a Labor member of the federal House of Representatives. The AWU leaders unconvincingly alleged that Lamond and Hughes had somehow tricked Spence into supporting conscription. On the other hand, Hughes said of Spence, “I have fought for unionism myself all my life, and I say that I would rather a thousand times stand by the side of this venerable and great leader

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of unionism, expelled from the organisation which he founded, than with those men who, abusing the great power vested in them, have driven out their leader, whose only crime is patriotism”.45

It is entirely possible that other AWU officials also supported conscription but chose to stay silent because they knew what happened to dissenters. The SMH reported that “it is understood that all officers of the AWU who support the Prime Minister in the forthcoming campaign on conscription will share the same fate as Mr Spence”.46 This is a further example of the lack of free speech within the AWU. The executive council did not allow officials to promote an opinion contrary to official policy even on external non-union matters such as conscription. The lack of local autonomy within the union meant that there were no independent local leaderships to lead a pro-conscription argument within the union.

As we saw in the previous chapter, at this time the collegial oligarchy was being challenged by radical officials from the Western Branch such as Cullinan and by dissenters in the Queensland Branch such as Ernest Lane. These officials led the anti-conscription motion at the 1916 Annual Convention. The majority conservative faction agreed with the radicals on opposing conscription, a rare example of unanimity. But this unanimity probably did not affect the outcome. The decision was up to the conservative majority group. Given their lack of success in any of the many conflicts with the ruling group, it seems unlikely that the radicals could have won on conscription.

In many trade unions at the time, especially in the United States, the president had supreme power, was almost impossible to remove and ruled the union essentially as a dictator. Edelstein and Warner label this type of oligarchy as a “simple official hierarchy”. The AWU changed into a simple official hierarchy in the 1930s under the dictatorship of Queensland Branch secretary Clarrie Fallon. If this had occurred prior to 1916 with Spence as dictator then his support for conscription would have decided

45 “Hughes,” SMH 25 September 1916, 10.
46 “Conscription,” SMH 26 September 1916, 8.
the issue, the AWU may have been a leading force in the campaign for conscription and the “yes” vote may well have won. But in 1916 the union was still a collegial oligarchy, so neither President Spence nor any other individual had supreme power.

As manager of the *Australian Worker*, Lamond controlled the newspaper on a day-to-day basis. But ultimate control rested once again with the collegial oligarchy. The secretaries of the union’s southern branches formed the *Australian Worker* board of control. According to the union rules, the board of control had complete power over “the manager and editor in regard to management, policy of the paper, and all other matters”. The board of control forced Lamond to resign and appointed the *Australian Worker*’s anti-conscriptionist editor Henry Boote as acting manager. Boote and the *Australian Worker* then executed one of the great political campaigns in Australian history.

**Conclusion**

We simply do not know the proportion of AWU members who supported conscription in 1916. But the fact that the AWU was an oligarchy means that membership opinion had little influence on the union’s stance. The type of oligarchy that existed within the union in 1916 determined exactly which officials decided the issue. The union was a collegial oligarchy so the issue was not decided by the president, nor by the manager of the union newspaper, nor by the radical minority faction, but by the majority coalition of branch leaders. Trade union oligarchy, like everything, has complicated effects. In this case the AWU’s collegial oligarchy helped to save thousands of Australian men from the horror of the Western Front.

The AWU’s key role in the campaign against conscription became an important part of the union’s mythology and AWU officials frequently cited it over the following decades as one of the union’s great achievements. At the AWU’s 50th anniversary in 1936, NSW Branch Secretary John McNeill said “if the AWU never did anything other than that great and glorious fight it put up in 1916-17” against conscription, that

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47 Rule 161 AWU Constitution and General Rules, 1919-20, AWU, E154/25, NBAC; Rule 166 AWU Constitution and General Rules, 1929-30, AWU, E154/25, NBAC.
would “be sufficient”. Many militant AWU members no doubt joked that their oligarchical union never had done anything else worthwhile, which is why the officials kept rekindling memories of this particular triumph.

CHAPTER IV

Foundations of Democracy: The Miners Federation

Throughout the interwar period, the Miners Federation was one of the most influential trade unions in New South Wales and Australia. It was also highly democratic. This chapter and the next examine how and why this was the case by studying the miners and their unions from the nineteenth century through to 1939. Once again, the seven key requirements for union democracy provide my framework. In this chapter I examine the miners’ occupational community, rules, membership decision-making, organised opposition, equality between members and officials and free communication. Chapter five then focuses on local autonomy and the miners’ crucial shift from local democratic community to national democratic community. Comparison with the AWU assists in identifying the factors that made the Miners Federation a democratic exception to the oligarchic norm.

Like the AWU, the Miners Federation had a centralised constitution and a culture that contained tensions between solidarity and egalitarianism on one side and competitiveness, hierarchy and aspirationalism on the other side. The most important difference was that miners worked and lived together in strong, permanent occupational communities. They lived with their families and their residential neighbourhoods were usually segregated and often isolated. The dangers of mining further encouraged unity. Arbitration undermined miners’ democracy but this was less pronounced than in the AWU, as the miners maintained a contested relationship with arbitration and continued to use strikes. Meanwhile, ALP affiliation had mixed effects for Miners Federation democracy as it had for the AWU.

Historiography

There is a historical consensus that the Miners Federation was one of the most democratic unions in Australia in the interwar period. Yet the literature provides little detailed analysis of how or why this was the case.¹ There have been two general

histories of the Miners Federation; in 1963, Robin Gollan published *The Coalminers of NSW*, and in 1970, Edgar Ross, *Common Cause* editor from 1935 to 1966, published the union’s official *History of the Miners Federation*. Both authors provide useful narrative and inevitably touch on the union’s internal politics, but neither offers any sustained analysis or theoretical engagement. Marxist theory implicitly underlies both works and both historians tacitly argue against Michels by contending that members placed important limits on officials. They also argue that the Miners Federation was democratic and that the primary reason for this was the miners’ strong communities. I expand on this argument with detailed analysis and comparison with the AWU.²

Unlike the rest of the historiography, Andrew Metcalfe’s history of the lower Hunter Valley coalfields in the Northern NSW District from 1900 to 1960 is highly theoretical. He devotes some attention to internal democracy within the Miners Federation and engages with some of the organisational theory. Metcalfe argues, counter to Michels, that oligarchy was a strong tendency in the Miners Federation but not an “iron law”:

> The iron law was only a tendency in coalfields politics, tempered in significant and historically variable ways by, for example, the democratic processes in the Federation, the persistence of organisationally unsanctioned modes of practice, the organisational looseness of the ALP and Miners Federation and the electoral competition between the group of leaders.³

Nevertheless, he adopts Michels’ and Vladimir Lenin’s criticisms of regional and national union leaders and cites them frequently.⁴ He argues that “pit top meetings were a prime site of ... tension for while rank and file miners saw their leaders as would-be autocrats, the latter saw members as a challenge to be mastered”.⁵ He concludes in Michelsian terms that the miners “developed organisations which alienated members from leaders and reconstituted elements of the seriality of class being in union membership”.⁶ By reconstituting the “seriality of class being in union membership”,⁶ Metcalfe has characterised the Miners Federation as a progressive organisation.

²Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 123.
⁵Ibid., 89.
⁶Ibid., 192.
membership” he is referring to what he argues was the union’s deliberate neglect of the non-faceworkers to the advantage of the faceworkers. So while he acknowledges that oligarchy was a tendency and not an iron law, his analysis is not far from that of Michels and he is critical of Miners Federation democracy.

By contrast, I will argue in line with the earlier historiography that the Miners Federation was highly democratic. Metcalfe holds the union to an unrealistic standard of democracy and then finds it wanting. It could be argued that, after studying the AWU in the previous two chapters, anything would look democratic by comparison. But it is precisely because this thesis is comparative, and informed by the extensive international literature on trade union democracy, that we have seen how rare union democracy is and how difficult it is to achieve. With this knowledge we will see that, despite its flaws, the Miners Federation was impressively democratic.

A short history of the Miners Federation from 1915 to 1939
The Miners Federation, officially the Australasian Coal and Shale Employees’ Federation, formed in 1915. Throughout the interwar period it was one of Australia’s most militant unions but its industrial success was limited by the oversupply of mining labour. The Miners Federation was the amalgamation of regional coal mining unions in Northern, Southern and Western New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania. In 1916 the NSW coke workers joined and the following year the Broken Hill metal miners joined. Each of the regional mining unions became districts of the Miners Federation, the middle tier in the three tiers of government: national, district and local lodge. The NSW coalminers are the main focus here as they made up a large majority of members and were the most heavily involved in the NSW Labor Party. The Broken Hill metal miners were geographically closer to Adelaide than Sydney and largely independent of both. Moreover, they already have

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8 Ibid.
an extensive labour historiography.\textsuperscript{9} Broken Hill miners are included in statistics unless stated otherwise.

The Miners Federation was the most politically and industrially influential trade union in NSW for most of the interwar period.\textsuperscript{10} While the AWU was more powerful nationally, in NSW it had failed in its aspirations to dominate the labour movement as it did in Queensland. By 1922 around 80 per cent of eligible mineworkers were Federation members, giving it 20,000 members divided amongst 141 local lodges.\textsuperscript{11} This membership number remained stable until 1939. Australia’s coal production peaked early in the period in 1913 at 12.5 million tonnes, 10.5 million tonnes from NSW, before the First World War destroyed Australia’s coal export trade.\textsuperscript{12} Initially the Miners Federation tried to enrol skilled workers who worked alongside the miners such as engineers, but this was unsuccessful and the union soon looked to cooperate with the mining craft unions.\textsuperscript{13}

Miners occupied a potentially powerful position because coal was so crucial to the economy, fuelling industry, railways, electricity and household cooking and heating. An editorial from the conservative \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, with the miners in view, bemoaned “the tendency of one section of the working men with an economic advantage to hold a pistol at the heads of the rest of the community”.\textsuperscript{14} But economic conditions and technological advancements nullified the miners’ strong position. Australian coal mining declined during the First World War, and unlike most industries it did not improve in the 1920s, before declining even further during the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{15} Prior to the First World War Australia had exported one third of its coal. The war destroyed this trade and until the Second World War there was a massive oversupply of coal and coalminers.\textsuperscript{16} Gradual technological advances also meant

\textsuperscript{9} See for example Julie Kimber, "'A Case of Mild Anarchy?': Job Committees in the Broken Hill Mines, c1930 to c1954,” \textit{Labour History} 80(2001).
\textsuperscript{10} Ross, \textit{A History of the Miners Federation of Australia}: 4.
\textsuperscript{12} Gollan, \textit{The Coalminers Coal Miners of New South Wales: A History of the Union, 1860-1960}: 137.
\textsuperscript{13} Ross, \textit{A History of the Miners Federation of Australia}: 311.
\textsuperscript{14} Editorial, “Industrial peace,” \textit{SMH} 4 April 1922, 8.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11.
fewer miners were needed to win the same amount of coal. Mining unemployment was part of a broader structural unemployment that existed in Australia from 1890 to 1940.

Most of the Miners Federation’s money came from compulsory levies taken in addition to membership fees. If levies are included, the Miners Federation had the highest membership fees of any Australian trade union, up to £30 per year, or 10 to 15 per cent of full-time income. The Northern District of NSW was easily the largest in membership and coal output, and provided around 60 per cent of the union’s funds. By the late 1930s the North produced 6.3 million tonnes per year, the Southern NSW District 1.8 million and the Western NSW District 1.4 million.

The top leadership of the Miners Federation was stable throughout the interwar period, with only four general secretaries and three presidents. Jack Baddeley was the founding President (1915-21) followed by Dan Rees (1922-34) and then Charlie Nelson (1934-41). Albert Willis was General Secretary from 1915 to 1925, followed by Arthur Teece (1925-26 and 1931-33), Dai Davies (1926-31) and Bill Orr 1934-1940). This is a similar level of leadership stability as the AWU and suggests oligarchy, but we will see that in the Miners Federation it was caused not by oligarchy, but by membership loyalty and satisfaction with the leaders.

Willis was highly intelligent and unusually well-educated for a miner. Born in 1876 in Wales, he began working in the mines at 10 years old while continuing his schooling and then attended university on a bursary at London Labour College, Ruskin College, Oxford University and King’s College, University of London. He was a mining union official in Wales before emigrating to Australia in 1911 where he quickly rose through the ranks of the Illawarra Miners Association, becoming acting secretary in 1913 and then president. A Nonconformist Protestant and lay preacher, he received much of

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17 “Union bosses,” SMH 27 March 1930, 10.
his initial support from the Illawarra’s large population of Nonconformist miners of Welsh heritage. He was a guild socialist who supported decentralised association and participatory rank-and-file democracy. Baddeley, meanwhile, was born in 1881 in England and came to Australia as a child. He began working around collieries in the Northern NSW district at 11 and became a miner at 16. He was well known as a great cricketer and first grade footballer and was elected president of the Northern miners’ union in 1914. Initially a militant socialist who advocated strikes and criticised capitalism, over the decades he became increasingly conservative in his labourism.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 19** The first Miners Federation Central Council in 1915. John (Jack) Baddeley is in the centre of the front row and Albert Willis is next to him, second from the left in the front row.

The Miners Federation had a tumultuous relationship with the NSW Labor Party, frequently disaffiliating and reaffiliating. In 1917, against the advice of the leadership, the miners participated in the massive but unsuccessful General Strike in NSW. In response to the failed strike, Willis and others led the push for all unions to

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combine into One Big Union (OBU). At the 1919 NSW Labor Party Annual Conference the miners led a militant faction which tried to introduce the OBU into Labor Party policy. When they narrowly failed, Willis led the miners out of the ALP and into the short-lived Industrial Socialist Labour Party. The Labor Council then founded an OBU called the Workers Industrial Union of Australia (WIUA). Even though it was ultimately the only union that joined this OBU, from 1 January 1921 the Miners Federation changed its name to the Mining Department of the WIUA.25

In the early 1920s, the NSW districts of the Miners Federation reaffiliated with the NSW Labor Party and, under the leadership of Willis and Baddeley, the union moved away from its dissident radicalism and took a leading role in the party. Baddeley resigned as Miners Federation president and won the state seat of Cessnock for Labor, becoming Minister for Mines and then Deputy NSW Premier under Jack Lang.26 Lang nominated Willis to the Legislative Council in 1925 and made him vice-president of the Executive Council from 1925 to 1927 and 1930 to 1931.27 The Miners Federation had founded its national newspaper, Common Cause, in July 1921.28 It lasted four years as a stand-alone paper before becoming a supplement to the NSW Labor Party’s official newspaper, the Labor Daily, of which the Miners Federation was the chief financier and Willis the founder and Managing Director.29

By 1925 unemployment and underemployment of miners was an ever-growing problem.30 There was growing dissatisfaction and militancy amongst the miners and in 1926 the CPA introduced its Militant Minority Movement, from 1931 Minority Movement (MM), to the coalfields.31 When Northern NSW coalowners demanded huge wage reductions and locked out coalminers in 1929, 10,000 men were out of work for 16 months.32 The strength of the MM grew immensely during the lockout

27 Farrell, "Albert Willis."
29 Ibid.
30 Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 326.
32 Ibid., 189.
as did dissatisfaction with the Miners Federation officials and, as a result, a rival Communist leadership emerged.\textsuperscript{33} The most prominent of these Communist leaders were the Scotsmen, Orr and Nelson, who had been MM leaders in the Western District.\textsuperscript{34}

When he was a MM organiser in the late 1920s Orr rode his motorbike to visit nearly every mine in NSW.\textsuperscript{35} In 1934 he was elected secretary and Nelson became president. The Miners Federation was the first major trade union with a Communist Party leadership. This was part of the rising influence of the MM and CPA which won leadership of other prominent unions in the 1930s such as the Australian Railways Union (ARU). Orr had been born in Scotland in 1900 and began working in the mines at nine years old. He then served as a soldier in the First World War before emigrating to Australia and working as a miner at Lithgow. In the late 1920s he attended Nelson’s Marxist study groups and became involved in the Unemployed Workers’ Movement, the Mineworkers Council of Action and the MM. By 1939 an overworked Orr had begun to succumb to alcoholism and he retired sick in November 1940.\textsuperscript{36}

Nelson had been born in 1896 in Scotland, began working in the mines at 13 and emigrated to Australia in 1914. He worked in railway construction and was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1916 and 1917. In 1925 he began work at the government coal mine at Lithgow where he joined the CPA and MM and became president of the Lithgow miners lodge in 1931. He served as Miners Federation president from 1934 until he was narrowly defeated in the 1941 ballot by fellow Communist Harold Wells.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 337.
\textsuperscript{37} Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 515.
Figure 20 William (Bill) Orr and Charles (Charlie) Nelson.\textsuperscript{38}
In the early 1930s the relationship between the Miners Federation and Lang began to sour. Lang had outmanoeuvred Willis and the two became bitter enemies. The Inner Group’s control of the *Labor Daily* caused the Miners Federation to break with the paper in 1935 and reintroduce *Common Cause* as a stand-alone publication. The relationship became even more rancorous under the Communist leadership and Lang and his allies tried unsuccessfully to depose Orr and Nelson in Miners Federation elections. The Miners Federation thereby became one of the first unions in which the Labor Party leadership openly tried to replace a union leadership, a precursor to the activities of the Industrial Groups of the late 1940s and 1950s. The Miners Federation was a leading force in the opposition coalition that finally defeated Lang and the Inner Group in 1939.39

**Ideology in the Miners Federation**

Almost all Miners Federation officials identified as “militants”. *Common Cause* defined a militant as “one who wishes to see something done instead of being merely talked about”.40 More specifically, militancy meant advocating industrial action in addition to, or instead of, arbitration and political action. Some officials were militant reformists while others were radicals who embraced various forms of socialism and anti-capitalism. The union’s official position throughout the period was against capitalism and for its replacement by a system of collective ownership. Miners Federation leaders and coalfields politicians openly condemned capitalism and employers. In practical terms, the abolition of capitalism would be achieved through raising working-class consciousness and struggle, industrial unionism and industrial democracy, which occurs when workers govern their workplaces.41 In 1926 Willis’s private secretary, Emil Voigt, wrote a five-part series of articles for *Common Cause* advocating employee management of workplaces through industrial democracy.42 The Miners Federation also called for the nationalisation of all coal mines.43

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40 “Militants should lead,” *CC* 3 March 1922, 3.
42 Emil Voigt, “Control of industry,” *CC* 1 May 1926, 1.
43 “Nationalisation objective of the miners,” *SMH* 17 January 1922, 9.
In 1908 the IWW had started clubs on the NSW coalfields which were instrumental in the successful 1916 miners’ strike shortly before the government suppressed the IWW.\textsuperscript{44} Tom “Bondy” Hoare was one of the founders of the IWW clubs in the Hunter Valley and went on to become long-time Northern District President as a non-Communist radical socialist.\textsuperscript{45} The Miners Federation’s official history recalled Hoare as “one of the most colourful of Federation leaders”. “Stories about his marathon speeches are legendary”, it said, and “he often spoke literally for hours at a time divesting himself of more and more of his clothing as he warmed to his task of driving home the lessons of the class struggle”.\textsuperscript{46}

It is difficult to say how widespread these militant and radical sentiments were amongst the ordinary members. Certainly, some members were not anti-capitalist nor even militant, and a few complained openly about the organisation’s radicalism. These members simply wanted to improve their lot by working hard for fair wages and conditions, similar to the ethos of the AWU. At the same time, however, a large majority of miners frequently participated in strikes, thousands joined organisations like the IWW and MM, and radicals like Hoare achieved continued success in union elections. This suggests that sympathy for radicalism was widespread amongst the membership or, at the very least, that most members believed that radicals made effective union officials.

The election of Orr and Nelson resulted primarily from their militant and pragmatic focus on the miners’ wages and conditions and not from majority support for the CPA.\textsuperscript{47} Nevertheless, after 1934 the Miners Federation’s anti-capitalism became more explicitly Communist; the members elected a “representative for Soviet Russia” in each annual election. \textit{Common Cause} stressed that members must “honour the leaders of Eureka and the Russian Revolution” and that the union was a revolutionary

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{46} Ross, A \textit{History of the Miners Federation of Australia}: 381.
\textsuperscript{47} Macintyre, \textit{The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality}: 254.
organisation: “our organisation [is] something more than mechanism for collective bargaining with the coalowners; it proclaims us as revolutionaries!”

From its formation, the Miners Federation had viewed arbitration with suspicion. In 1929 Willis said to other trade union leaders:

> When you went into the Arbitration Court you put your heads into the jaws of the machine. You knew what you were doing, but you did it, and now you are groaning and complaining because the machine is crushing you. You will be simply crushed one after another.

In the 1930s this criticism became even more pronounced. The union condemned arbitration as pro-employer and as weakening union organising and militancy. In 1937 the Miners Federation declared its policy as being for direct negotiation with owners and against arbitration. The union frequently threatened to withdraw from arbitration completely, but in practice it continued to participate in the arbitration courts throughout the 1930s. Only the Broken Hill metal miners refused to register with the Federal Arbitration Court. In 1937 Nelson said that throughout its history the Miners Federation had been “nominally opposed to arbitration and yet it had consistently participated in court proceedings of one kind or another”. Because “the whole industry was covered by awards or agreements registered in a court” it was “not possible to escape entirely from the existing legal net”. Communists recognised that arbitration imposed limits on their freedom of action but Orr argued it was still imperative to maintain militancy and industrial action because “the arbitration court would never give them what they were not strong enough to take” through strikes.

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48 “Southern miners officers elected,” CC 30 November 1935, 8; “We are revolutionaries!” CC 15 January 1938, 4.
49 “Willis,” SMH 2 November 1929, 11.
52 “Federation’s attitude to arbitration,” CC 16 December 1939, 11; “Bill Orr re-elected,” CC 16 December 1939, 10.
53 “Barrier miners,” SMH 10 January 1933, 12.
55 Ibid.
The Miners Federation’s support for political action and the Labor Party also declined. In the 1920s Willis and Baddeley had tied the union to the NSW Labor Party and Lang. A 1922 change to the Federation preamble was subtle but telling, from pursuing its goals through “revolutionary industrial and political action” to “revolutionary political and industrial action”; the political was now in first place.\(^56\) But by the mid-1930s the Miners Federation leadership was disillusioned with Lang and Labor and once again stressed the limitations of political action. Orr, in line with CPA policy, said that parliamentary action was one “form of struggle to be used by the working class” but “was inadequate of itself”.\(^57\) Meanwhile Common Cause now promoted Lenin’s analysis of why the working class could not be emancipated through the ballot box.\(^58\)

**Mining masculinity**

Metcalf describes a “moral civil war” amongst the miners between “larrikin” and “respectable” models of behaviour.\(^59\) This was interconnected with the two rival forms of masculinity we have seen in previous chapters. The first larrikin masculinity was misogynistic and hedonistic celebrating drinking, gambling and sex. Glorifying wasting money on gambling and drinking made a virtue out of many miners’ unavoidable poverty.\(^60\) The responsibilities of providing for children and a “nagging wife” would limit time and money spent on hedonistic activities. It would also reduce the miner’s autonomy by removing his ability to withdraw from work that was demeaning or dangerous.\(^61\) Scorning marriage also made a virtue out of a necessity as men outnumbered women in most mining areas.\(^62\) As Metcalfe argues, “aggressive masculinity became an expression of miners’ solidarity and misogyny could double as a mark of loyalty to workmates.”\(^63\)

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\(^{56}\) “Nationalisation objective of the miners,” *SMH* 17 January 1922, 9.

\(^{57}\) “Federation’s year of record activity,” *CC* 19 February 1938, 2.

\(^{58}\) “Can the ballot box emancipate us?” *CC* 7 December 1935, 6.

\(^{59}\) Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.*: 89.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 85.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 181.
Privileging mates over wives and children was also part of a “hard” masculinity that frowned upon too much emotion or sentiment. Doris Seeton recalled her coalmoker father in the 1930s in Lithgow hiding his affection for the pit horses. “Although he appeared to be hard, he never let us keep a pet, he wouldn’t appear to like animals, I think he might have deep down. Because I think he’d take an apple for the horse. And he’d talk about how the horse learned to open his lunch tin and get the apple out [Doris laughs]”.  

Responsible masculinity tied in with respectable behaviour. Responsible men were providers for wives and children. The Miners Federation encouraged this view and relief pay was based on how many children a miner had. When on strike or out of work miners went fishing and rabbiting, asserting their masculinity as providers. Dolly Potter, a founding member of the Women’s Auxiliaries, remembered the prevailing attitude that “men had their place as breadwinners and women had their place as housewives and mothers”.

Both forms of masculinity celebrated strength, bravery and hard work which were synonymous with mining. Jack O’Shea began mining in the late 1920s at Aberdare Extended Colliery in Cessnock:

Well I was proud, very proud ... I was going to be a miner. That was a real job. A man’s job. To look at me though I wasn’t the exact image of a big miner. In fact I was the smallest bloke in the pit. I must have weighed no more than 6 stone [38kg] in a big heavy overcoat.

Paradoxically, the danger of mining which the miners fought so hard against also justified their claim to be the bravest and manliest of workers. If a miner worried too much about safety he was mocked as a wimp or a whiner. McKenzie recalled with

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67 Moore et al., Back at the coalface : volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history: 35.
68 Ibid., 120.
bravado that the explosives did not need the strict care required by the safety rules: “it’s not safety-wise and you shouldn’t. But we used to”, he said.69

Like in the AWU, disagreements were settled with fists. Miners revered sport especially bruising rugby league and boxing. In the 1930s Lithgow had ten rugby league teams.70 A miner recalled “even at work we had these 25 pound weights ... we used to lift these 25 pound weights up, see who could lift them up over their heads the most”.71 This competitive, fighting masculinity paired well with union militancy in which miners fought the bosses and would rather strike than surrender their pride. McKenzie believed that once mining became completely mechanised in the 1970s the lack of physical work translated into a “softer” masculinity and a lack of union militancy: “the coal industry now, last couple of years, gone pretty cushy, they’re pussycats now. They don’t strike at all.”72

The miners’ occupational culture and community

Like AWU members, coalminers worked for piecework rates. Where shearsers were paid per sheep, coalminers were paid per tonne of coal. Contemporary scholars such as the Englishman G.D.H. Cole argued that piecework encouraged individualism and competition amongst workers which was detrimental to union solidarity. As we saw in chapter one, this was the case amongst shearsers in the AWU. Just as the shearsers had their tally of sheep shorn, the miners had a tally board of the coal won by each pair of miners.73 A delegate to the 1925 Miners Federation convention observed that piecework “breeds that selfishness that is not good or conducive to good comradeship”.74 Like the AWU, the miners’ occupational community was not significantly divided by race or gender but it was divided by occupation. The AWU’s early occupational hierarchy was between shearsers and shedhands while in the Miners Federation it was between faceworkers and non-faceworkers like wheelers who used horses to take skips full of coal to the surface.

69 Watson, A Disappearing World: Studies in Class, Gender & Memory: 98.
70 Ibid., 41.
71 Ibid., 42.
72 Ibid., 43.
As in the AWU, the miners’ culture contained tension between solidarity and egalitarianism on the one hand and aspirationalism, competitiveness and hierarchy on the other. Unlike the AWU, however, solidarity and egalitarianism tended to win out amongst the miners and piecework and stratification did not lead the miners down the path to oligarchy as it had in the AWU. A first point of distinction is that the miners or their parents had brought with them from Britain a ready-made mining culture of solidarity. Mining was a family affair; fathers apprenticed their sons into the mines and often an extended family would work together in the same mine. When Greg McKenzie started mining in the 1940s in Lithgow the other fifteen men in his small mine were all related. Furthermore, the miners’ piecework was not as individualistic as that of shearers because miners worked the coal in pairs with a “mate” and divided their profits equally. Mates would often work together their

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75 Fairfax. NLA 199368850.
77 Watson, A Disappearing World: Studies in Class, Gender & Memory: 40.
78 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 18.
entire careers and for this reason “a mate was chosen as carefully as a wife”. Jack Savage began coalmining at Big Spur Colliery in Victoria in 1938 and recalled his mate Merv Crane:

Merv was a good old mate. One of the nicest blokes I ever worked with. We never had a cross word in our life ... you wouldn’t believe it. Any bastard working with me for three years and not having a row you’d wonder why. But that’s fair dinkum.

As well as being less individualistic, direct comparison and competition were also more difficult in mining than in shearing because coal was much easier to win in some parts of a mine than it was in others. Mining took place in pairs in the dark and did not have the same degree of sport and display as shearing.

The occupational stratification amongst the miners was generally less intense than between the shearsers and shedhands because there was a clearly established progression amongst the miners from non-faceworker to faceworker. There were still conflicts; in the Northern District in 1911 wheelers and shiftmen unsuccessfully tried to form their own union and split from the miners. But this conflict was usually tempered by the fact that non-faceworkers were not perpetually second-class union members but were simply waiting their turn, just as the current faceworkers had done before them. Metcalfe argues that the union’s deliberate neglect of the non-faceworkers undermined solidarity and democracy but the effects were not as detrimental as he claims. The non-faceworkers knew that wins for the faceworkers were also wins for themselves in the future.

The Miners Federation was further able to overcome the tendencies to oligarchy because of a range of interwoven cultural factors that distinguished it from the AWU. Most importantly, miners worked and lived together permanently in large

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 147.
81 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 172.
82 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 14.
83 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 172.
numbers. Miners and their families were strongly interconnected within social, religious, charitable and sports organisations. Because miners and their families constituted the majority in most mining towns, they dominated the towns’ social life and events. In the Western NSW District town of Lithgow, for example, the annual eight hours demonstration was the biggest social event of the year and was accompanied by banquets, smoke socials, dances and sports carnivals. Mining towns usually had collective enterprises such as food cooperatives and many had union theatres and other forms of union entertainment. The Broken Hill district ran summer camps for members and their families on South Australian beaches. All of this stood in stark contrast to most AWU pastoral workers and navvies who, when they did live together in significant numbers, did so temporarily and without families.

In 1944 the Women’s Weekly published an article on miners’ wives. It argued that “loyalty to their husbands is the most outstanding characteristic of the miners' wives. Next to it comes their loyalty to their neighbours”. The article noted that “most wives deplore frivolous stoppages” but that while “a wife may criticise mine stoppages in the home”, “to the world she is completely in agreement with her husband”. This partly reflected the fact that women were not yet equal public political participants and were expected to be loyal to their husband who was the head of the household. The Women’s Weekly described miners’ wives as “capable, ‘old-fashioned’ housewives” who “wage a continual battle against coaldust”. They rarely worked outside the home because “there are no crèches and kindergartens” and “the miners' working hours would not fit in with the working hours of most jobs available to women”. The article stressed the strong community in coal towns: “a coal town is a friendly, democratic community” and “illness or trouble brings immediate help from the neighbours”.

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84 Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 2.
87 "Workers holiday camp," CC 30 November 1935, 8.
88 "Family background of coalfield," Australian Women’s Weekly 15 July 1944, 12.
Strikes involved whole families and communities and further reinforced the union’s occupational solidarity. Socialising and leisure increased during strikes and unemployment, especially the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{89} The miners’ co-op stores were generous with credit during strikes, as were shopkeepers, landlords and mortgage holders. If the miners declared a business “black” in a mining town it was ruined.\textsuperscript{90} The miners also demonstrated their strong occupational community in their treatment of unemployed members. Although they could not vote on financial matters, unemployed members could still run and vote in union elections and received free copies of \textit{Common Cause}.\textsuperscript{91}

The dangers of mining and the need to struggle together to improve safety was a further incentive for unity.\textsuperscript{92} Coal mining was hard, dirty, dangerous work. Methods did not change significantly in most mines between 1860 and 1940.\textsuperscript{93} Coalminers worked in the dark in mineshafts deep underground and it could take more than an hour to get from the surface to the coalface.\textsuperscript{94} Once there, faceworkers broke coal from the coalface by a combination of pick and explosives before loading it by shovel into skips which the wheelers took to the surface.\textsuperscript{95} The physical exertion was compounded by the extreme heat which could reach 50 degrees celsius.\textsuperscript{96} Shift work also added to the burden with many miners working 3pm to midnight or the “dog watch” from midnight to 8am.\textsuperscript{97} The \textit{Women’s Weekly} stressed the anxiety experienced by wives every day when their husband left for work. It quoted one wife who said “your husband may have been a miner for twenty years, but you never lose that feeling of anxiety for him”.\textsuperscript{98}

\begin{itemize}
\item “Northern miners,” \textit{SMH} 18 February 1930, 12.
\item “South Bulli matters,” \textit{CC} 1 April 1936, 3; “Labor Daily and CC,” \textit{CC} 9 November 1935, 2.
\item “The price the miner pays ,” \textit{CC} 16 February 1923, 6.
\item “Coal industry,” \textit{SMH} 11 May 1922, 9.
\item Watson, \textit{A Disappearing World: Studies in Class, Gender & Memory}: 38.
\item “Family background of coalfield,” \textit{Australian Women’s Weekly} 15 July 1944, 12.
\item Ibid.
\end{itemize}
A NSW coalminer who worked for 40 years between 1902 and 1976 had a one in four chance of death or serious injury, making it probably the most dangerous occupation in the country. The greatest immediate danger was being crushed by collapsing tunnels or heavy machinery. Safety equipment and personnel were non-existent and if a miner was trapped his workmates would use their shovels to hack off the pinned limb and then carry him several kilometres to the surface. Many did not survive the journey. The smell of blood and the sounds of screaming and splintering bone must have traumatised the rescuers who knew it could just as easily have been them.

More insidious lung and eye diseases from gas and dust were commonplace, as was hearing loss from explosions. Metal miners faced the added danger of poisoning. In 1920 a doctor found that 87 per cent of the 244 miners he examined at Broken Hill had an occupational disease: 142 had damaged lungs from silicosis and 74 had liver and kidney damage from lead poisoning. The absence of toilets added the stench of human excrement to the sweat, heat and humidity and increased the spread of infectious diseases. The miners’ dangers and discomforts were greater than those of the AWU navvies and far greater than those of pastoral workers and this translated into a different kind of mateship. As Carol Lansbury argues, “true mateship is created when one man’s life is wholly dependent on that of another. It occurs in wartime, at sea and always at the coalface.”

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99 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 61.
100 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 26.
101 Moore et al., Back at the coalface: volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history: 40, 59.
102 “Union statement,” SMH 11 June 1920, 9.
103 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 66.
As we saw in chapter one, many AWU members aspired to leave the working class and become landholders. Until the early twentieth century, most shearers were smallholders, perhaps shearing to make money to buy more land. Some miners had similar goals to leave the working class and a few even bought mines, but this was not a realistic aim for most. This reality helped to promote solidarity and class consciousness amongst the miners because if their lot was going to improve, it would be through winning higher wages for workers rather than by escaping the working class. Many miners did, however, wish for their sons to escape the dangers and hardships of mining, if not the working class. The *Women’s Weekly* noted the “unwavering ambition of miners and their wives is to ‘get the children out’” ... A miner tells you with thankfulness in his voice, ‘no, my boy's not in the mines, he is in the railways’, or ‘I got all mine out’”.  

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105 Fairfax. NLA 199368731.
The union leadership was another key factor distinguishing the AWU from the Miners Federation. AWU officials praised competitive piecework as strengthening the union. AWU president Barnes said:

this competitive interest, which made the work of shearing sheep more like a game than otherwise, drew into the union ranks the most intelligent and competent in the country – for there is no place in the ranks of the shearer for the loafer who watches the clock and waits for pay day – and so an organisation was built up which is the envy of the organisers of other unions.\(^{107}\)

Conversely, from the 1920s one of Miners Federation’s key policies was abolition of the piecework system.\(^{108}\) In 1924 the *Labor Daily* published an article titled “Insidious evil of the piecework system”.\(^{109}\) Piecework was not abolished, but the Miners Federation did successfully introduce rules which restricted individual competition. Coal was more easily won at some worksites than others. A seniority system existed in the union which controlled promotions and dismissals: last in, first out. However, worksites were not allocated by seniority. The “cavil” (Latin for quibbling) was a quarterly lottery by which worksites were randomly allocated. This ensured fairness over the long term and prevented managers from rewarding certain miners with good sites and punishing others with bad ones.\(^{110}\)

The “darg” (Scottish for a day’s work) was more controversial amongst the members. It was a union rule which specified a maximum number of skips that each pair of miners could use. This rule capped the amount of coal a pair could mine so that it remained relatively even.\(^{111}\) A reduced darg could also be used as a form of go-slow industrial action.\(^{112}\) The Miners Federation rationed work when it was limited during downturns and the Great Depression.\(^{113}\) Members were also forbidden from working


\(^{108}\) “Nationalisation,” *SMH* 17 January 1922, 9.

\(^{109}\) “Insidious evil of the piecework system,” *LD* 3 December 1924, 6.

\(^{110}\) Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.*: 118.


\(^{112}\) “The coalminers,” *SMH* 8 July 1920, 7.

in more than one colliery or in more than one job. There was always tension when the Miners Federation tried to introduce a measure that could limit members’ earnings. Many miners opposed the darg throughout the period. In 1921 the Central Council proposed a nine day fortnight to share work but the proposal was defeated at the ballot by a 4:1 majority. Yet during the Depression most miners recognised the pragmatic need for work-sharing which became commonplace; men worked a five day fortnight, two days one week and three the next.

The Miners Federation rules

The Miners Federation rules were highly democratic, combining participatory, direct and representative democracy in a formulation that gave the members a great deal of control. The lodges operated primarily as participatory democracies in which issues were debated and voted on by members at daily pit top meetings and frequent lodge meetings. There were also pragmatic elements of representative democracy as lodge members elected a lodge secretary, president, treasurer and management committee quarterly and a representative to the district delegate board annually.

At the district level, the union was a representative democracy. The district delegate boards consisted of a district executive - secretary, president and vice-president each elected annually by a district-wide ballot - plus the lodge delegates who had votes in proportion to their lodge’s membership. In 1923 the union abolished the district Delegate Boards citing their high costs. Travel costs for 141 lodge representatives were expensive, but the reform reduced democracy and concentrated power by giving all of the delegate board’s authority to the three members of the district executive.

114 “Mining matters,” Newcastle Herald 21 October 1911, 5.
115 “Darg system,” SMH 22 February 1919, 12.
116 “Minutes,” CC 17 February 1922, 6.
117 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 21.
118 Miners Federation Illawarra District Rules 1917, E165/12, NBAC, 20.
119 Miners Federation Illawarra District Rules 1917, E165/12, NBAC, 10-11.
120 “Industrial matters,” Newcastle Herald 3 August 1923, 5.
At the national level, the Miners Federation was a combination of representative and direct democracy. Members elected all national representatives in an annual ballot using preferential voting.\textsuperscript{121} There were few restrictions on nominating for office and by 1935 even unemployed members could nominate.\textsuperscript{122} The central executive managed the union and comprised a general secretary, president and vice-president.\textsuperscript{123} The central executive was answerable to the central council which was the highest authority in the union and was made up of district representatives in proportion to their membership.\textsuperscript{124} Districts with 2000 or less members elected one representative to the central council, between 2000 and 6000 two representatives and over 6000 elected three.\textsuperscript{125} By 1935 districts with between 6,000 and 11,000 members had three representatives, over 11,000 four representatives and one additional representative for every 3,000 or part thereof.\textsuperscript{126} In 1936 five councillors represented the Northern District, two represented each of the Southern, Western, Broken Hill and Queensland districts and one represented Victoria.\textsuperscript{127}

As in most representative organisations, there was tension between the views of representatives as delegates and trustees. The union’s 1916 Rules suggested that representatives were trustees when it advised members: “trust your officers and be careful in selecting them”.\textsuperscript{128} But in practice, as we will see, the attitude of both members and officials was more towards representatives as delegates. This was in stark contrast to the AWU which promoted its leaders as trustees to be obeyed by the members.

Unlike the AWU’s executive council, the central council’s power was subject to a series of democratic limitations. Most importantly, all central council decisions went

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{121} Miners Federation Illawarra District Rules 1916, E165/12, NBAC, 8; “Ballot paper,” CC 28 October 1921, 3; Miners Federation Rules 1935, E165/1/4, NBAC, 21; “Important resolutions,” CC 9 February 1923, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Miners Federation Rules 1935, E165/1/4, NBAC, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Miners Federation Rules 1935, E165/1/4, NBAC, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{127} “Central Council,” CC 22 February 1936, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/12, NBAC, 3.
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back to the lodges and needed majority support amongst the membership before becoming union policy (direct democracy). Each lodge had one vote per 25 members or part thereof with all of a lodge’s votes going with the majority. Furthermore, unlike in the AWU, the central council could only dismiss officials with ballot approval of members and there were by-elections to replace officials who left office. From 1925 special conventions became the union’s highest authority and were held at the districts’ request. Members directly elected delegates to conventions and no central councillors could be delegates. This was a reform that dissidents like Jack Cullinan unsuccessfully tried to implement in the AWU to break the oligarchy. While the AWU rules enabled the leaders to entrench their control, the Miners Federation rules successfully operated to prevent the accumulation of too much power into a small group of top officials.

**Membership decision-making**

All central council decisions needed to be approved by the members directly in open votes at their lodge meetings. The members usually adopted council decisions, but some were rejected. Unlike AWU members, Miners Federation members also voted on all district employment contracts, strikes and political affiliations. These votes were sometimes by ballot but usually by open vote at lodges or aggregate meetings of all the lodges in an area. Famously, the northern miners rejected their leaders’ compromise agreement during the 1929 lockout. Pressure from below and the miners’ culture of membership authority was obvious at meetings with routine verbal, and occasionally physical, abuse of officials. “You’ve sold us” was a common accusation flung at officials promoting a compromise agreement. The lodges and districts facilitated further membership decision-making. Lodges operated as participatory democracies in which members voted on local issues at daily pit top and regular lodge meetings. Members also sometimes exercised direct

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129 Miners Federation Rules 1921, E165/1/2, NBAC, 5.
130 Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 9-10.
133 “Aggregate meeting,” SMH 7 December 1929, 17-18.
democracy by voting on district issues. For example, in the early years of the Miners Federation the Southern NSW District required a membership ballot to approve all district money spending.\(^{135}\)

The Miners Federation encouraged maximum participation. Voting turnout in ballots was almost always over 50 per cent and usually around 75 per cent, far higher than the AWU which peaked around 25 per cent.\(^{136}\) The Miners Federation’s 1916 rules advised members to “be regular in your attendance at branch meetings”, “have your say during debate but cheerfully accept the will of the majority” and “remember that the lodge meeting and not the sidewalk or the nearest gin mill is the place to discuss union affairs”.\(^{137}\) Some lodges even imposed compulsory attendance with fines for not attending monthly lodge meetings.\(^{138}\)

Many employers and conservative politicians and commentators argued that open votes were not democratic because the more reasonable and conservative miners were often bullied into voting for militant proposals like strikes. They argued that if secret ballots were used many stoppages would not have occurred.\(^{139}\) Some Miners Federation members made similar arguments and campaigned for secret ballots to replace open voting.\(^{140}\) One miner observed in 1923 that many members “sit at a meeting and watch which way the hands go and vote against their conscience”.\(^{141}\) These campaigns for secret ballots were occasionally successful in the 1930s and several lodges replaced open voting with the compulsory secret ballot enforced with fines for failing to vote.\(^{142}\) However, most officials countered that open discussion and voting was essential to the union’s participatory democracy.

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\(^{135}\) Miners Federation Illawarra District Rules 1917, E165/12, NBAC, 15.
\(^{137}\) Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 3.
\(^{138}\) Abermain number 1 Lodge Rules 1937, N114/5/962, 5.
\(^{140}\) “Move for secret ballot,” *SMH* 9 December 1929, 11.
\(^{142}\) “South Bulli mine,” *SMH* 12 February 1935, 9.
Metcalfe described what he called a culture of “larrikin conformism” in the coalfields. As a result of their strong occupational culture and masculine mateship, miners showed a “strong tendency to suppress by ridicule any attempt at differentiation”. He quoted a mine manager who observed that “the miners are the greatest cowards on earth. I’ve seen it happen at pit top meetings. I’ve seen everybody looking around. And the fellow next to him puts his hand up and the next one puts his hand up ... and so this one puts his hand up. And he’s quite aggressive about it once he’s made his mind up”. Tom McMahon, a miner at Aberdare Central in the Northern NSW District, presented a different image: “I’ll tell you what ... if a bloke didn’t agree with something at a union meeting he got up and spoke his piece. We weren’t sheep to be herded along this way and that way. Everybody who wanted to have a say could have a say. Then when all the talking was done, we’d reach a decision and stick to it. We stuck by each other – at work and in our towns”. Presumably the extent to which miners openly disagreed with the majority varied at different lodges at different times, but even McMahon’s recollection demonstrates that the miners’ emphasis on sticking to decisions and sticking by each other could make opposition difficult.

Open votes taken at large aggregate meetings were particularly open to intimidation. The biggest of these meetings would occur with leaders speaking from a hotel balcony down to hundreds of members in the street below. They often featured alcohol, raucous behaviour, abuse of officials, fights and loud aggressive minorities. These volatile crowds would abuse an official one minute and then cheer him the next after a short speech. This was certainly not a place for reasoned debate and disagreement.

Ironically, in the context of the Miners Federation’s high levels of membership decision-making, members had little choice over the most fundamental decision of all: whether or not to be a member of the union. In this way the Miners Federation

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143 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 87.
144 Ibid.
145 Moore et al., Back at the coalface : volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history: 28.
146 “Aggregate meeting,” SMH 7 December 1929, 17-18.
was the same as the AWU, and most other Australian unions, which sought security and numerical strength through compulsory unionism. Through arbitration awards the Federation won compulsory unionism in most mines. In mines where they had not officially forced all miners to join, the Miners Federation and its members brought huge pressure to join through exclusion, bullying, intimidation and violence. There were often strikes because members refused to work alongside non-members. In 1936 the first grade Weston rugby union team refused to take the field against Maitland because one of the players worked at a non-union colliery. The Northern District’s official policy was to seek out non-unionists in all sports and instruct Miners Federation members not to play against them. The Northern miners’ acting president John Kellock congratulated the Weston club on its action. It was the duty of every unionist to “refuse to speak, to play beside, or against, or have any association whatever with men who were working in mines not recognised by the Federation”.

In oligarchical unions like the AWU, one of few ways that members could influence the leaders was by leaving or threatening to do so, and compulsory unionism stripped them of this last remaining power. In democratic unions like the Miners Federation, however, compulsory unionism did not destroy union democracy because unionists did not need to leave or threaten to leave the union to influence the leaders. Nevertheless, compulsory unionism did have more subtle negative effects on the Miners Federation. A majority of workers forcing the minority to join their union is democratic in a hard majoritarian sense. But most theorists hold that a healthy democracy requires minority rights in addition to majority rule. By breaching these minority rights, the Miners Federation weakened its moral authority and unity.

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149 “Direct action,” SMH 13 October 1921, 9.
150 “Heresy hunt,” SMH 26 May 1936, 11.
151 Ibid.
Even some Miners Federation insiders recognised the problems of compulsory membership. Ross wrote in the official history that “the history of the Federation ... tells of the apathy and conservatism that can follow in the wake of unionism becoming a ‘formal’ thing with compulsory membership”. Like the AWU, the Miners Federation sought a short cut to strength through compulsion and in doing so created an uninterested and even hostile section of members. The fact that votes in elections were rarely over 75 per cent suggests that a significant minority of members were reluctant or at least apathetic.

Organised opposition

The Miners Federation frowned upon organised factions, parties or tickets of candidates in union elections but did not ban them like the AWU. In 1922 a ticket was circulated which included the sitting Northern District treasurer A. Lewis. He denied any involvement and said that organising tickets for elections was “not in keeping with the traditions and practices” of the union. All the same, allied individuals worked together in unofficial factions, as they do in all organisations. In 1924 the ever-vigilant SMH identified a “militant element” factional opposition based in the Northern fields. Metcalfe argued that “factionalism constrained rank and file involvement by giving organised subgroups considerable control over the rest of the membership”. This argument runs counter to the sociological consensus which argues that organised opposition is crucial to union democracy. Lipset and others argue that factional conflict gives members greater electoral choice, stimulates interest and debate within the union and holds officials to account. This is exactly what occurred in the Miners Federation when the MM and then Lang challenged its leaders.

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153 Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 3.
155 “Miners ballot,” SMH 5 December 1924, 12.
156 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 189.
The first open factional organisation within the union came in 1928 when the MM formed its miners section. The AWU would not have tolerated any openly Communist organisation and other unions, such as the Boilermakers Union, specifically banned MM members from nominating for positions, but the Miners Federation maintained its commitment to freedom of organisation and speech. The MM created councils of action including strike relief and publicity committees at each mine and MM officials such as Orr made bitter attacks against the Miners Federation Executive in the CPA newspaper, the *Workers' Weekly*, before he and Nelson successfully deposed the sitting leadership in 1934. Just as Lipset and others would have predicted, organised opposition enhanced democracy by stimulating membership interest and debate and providing electoral alternatives which eventually led to leadership renewal.

In 1934 the anti-Communist Lang Labor Party established a faction within the Miners Federation and openly tried to depose Orr and Nelson from the leadership. Lang toured mining areas campaigning for his candidates. This was one step further than the Labor Party had gone with the AWU where it had instead supported existing dissidents like the Bushworkers Propaganda Group and rival unions like the United Labourers Union and Pastoral Workers Industrial Union. Even though Lang was very popular in the coalfields, his candidates were easily defeated; evidently the majority of miners did not agree with Lang’s criticisms of the Communist leadership. While the direct interference of the Labor Party in union elections was potentially divisive, the episode arguably enhanced democracy by increasing membership interest and participation and holding the existing leaders to account with a strong opposition.

159 “Union control,” *SMH* 8 January 1934, 10.
160 “Miners must decide submission or struggle” *Workers' Weekly* 24 July 1931, 4; “Miners roused to action demand Rank and File Convention,” *Workers' Weekly* 1 September 1933, 2.
162 “AWU,” *SMH* 11 August 1928, 16.
Metcalfe argues in Michelsian terms that the members’ unwavering support for Lang in state parliament and for Orr and Nelson in the Miners Federation leadership reveals that members relied “on individual leaders rather than on critical consideration of policies”.¹⁶³ Perhaps this is so, but it could equally be argued that support for these leaders demonstrated the members’ ability to distinguish state parliamentary politics from union politics. Jim Comerford, a member of Richmond Main Miners’ Lodge since 1927, recalled that the men were generally intelligent and interested and did not follow leaders blindly. They “gave loyal support to their elected representatives so long as they merited support. Just as deliberately they would decide to replace anyone who they felt should be replaced”.¹⁶⁴

Lang’s factional involvement in the Miners Federation was not the first nor the only time the Labor Party organised to depose Communists from union office. In 1928 the NSW Labor Party Executive successfully organised for the defeat of Communist officials and delegates in the Sheet Metal Workers and Clerks Union.¹⁶⁵ In the mid-1930s Lang and the Inner Group also unsuccessfully organised to depose the Communist Australian Railways Union (ARU) leadership.¹⁶⁶ When they could not win internal elections, the Inner Group formed the Railway Operating Employees Union to rival the ARU.¹⁶⁷ The Inner Group also formed a new Metal Trades Union and tried to enrol members from existing metal unions.¹⁶⁸

**Equality of salary, status, skill and education**

Miners Federation officials received good salaries; in 1921 Willis as secretary earned £534 per annum excluding expenses and president Baddeley £221.¹⁶⁹ The lowest paid fulltime miners earned £236 per year, around half as much as Willis.¹⁷⁰ The

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¹⁶³ Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.*: 149.
¹⁶⁹ “Balance sheet,” *CC* 17 February 1922, 6
highest paid miners could earn £20 per week, around £1000 per year if work was consistent, but it never was. By 1939 the secretary’s salary was almost the same in nominal and real terms (there had been just 0.5 per cent deflation between 1921 and 1939) at £547 but the president’s salary had more than doubled to £481. They both earned about half as much as the highest paid Australian trade union officer, AWU General Secretary Edward Grayndler, who received £1000 per year. The officials also received many fringe benefits. Central council members enjoyed first-class rail travel, but did not celebrate it as openly as AWU officials, and in 1939 the president claimed £269 on expenses and the secretary £271. There is some evidence of resentment amongst the members regarding the officials’ salaries. This tended to be expressed most forcefully during industrial action and/or work rationing when some members complained that officials should get “darg rates”.

The miners’ leaders were very much part of the social elite in mining towns along with business owners and politicians, and most coalfields politicians were former Miners Federation officials. Labor Party affiliation increased the status gap between ordinary members and officials like Willis and Baddeley who became politicians and/or powerful members of the extra-parliamentary party. Miners Federation leaders were guests of honour at important events and frequently interacted with other local elites like judges, politicians and businessmen. The elite status was exemplified at Miners Federation and Labor Party events where the officials and politicians would sit on the stage looking down at the audience. Yet there was nothing like the self-aggrandisement of the AWU officials. While the AWU leaders organised monuments for deceased leaders and made pilgrimages to their graves, in the Miners Federation that honour was reserved for ordinary members or officials who had become union martyrs. The Miners Federation erected a memorial for Norman Brown to commemorate his death when he was shot by police during the

172 “Union bosses,” SMH 27 March 1930, 10.
174 “Darg system,” SMH 22 February 1919, 12.
175 “Maitland district,” Newcastle Herald 19 April 1916, 8.
lockout at Rothbury colliery on 16 December 1929, and miners made an annual pilgrimage to the monument on that date each year.176

Most Miners Federation officials were former miners with limited education; Willis was an obvious exception. But like the AWU officials, Miners Federation officials gained significant education and skills on the job. The union aimed to limit this gap by educating members on important issues. There were frequent educational articles in Common Cause and the union held study classes and educational leagues for members to learn about radical and Marxist economics, political theory and history.177 The Educational Committee of the Women’s Auxiliaries also ran education and discussion classes for women and youths.178 It was the MM, however, in keeping with Communist tactics, which worked hardest to train the minds of miners with films, lectures and pamphlets.179

Miners Federation education was more indoctrinating than empowering.180 Rather than seeking to build the miners’ critical thinking skills, classes provided oversimplified sketches of radical economics and philosophy. Less formal education and discussion occurred at each coal town’s “log of knowledge”, a place where miners would gather to discuss and debate topical issues. These informal gatherings were probably more practical and less indoctrinating than official union education.181

The inequality of salary, status, skill and education between officials and members was detrimental to Miners Federation democracy. Officials often believed that they knew better than the members. In 1923 Hoare criticised “the destructive tendencies which are prevalent amongst numbers of enthusiasts who lack the necessary

177 “Study classes,” CC 23 November 1935, 8.
178 “Proposed Women’s Auxiliaries,” CC 28 May 1938, 4.
179 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 105.
180 For a discussion of indoctrinating union education see Matthew Mettler, “Social Science and Solidarity: Psychology, Organizational Reform, and Democracy in Walter Reuther’s U.A.W.” (University of Iowa, 2013), 115.
181 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 105.
scientific knowledge”. “Enthusiasm without intelligence leads us up a blind alley”, he concluded. But the miners’ strong democratic culture prevented anything like the arrogance of the AWU leaders who openly proclaimed that their members should obey them unquestioningly.

Free communication
The most important avenue of communication within the Miners Federation was its newspaper Common Cause. Within the period under consideration, Common Cause had three distinct phases. From 1921 to 1925 it was a stand-alone newspaper, from 1925 to 1935 it was a supplement within the Labor Daily, and finally it was a stand-alone newspaper once again from 1935 to 1939 and beyond. Gollan argued that “it was not peculiarly a miners’ paper but a propaganda vehicle for a simplified socialist critique of capitalism” which “reported briefly some news from the coalfields under the heading ‘King Coal’”. But this understates the extent to which Common Cause was an important site of free communication within the union.

The Miners Federation rules provided that the central council appointed the editor and sub-editor of Common Cause and determined “the interpretation of the union policy to be advocated in the paper and the management of the same”. This had the potential to make the paper a mouthpiece for the leadership. A Miners Federation member cited Australian Worker control by the AWU executive council as a cautionary example and argued that members should directly elect the Common Cause editors. Unlike in the AWU, however, the Miners Federation had a culture of democracy and free speech and the leaders and editors encouraged criticism and debate. In 1921 Willis said that “there may be room for criticism of policy and such criticism together with any suggestion for improvement will be welcomed” in Common Cause.

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184 Miners Federation Rules 1921, E165/1/2, NBAC, 24.
186 “General Secretary Willis’ opinion,” CC 25 November 1921, 3.
Editor Samuel Rosa frequently appealed for criticism of the newspaper and the union. He published detailed criticism of individual officials and policies and argued that all members “have the right to [Common Cause] columns” including “hostile critics”. The newspaper demonstrated strong independence from the leadership. For example, in 1922 it advised members to vote against the central council’s proposed 9 day fortnight. Nevertheless, the leaders did use the newspaper to promote themselves. Baddeley wrote a weekly column called “The Baddeley report” which included his photograph. Lodge press representatives sent local news, issues and arguments to Common Cause and, unlike in the AWU, they were free to express their views even when they were opposed to union policy. Free communication also occurred in the many pit newspapers that existed at individual mines. Pit newspapers became increasingly common from the late 1920s as the MM grew in influence and encouraged local newspapers as a rank-and-file organising tool.

When Common Cause became a supplement of the Labor Daily in 1925 its role as an avenue for free Miners Federation communication declined. It was reduced to only a few pages and lost much of its industrial content. Nevertheless, in 1928 the Common Cause supplement published detailed and harsh critiques by the MM of the sitting officials. John Hitchen, MM organiser at Coledale, wrote: “Away with bureaucracy! Away with oligarchy! It is an organised rank and file we need, not an entrenched oligarchy”. However, the substance of Hitchen’s criticism was against the officials’ support for arbitration and he did not substantiate his claims of “entrenched oligarchy” within the union. The fact that the union’s official newspaper published harsh criticism from a faction that was increasingly threatening to defeat the

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188 Ibid.
190 “The Baddeley report,” LD (CC supplement) 7 April 1928, 1.
192 O’Lincoln, “The militant minority: Organising rank and file workers in the thirties.”
193 “Two oligarchies and a democracy,” LD 6 April 1928, 8; “The coal crisis,” LD (CC supplement) 7 April 1928, 1.
incumbent leadership is an impressive example of freedom of speech and press within a union.

When *Common Cause* broke away from the *Labor Daily* in 1935 it announced that it would once again “fulfil its role as an organ providing free exchange of ideas, opinions and criticism ... there will be more space and greater scope for discussion in the future”.\(^{194}\) Orr instructed that “our members must read and study *Common Cause* and when necessary offer criticism”.\(^{195}\) In reality, however, under the Communist leadership *Common Cause* lost much of its independence and role as an avenue of free communication. Orr and Nelson appointed Edgar Ross, former President of the Broken Hill MM, as editor of *Common Cause*. In conformity with the CPA’s hierarchical organisation, under Ross’s editorship the newspaper became highly supportive of the leadership.\(^{196}\) Headlines like “Orr builds up an unanswerable case” became the norm and criticism disappeared.\(^{197\)}} If the members had directly elected the editor this decline in free speech may have been avoided.

Orr and Nelson also used other avenues of official union communication to their electoral advantage. In 1934 they sent circulars to all miners’ lodges in NSW to counteract Lang’s propaganda against them.\(^{198}\) They also took advantage of other forms of communication such as the rise of radio. Radio stations in mining towns gave airtime to Miners Federation officials in slots such as 2CK Cessnock’s “Mining News” segment.\(^{199}\) This was not an opportunity for discussion, debate or rank-and-file input but rather a forum for the leaders to promote themselves and their views. Willis and Lang were especially interested in the power of radio as we will see in chapter ten.\(^{200}\)

\(^{197}\) “Orr builds up unanswerable case,” *CC* 1 April 1939, 6.  
\(^{198}\) “Circular to miners,” *SMH* 30 Oct 1934, 9.  
\(^{199}\) “Northern district matters,” *CC* 12 August 1939, 4.  
Blaming the propaganda battle between the Lang and Communist candidates in the union’s 1934 elections, in 1935 the Miners Federation introduced a new rule banning campaign material.\(^{201}\) This advantaged the incumbents as it made it harder for rivals to become known to the members. This prohibition on campaign material was not as bad as the AWU’s ban on election campaigning as Miners Federation candidates could still tour mines and seek media publicity. The close mining communities also meant that information could travel through informal workplace and social channels in a way that it could not amongst the scattered AWU membership. By the end of the interwar period the Communist Miners Federation leadership had eroded free communication somewhat but to nowhere near the extent as had occurred in the AWU.

**Conclusion**

Miners Federation democracy had its weaknesses. Open votes and compulsory membership could undermine democracy through pressure, intimidation, apathy and hostility. Inequality between officials and members encouraged elitism amongst the leaders and free communication within the union declined under the Communist leadership. But compared with the AWU, and by the standards of the literature on other large, national unions in Australia and internationally, the Miners Federation was highly democratic.

Democratic rules, high levels of membership decision-making and strong organised opposition all facilitated this democracy. At its foundation was the miners’ strong occupational community and democratic culture through which members were able to pressure leaders “from below” and elect officials who believed in high levels of rank-and-file control. Labor Party affiliation had mixed effects. On the pro-democracy side it provided organised opposition to the sitting officials but on the anti-democracy side it increased the status gap between members and officials, increased membership passivity by privileging political action over industrial action, and reduced the capacity of *Common Cause* to facilitate free union communication.

\(^{201}\) “Miners elections,” *SMH* 5 April 1935, 13.
CHAPTER V
Building a national Miners Federation

Strong occupational communities are essential for union democracy. This chapter focuses in on the issue of local autonomy and investigates how the Miners Federation remained democratic while shifting away from local occupational communities and local democracy and towards a national occupational community and national democracy. Federation created new opportunities for the miners but it also created challenges. Throughout the interwar period there were tensions between traditional local loyalties on one side and the new national organisation on the other. To overcome these local loyalties, the Miners Federation successfully built a national mining community.

Much of the organisational work of the Miners Federation from 1915 to 1939 was concerned with resisting local challenges in order to hold the federation together. This was rarely a problem in the AWU, which had been organised from the top down and had not been built on strong existing local unions. Advocates of federation amongst the miners needed to overcome two forms of local loyalty. First, “localism” is an ideology that privileges location over other forms of identity with the effect of promoting unity between classes and concealing class interests.¹ Second, what I will call “localised occupational communities” occur when workers feel strong loyalty and communion with the workers in their industry in their location but far less with workers in the same industry in other locations. This is a related but distinct phenomenon from localism because localised occupational communities may or may not be loyal to other groups and individuals in their locality such as employers.

Local loyalties manifested in a range of problematic ways within the Miners Federation. Unauthorised local stoppages undermined the very reasons that the Federation had been created, as they challenged its claim to be a united, disciplined organisation that would fight as one unit, speak as one voice and honour agreements and awards. Furthermore, some members’ reluctance and refusal to pay strike levies

¹ Erik Eklund, ”The ‘Place’ of Politics: Class and Localist Politics at Port Kembla, 1900-30,” Labour History 78(2000): 95.
for distant miners threatened the financial security of the union. Local decisions being made at the national level undermined the effectiveness and unity of the Miners Federation because miners nationally did not understand issues as well as locals did, and the interests of the miners in one location were often opposed to the interests of those in another. Localism and positive relationships between mine owners and miners further undermined Miners Federation unity and caused many smaller collieries to be outside the Federation. The Great Depression further encouraged local thinking amongst some miners with increased hostility to “outsiders” taking “local work”.

Yet the Miners Federation overcame these challenges and became one of the most powerful and successful unions in Australian history. Crucially, unlike other big national unions, notably the AWU, the miners did so while remaining democratic. They achieved this impressive feat by building a strong national mining community. This was a different kind of community from the miners’ longstanding local occupational communities because a national mining community was one in which all the members could not know or interact with one another. It was therefore what Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community”.

Just as Anderson argued that daily newspapers printed in the common tongue were the key to the formation of national imagined communities, the Miners Federation’s national newspaper, Common Cause, was a key component in the construction of the miners’ national imagined community. Common Cause exposed miners to the thoughts and practices of miners nationwide. It highlighted their shared experiences, interests and dangers and recounted the history of mining and the improvements won through collective struggle. Shared entertainment and sport between regions further enhanced national sentiment, as did the national organisation of the Women’s Auxiliaries in the 1930s.

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Rising levels of class consciousness amongst the miners was the final crucial ingredient in the formation of a national mining community. The historiography explains the interwar rise in class consciousness amongst the miners as a result of the workplace conflict that is inherent to mining, the social and economic conditions of the First World War and Great Depression, and the period’s prominent radical ideologies and organisations like the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and its Militant Minority (MM). I add to this analysis, elaborating on it in relation to the more practical application of anti-capitalist ideology by the leadership, the effects of changing mine management techniques, and the increasing inclusion of women in the miners’ community. These factors combined to create a national mining community which formed the basis of the Miners Federation’s national organisational democracy.

Figure 23 Coal miners next to a coal train at Gartlee mine near Newcastle in 1898.³

³ Ralph Snowball. NLA 210118543.
Historiography

Robin Gollan argued that the formation of the Miners Federation in 1915 succeeded where previous attempts had failed because of the miners’ increased militancy brought about by the First World War, a growing awareness amongst the miners that “division meant weakness” and the able leadership of Albert Willis and Jack Baddeley. The successful 1916 strike then “cemented the bonds of the Federation”. Edgar Ross highlighted the same factors but argued more explicitly in terms of class consciousness, contending that it was “many years before experience convinced of the truth of class transcending sectional interests, of the need for national unity to achieve common aims”.

These historians argued that class consciousness came easily to the miners due to the owners’ naked exploitation of mineworkers and disregard for their safety. The fact that class consciousness became stronger during the First World War and over the interwar period was primarily due to the social and economic circumstances, most notably the Great Depression. Although they did not use this terminology, both historians acknowledged that in order to succeed the Miners Federation needed to convince various localised mining communities to become part of a national community of miners. But the fact that these histories had little focus on the miners’ internal structure, organisation or democracy means that these issues were not explored in detail.

Gollan and Ross gave even less attention to localism. Throughout their narratives they tacitly acknowledged some instances of localism but they never explored the tensions between localism and national organisation or class consciousness. Instead, their overriding arguments concerned the high levels of class conflict that existed between the miners and mine owners. Gollan presented the class conflict as

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5 Ibid., 148.
timeless, arguing that in mining “more than in any other industry employers and employees have faced each other as enemies”. Later, he continued that “generations of industrial struggle prepared miners for the blunt assertion that the working class and the employing class have nothing in common”.

Jim Comerford began mining in 1927 and was Miners Federation President from 1953 to 1973. His book *Lockout* detailed the 1929 Northern district lockout, based partly on his own memories and partly on historical research. He argued that the miners’ militancy sprang from close-knit, one industry communities sited close to each other. Everything in the nature and dangers of mining worked to bring on the clearly distinctive outlook among the people of those pit towns and villages with their Miners Federation lodges, fiercely attached to their district and central organisations.

He conflated miners’ local loyalty with loyalty to their district and central organisations. For Comerford, the first led logically into the latter. I will demonstrate, however, that it was not always so straightforward, and that local loyalties often led to hostility to the district and national organisations.

Raymond Markey’s argument is closer to my own than Gollan’s. Markey briefly recognised that because of the miners’ strong local structure and history, “much of the history of mining unionism consists of a struggle between lodge and district hegemony”. He suggested that miners had strong local communities but that “intercommunity links” between areas “remained weak in the nineteenth century”. He also tacitly acknowledged the existence of localism: “under circumstances of underemployment an individual lodge’s interests might become identified with those of the local employers”. His analysis ended in 1910 whereas I am concerned with how these issues continued to play out in the decades following 1915.

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8 Ibid., 1.
9 Ibid., 123.
12 Ibid.
There have been several important studies of localism in Australian mining towns.\(^\text{13}\) As Barry McGowan observed:

mining society was complex, involving a mosaic of occupations, working arrangements, ethnic and religious backgrounds and allegiances. Referring solely to time worn clichés of class and struggle simply will not do. A number of historians and sociologists have suggested localism as an additional aid.\(^\text{14}\)

Greg Patmore studied localism in Lithgow from 1869 to 1932. He concluded that localism had both positive and negative effects on the Lithgow labour movement. On the positive side, strikers received support from local businesses but on the negative side local unionism fragmented the labour movement and support for independent labour political candidates weakened the Labor Party.\(^\text{15}\) As well as being a manufacturing centre, Lithgow was an important coal mining town in the Western NSW District.

**Local autonomy in the Miners Federation**

The Miners Federation had a highly centralised constitution in which districts and lodges had little formal autonomy and the central council had complete power (assuming it could gain majority endorsement for its actions in the nationwide lodge votes).\(^\text{16}\) On paper this centralisation seems similar to the AWU, but unlike the AWU the Miners Federation was formed through the fusion of strong local bodies with decades of autonomous operation.\(^\text{17}\) This meant that in practice the central council did not have as much control over the lodges as the constitution suggested. The central council often pragmatically allowed the districts and lodges significant autonomy. Local variations in mining conditions meant that by necessity lodges retained a large negotiating role.\(^\text{18}\) Industrial agreements and awards operated as

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\(^{15}\) Patmore, "Localism and Labour: Lithgow 1869-1932," 53.

\(^{16}\) Miners Federation Rules 1916, E165/1/1, NBAC, 10-11.


minimum standards, at least in theory, and there were local fortnightly negotiations for prices based on the difficulty of extraction.  

Most of the lodges cooperated with the Federation most of the time but the central officials knew they could not simply dictate to them. When they left the central officials no other choice, lodges were expelled from the Federation and it was normal for several lodges to be outside the Federation at any one time. But unlike temporary AWU workplaces, mining lodges could remain healthy without the Federation, which could not afford to alienate too many, so appeasement prevailed and lodges were usually welcomed back into the fold fairly quickly. Strong local organisation enhanced democracy because it meant that there were always lodge leaders who could form rival leaderships to challenge the district and federal officials.

The arbitration courts encouraged union centralisation and discipline within the Miners Federation as they had within the AWU. Arbitration courts refused to hear the miners’ case while any collieries were stopped. Arbitration thereby forced the Miners Federation to either control or expel rebel lodges. In response to unauthorised stoppages, Justice H. B. Higgins, President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court from 1907 to 1920, said “apparently the men are not loyal to the public nor to their own union” and “if the executive were not able to control the union there must be other men to take charge. No union [is] worthy unless it secures the loyalty of the men”. Central control over stoppages also allowed for better state-wide or nationwide industrial tactics. Despite these pressures, the strong local occupational communities and history of local lodge autonomy meant that expansion of central control was contested and slow.

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20 “Hebburn no. 1 readmitted,” CC 30 November 1935, 2; “Central Council assembles for annual meeting,” CC 15 February 1936, 8.
23 “Miners council summoned,” SMH 11 August 1925, 9.
Localism and localised mining communities before the Miners Federation

By the early twentieth century the miners’ occupational communities were strong but they were primarily localised to individual mining towns. Local unionists often resisted regional or national organisation because they believed that they would lose autonomy and have to follow the orders of distant leaders who did not understand local issues. On the other hand, pressures and incentives promoting regional and national organisation included preventing workers from other areas acting as strike-breakers in local disputes, access to funds during strikes, admission to state and federal arbitration courts and increased political and economic influence.

Nevertheless, there was often more to divide mining communities from one another than there was to unite them. Before Federation, local and district agreements usually provided for miners’ wages to rise and fall with owners’ profits. The miners and owners in each location had interests in common against the miners and owners of rival mines. The classic example occurred in the Northern NSW coalfields in 1878 and 1879. The coal mines there operated in a cartel known as the “Vend”, which set a universal minimum price. Lambton owners started selling below the Vend price to increase their market share and the Lambton miners’ lodge cooperated with the owners as a larger market share meant more work and higher wages. This generated great hostility towards the Lambton miners and the Northern miners’ union expelled the Lambton lodge.

In the 1910s letters to the editor in local newspapers from professed members of the miners’ unions often advocated cooperation with mine owners. “Not satisfied” complained about the Northern leaders’ radicalism and hoped that “more harmonious feeling may be created between employers and employees for the general advancement and prosperity of the coal trade”. Another wrote favourably

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26 Ibid.
of an owner, reminding readers that “he has spent a few hundred thousand pounds in opening out a colliery in the vicinity of Kurri Kurri which has been the means of providing work for about 800 persons”. 29 “Old Newcastle miner” argued similarly against radicalism, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and strikes and advocated “an expansion of the Newcastle coal trade that is so urgently needed to fill the stomachs by those who are... dependent on the coal mining industry of the north”. 30

In 1907 the Northern miners had adopted the IWW preamble which began: “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common”. 31 But in reality mine owners and mining unions often cooperated. During the 1909 strike the Northern miners made a clever deal with two independent coal owners at Young Wallsend and Ebbw Vale: the union would allow members to keep working in those mines and the owners and the union would split the inflated profits caused by the scarcity of coal. Unfortunately for the miners, the government blocked the scheme by refusing to carry the coal on the railways. 32

Owners and unions also cooperated when the coal trade in their region was threatened. In 1911 the Northern miners adopted a resolution encouraging the NSW Minister for Mines to set a minimum price for coal leaving the port of Newcastle. 33 Later that year the Mayor of Newcastle convened a meeting of the local chamber of commerce, politicians and trade unions to object to control of Newcastle Harbour by the Sydney Harbour Trust. 34 In 1916 coal owners and union representatives travelled to Melbourne together to lobby the federal government to assist the Newcastle coal trade. 35

29 “Loyal citizen, mining situation,” NH 11 August 1914, 7.
30 Old Newcastle miner, “Colliery Employees Federation,” NH 29 May 1911, 6.
32 Ibid., 132.
33 “Keeping up coal prices,” NH 8 March 1911, 4.
34 “Newcastle Harbour: Sydney control objected to,” NH 12 May 1911, 5.
Employers and governments encouraged local thinking and local loyalty amongst miners. Owners and state industrial tribunals deliberately made agreements so that they ended in different districts at different times to discourage union campaigns across multiple districts. Mine owners would often agree to meet and negotiate with miners and representatives from their own mine or region but not from larger district bodies.

Financial disputes within districts encouraged local lodge loyalty. It is not surprising that members did not enjoy paying strike levies for other miners, which were usually about 5 per cent of their salary but could be as high as 20 per cent. Members felt that they were constantly paying levies to support miners from other lodges and then, when they needed support, the district officials refused. Disputes between lodges and between the district and lodges over money were commonplace. In 1910 the Northern district delegate board rejected a request for funds from Young Wallsend Lodge. In reply, the lodge unsuccessfully requested a refund of a strike levy it had paid earlier that year. Miners also complained that when mines that had enjoyed good employment for years went on strike, they were supported by others who had had little work. Members especially resented recent arrivals to a mine or district receiving strike pay. During the 1910 strike the Northern delegate board voted that relief money would not be paid to any “fresh applicants”.

Local miners did not like being told what to do by district officials who they often felt did not understand local conditions. In 1914 the Northern miners expelled the Minmi lodge for signing an agreement with their owners that barred district officials sitting on the local arbitration board. Minmi miner Walter Rawling complained: “I do not see what good any of the executive officers are on local arbitration boards as in nine

36 Albert Willis, “Conditions before federation were chaotic,” Common Cause (CC) 9 December 1939, 7.
38 J.W.R., “Colliery Employees Federation,” NH 7 June 1911, 2.
41 “Delegate board,” NH 30 March 1910, 4.
cases out of ten the local secretary has to explain to them for two or three hours” and even then “they cannot conduct the case half as well as the local officers”. 43

Miners especially did not like being told what to do by district officials in regard to political affiliation. In 1910 the Northern miners officials advocated affiliation with the Labor Party. Many members complained that they did not support the Labor Party, usually because it was too conservative, and that they did not want their union dues being used to support a party they opposed. David Williams feared that “the time is at hand when union officials shall say to everyone seeking employment ‘you must accept the same religion and support the same political party as us if you want to become a member of our society’”. 44 Dave McNeill wrote that “I and others right through the five lodges of the West Wallsend district have pointed out that a determined and bitter fight will be made on this question of political freedom”. 45

These widespread local sentiments meant that even as moves for a national federation were growing in the early 1910s, there were others campaigning to scale back district amalgamations. In 1911, lodges in the Teralba and Maitland regions unsuccessfully tried to create smaller district unions separate from the Northern union. 46 In 1914 the Albadere lodge submitted a resolution for the abolition of all central positions. 47 This was a reaction against the financial cost of central officials which Albadere thought was unnecessary. 48

Prior to the successful Federation in 1915 there had been several failed attempts. By 1910 the Northern, Southern, Western NSW and Victorian mining unions had formed the Federated Coal and Shale Workers Association but it was primarily consultative and did not have any authority over the districts. Even this toothless federation was too much for some localist miners, and there were various attempts to disband it. 49

43 Ibid.
44 David Williams, “Colliery Employees Federation,” NH 15 March 1911, 11.
47 “Delegate board meeting,” NH 16 October 1914, 4.
John Brown, secretary of the Aberdare miners lodge, argued that the lodges had better local knowledge, that the association had no power over districts anyway so it was pointless, and that there were already more than enough well paid officials without a federation.\textsuperscript{50}

**Challenges to the Federation**

Local sentiments did not just disappear with Federation in 1915. Even by 1936 J.N. Teerman complained in *Common Cause* that “petty inter-lodge jealousy and distrust” was “rampant” and “must be liquidated before any lasting measure of unity can be achieved”.\textsuperscript{51} He argued that all individual lodge picnics and outings “should be converged into a combined picnic sports day for the purpose of bringing the whole of the mineworkers and their families together”. He also proposed additional sports competitions between lodges and districts and ended his letter: “mass contact, rank and file control!”\textsuperscript{52}

The most common manifestation of local loyalty was local stoppages which had not been authorised by the central union. These continued to be a major problem for the Miners Federation central officials throughout the interwar period. Between 1919 and 1922 there were 900 separate stoppages on the Northern coalfields, mostly unauthorised.\textsuperscript{53} Unauthorised stoppages undermined the Federation’s ability to convince owners, governments, arbitration courts and the public that it was a united, disciplined organisation that would honour agreements. Metcalfe argued that “support for petty stoppages drew on reluctance to work and the interaction of resentments and loyalties within the workforce”.\textsuperscript{54} It also drew on suspicion of the arbitration system and the motives and loyalties of national Miners Federation officials.

\textsuperscript{50} John Brown, “Colliery Employees Federation,” *NH* 4 January 1911, 3.
\textsuperscript{51} J.N. Teerman, “Unity through sport,” *CC* 8 February 1936, 8.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} “Coal industry,” *SMH* 11 May 1922, 9.
Arbitration judges, mine owners and union leaders all wanted discipline. Metcalfe argued that this was a Michelsian example of the elite interests of union leaders being opposed to the interests of members. He argued that “officers’ credibility and effectiveness with owners, arbitration courts, political leaders and other union officials depended on their ability to predict and control the actions of their members. To do their job therefore they had to stifle a range of their members’ political responses”.55 Certainly many members believed this was the case. A meeting of 1200 striking miners in Adamstown in 1923 expressed these suspicions of distant officials. A slim majority endorsed the officials’ compromise agreement with the owners but the SMH reported that the meeting was marked by frequent interruptions and “general pandemonium”. Arthur Teece’s claim that “if the members of the Maitland district had had their way the Federation would have been broken up” was met with “uproar”. There were cries of “you have sold us” and “adjourn the meeting”. Willis then said that the men who were trying to bring the meeting to a close were the “enemies of labour” and “out to wreck the Federation”. He would “fight the whole damned lot of them”. The crowd replied with more “uproar” and further cries of “you’ve sold us!”56

All the same, Metcalfe’s argument underplays the extent to which the countervailing tendencies of rank-and-file pressure on the leaders and the leaders’ belief in democracy could counteract the tendency to elitism. For example, Jack Savage, a miner in the Western District in the 1930s, recalled that the Neubecks lodge “produced one of the best secretaries the Western District ever had. A fellow by the name of Jock Jamison and he was a true believer in every bloody thing. The men were never wrong and he always stuck by the principle that men wouldn’t be fighting if they wasn’t bloody right”.57 Federation officials consistently and sometimes successfully lobbied for the arbitration courts to be complemented by local tribunals to hear local grievances on short notice.58 In 1926, moreover, some Northern district

55 Ibid., 122.
57 Fred Moore, Paddy Gorman, and Ray Harrison, eds., At the coalface: An oral history (Sydney: CFMEU, 1998): 144.
58 “The labour year,” SMH 31 December 1924, 9; “Coal tribunals,” SMH 28 April 1921, 8.
officials sought to reorganise the Federation to better deal with local disputes. The plan involved appointing local dispute committees but it also involved moving the Federation headquarters from Sydney to Newcastle and abolishing the central council. It was really an attempted coup by the giant Northern district to take over the Federation, and the central council rejected it.\(^{59}\) Unauthorised stoppages were the biggest problem within the Federation and therefore made a good cover for the attempted take-over.

Levies were another source of tension. Many miners did not see why they should pay for what they saw as the follies of distant miners. In 1923 a section of Barrier men refused to pay the 15 per cent Maitland levy and the Federation ordered the Barrier district to expel any who had not paid.\(^{60}\) Many Queenslanders also refused to pay the levy, especially at Ipswich. The Miners Federation took one Ipswich member to the local police court and won the right to force him to pay the levy.\(^{61}\)

Federation decisions to provide or refuse relief payments to striking lodges were always controversial. As had been the case within the districts prior to Federation, many members felt that they were constantly paying levies to support miners from other areas but when they needed support the Federation refused. In 1932 the Wallsend miners lodge refused to pay the 5 per cent levy for Wonthaggi in Victoria because they had received no financial support during their own stoppage earlier in the year.\(^{62}\) At the 1925 Convention a motion had passed which appeared to take the power to authorise strikes from the central council and give it to the district executives while still using the central funds. This situation was clearly financially unsustainable and the central council rejected that interpretation. In response, a minority of Northern officials and members moved unsuccessfully to split from the Federation.\(^{63}\)

\(^{60}\) “Coal disputes,” SMH 9 August 1923, 10.
\(^{61}\) “Miners Federation,” SMH 20 October 1923, 15.
\(^{63}\) Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 321.
Both stoppages and levies were part of the wider problem of local issues being decided by the national organisation. As we saw in the previous chapter, national decisions were made in a highly democratic way. Central council needed to approve stoppages, relief pay and levies but then their decisions were submitted to the lodges nationwide for approval or rejection. Yet this high level of national democracy did not change the fact that decisions were not being made at the local level by the people involved, and many miners did not appreciate “outside interference”. Even by 1955, when Walter “Pincher” Smart became Southern President, he recalled that when he visited local lodges “there was some kind of trouble at nearly every meeting.” When he addressed a rowdy pit top meeting at Scarborough, one of the men stood up and said:

I’ve never heard so much bullshit in my life. This bloody fellow comes out here from Corrimal pit top, trying to tell us what to do? Tell him to piss off! We’ve had enough of him!

These disputes often led to fist fights between members and even between members and officials. Such conflicts were said to have been settled in the “bull paddock”. Smart recalled that “in those days many an argument was settled in this way without any holding of grudges”.

National control over local issues was problematic not only because miners and officials nationwide did not understand issues as well as the people involved, but also because the interests of the miners in one location were often opposed to the interests of miners in another location. In late 1929, during the Northern lockout, the Northern district leaders supported a compromise with owners and the end of the lockout. But the representatives from other districts on the central council blocked the resumption. The SMH claimed that even though they were paying a 12.5 per cent levy, the other districts were still better off because the removal of Northern coal from the market meant more demand and higher prices. Whether or not the SMH

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64 “Minutes,” CC 17 February 1922, 7.
65 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 91.
66 Ibid., 90.
67 Ibid., 183.
68 Ibid., 91.
69 “Northern miners,” SMH 29 November 1929, 13.
was correct about the motivations of the central councillors, many northern miners believed that it was. The *SMH* reported widespread feeling in the north against the Federation which undesirably “centralise[d] authority which should be in the hands of the lodge members”.70 In 1932 the John Darling lodge refused the central council’s instruction for a sympathy strike with the Newcastle branch of the Seamen’s Union. Members nationwide supported the sympathy strike, but it was easy for them to take a principled stand of class solidarity because it did not affect their wages.71

A similar example occurred when miners at Wonthaggi in Victoria went on strike in 1934. Representatives from NSW coal owners quickly travelled to Melbourne seeking to exploit the situation and secure coal contracts for a minimum of between one and two years.72 This would have meant more work for NSW miners and former trade union official George Waite wrote that the NSW miners were “quite willing to levy themselves a few shillings weekly to prolong the struggle at Wonthaggi whilst they are financial gainers thereby”. 73 The 1934 strike was successful but ill feelings towards NSW miners remained. Three years later when Wonthaggi went on strike again some miners complained that they were being “sacrificed” in the interests of NSW members and they quickly voted to resume work.74

Localism and cooperation with employers continued long after Federation. As much as radical officials and members preached the class war, the fact remained that miners and owners often had interests in common. Throughout the interwar period the Miners Federation called for owners to establish cartels and criticised owners and miners who undercut prices.75 Some workers hated their mine owners, but relations between owners and miners were amicable in other places. Jack Savage was a miner at Big Spur Colliery in Portland, Victoria in the 1930s. Arthur Earnshaw owned Big Spur and his brother Ike was a horse trainer in Sydney. Savage recalled

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70 “Northern miners,” *SMH* 29 November 1929, 13.
72 “Union levy,” *SMH* 1 October 1932, 14.
74 “Strike to end,” *SMH* 13 May 1937, 15.
75 “Strike not wanted,” *SMH* 14 July 1937, 16.
that he often spoke to Arthur about horseracing and asked for insider tips.76 At smaller mines with single owners and several dozen miners there were often positive relationships between employers and employees and the interests of owner and workers were more obviously aligned. During strikes, smaller mines would offer to pay their workers double to stay on as coal prices increased due to decreased supply. Both miners and owners could make a lot of money, even if it meant the miners would be expelled from the Miners Federation. For this and other reasons many smaller mines were outside the Federation.77

During the First World War, a series of mining company amalgamations led to the formation of Amalgamated Collieries which enjoyed virtually a monopoly on coal production from 1920 to 1927. This created huge profits for owners and high wages for miners but the rest of society bore the costs through inflated coal prices.78 In 1928 members of the Abadere Central lodge met the owners of their colliery and reached agreement without the Federation.79 The SMH claimed that many other lodges also wished to deal directly with their employer because, “in the words of one lodge official”, the Miners Federation executive “has never veered from a policy of using any minor pinprick as justification for poisoning the relations between the proprietors and their employees”.80

The mine owners and their organisations encouraged localism. C.M. McDonald, President of the Northern Collieries Association, said that “the coalowners deplore the cunning attempts being made to create a spirit of hostility and intolerance between the owners and the mine workers whose interests are practically identical”. He continued that “although the owners have suffered seriously at the hands of [Miners Federation] officialdom, they have no quarrel with the rank and file of mine

76 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 140.
79 “Miners split,” SMH 27 August 1928, 11.
80 Ibid.

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workers who, generally speaking, are industrious and loyal and good citizens”. The owners would meet with the men but not the “unhelpful” officials.  

The MM’s growth from the late 1920s was based in part on encouraging a return to miners’ local organising through its focus on job committees. This occurred during the Comintern’s “Third Period” in which it encouraged Communists to establish alternative structures to the existing “social fascist” unions. The MM advocated job control through militant job committees at each mine. In 1934 the MM’s James Jack was elected Northern president, defeating Hoare who the MM dismissed as a “left phrase monger”. Jack said “it is only rank and file control of the workers, by the workers that will allow them to work out their own destiny … I will at all times be subservient to the rank and file”. However, the CPA advocated “democratic centralism” in which members were free to discuss and debate an issue but once the majority had decided all members must fall in line with the decision. It did not really advocate any more local autonomy than currently existed within the Miners Federation.

In fact, at the 1928 Miners Federation Convention, the MM proposed to abolish all the districts and replace the central council with a general secretary and five organisers. The proposal was defeated by a two to one majority and even many who voted for the MM plan did so more from dissatisfaction with the current leadership than from support for centralisation. Unlike the highly democratic Miners Federation, the CPA was an authoritarian hierarchy which extolled “unity” through top-down “iron discipline”, similar to the AWU in organisation but not in ideology. For example, the CPA general secretary personally chose the Communist candidates for Miners Federation elections. CPA tactics involved facing the

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81 “Owners offer,” SMH 18 May 1929, 17.
82 Kimber, “‘A Case of Mild Anarchy?’: Job Committees in the Broken Hill Mines, c1930 to c1954,” 46.
83 “Job control,” SMH 4 January 1934, 9.
85 Ibid., 185-86.
87 Metcalfe, For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of N.S.W.: 111.
capitalists as a disciplined force which in practice required an obedient rank and file. But Communist Miners Federation leaders soon learned that the miners were not easy to control. In 1936 the Communist leadership ordered strikes at Lambton but the members simply refused.

Finally, unemployment and underemployment caused by the Great Depression reinforced some miners’ local loyalties. Even in January 1928 before the Depression, the Western district adopted a resolution that unemployed members of the district receive first preference for jobs. During the Depression the Western district pragmatically ruled that only those who had lived in the area for more than three months would receive relief payments. The Broken Hill district similarly closed the books to all but local residents in 1931 and this continued after the Depression. In 1939 the Southern district delegate board closed the books, refusing to accept any new members because of lack of work. Yet the Depression also strengthened the national outlook and class consciousness of many members, as we will see in the following section.

**Keeping it together: Creating a national mining community**

Advocates of Federation needed to overcome local loyalties and build a national mining community but they were not building completely from scratch. There was a limited national mining community that existed before Federation. For example, regional mining unions had sometimes given donations to other regions. One of the most generous occurred in 1912 when the Southern miners levied sixpence per man fortnightly to support the Western region’s Lithgow strikers. In 1868 the southern NSW miners had paid a 20 per cent levy for Newcastle strikers. This financial

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88 Ibid., 112.
91 “Unemployed,” *SMH* 8 July 1931, 15.
93 “Miners close books,” *SMH* 1 July 1939, 10.
94 “Relief of distress,” *NH* 17 February 1910, 5.
95 “Southern miners,” *NH* 22 January 1912, 5.
96 “Coal strike,” *SMH* 21 May 1923, 9.
support for strikes was not necessarily completely altruistic; as we have seen, stoppages in one region meant increased demand in others.

The leaders of the district unions visited and spoke in other districts. Districts also advised one another of unemployment so others would not come looking for work. The three NSW districts jointly lobbied the NSW government on legislation and other issues. There was also clearly some feeling of community amongst miners not only within Australia but also between Australia and Britain. Australian regional unions sent money to striking British miners in 1912. They also sent money and expressed sympathy during British mine disasters.

In the 1910s the push for miners to combine into a national union was strengthened by a desire to participate in the Federal Arbitration system and by popular ideologies, which encouraged larger union organisation. Federation received encouragement from radical organisations including the IWW. In 1911 T. Johnson wrote to the *Newcastle Herald* encouraging his fellow Northern members to reject capitalism, form a single industrial mining union and join the IWW. From around 1910 the officials of the various regional unions increasingly advocated federation. In 1911 the Northern miners appointed an organiser to work towards all coal unions combining. Three quarters (21 of 28) of delegates at a quarterly delegate board meeting supported the move towards federation. President David Watson said: “the present system of [employers] playing fast and loose with the respective organisations or using one against another must continue no longer”. In the past “the men of one state or one district had unconsciously perhaps worked against the men of another state or district and the result had been disastrous. In the future they must make their demands conjointly if they wished to be successful”. But he cautioned

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97 “Mining matters,” *NH* 17 November 1910, 4.
98 “Unemployed at Collie,” *NH* 5 September 1911, 5.
99 “Delegate board,” *NH* 10 June 1911, 5; “Southern miners annual meeting,” *NH* 22 January 1912, 5.
100 “Relieving strike distress,” *NH* 22 May 1912, 5.
101 “Newcastle regret,” *NH* 17 October 1913, 5.
102 T. Johnson, “Colliery Employees Federation,” *NH* 1 March 1911, 2.
103 “Mining matters,” *NH* 21 October 1911, 5.
104 “Mining matters,” *NH* 22 July 1911, 4.
that they should not be revolutionary: “if there was any hope for settled conditions and peace in the coalmining industry it would be through intelligent organisation”.105

Building a national mining occupational community meant creating what Anderson famously called an “imagined community” amongst people who did not and could not have regular face-to-face interactions. Anderson argued that the national community "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion".106 So it was within the Miners Federation. Anderson identified print capitalism and especially daily newspapers printed in the common language as the key to the formation of national imagined communities from the late eighteenth century. As we saw in the previous chapter, Gollan dismissed Common Cause as “not peculiarly a miners’ paper but a propaganda vehicle for a simplified socialist critique of capitalism”.107 I disagree with Gollan; Common Cause was a key component in the construction of the miners’ national imagined community.

Figure 24 Common Cause masthead in 1924 depicting different types of workers with a man representing “mining” standing in the centre.108

It is difficult to quantify exactly how influential Common Cause was amongst the Miners Federation membership. All Federation members received a copy of Common Cause automatically as part of membership so circulation does not tell us much. For

105 “Mining matters,” NH 30 November 1911, 5.
108 CC 23 September 1924, 1.
the period 1890 to 1930, Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa estimated that 87 per cent of “lower-middle class” and 55 per cent of “working class” families in NSW purchased at least one daily newspaper and more would have read newspapers on an irregular basis. The authors concluded that “these rates for newspaper reading suggest a high literacy rate, as well as involvement in the world of the printed word”. These rates suggest that the majority of Miners Federation members and their families probably read the weekly Common Cause regularly and also read at least one additional daily newspaper. The Miners Federation’s leaders certainly thought Common Cause was influential and important. Jim Comerford, Federation president from 1953 to 1973, considered the establishment of Common Cause to be one of the Miners Federation’s most outstanding achievements.109

The union’s leaders recognised the importance of the national newspaper and they and the editors deliberately used it to unite the miners. In 1921 Willis said “Common Cause is absolutely essential to our organisation for the purpose of keeping in touch with the whole of our members”.111 When he launched the new Common Cause in 1935 Orr was even more explicit, saying that “the official organ will devote its main attention to welding together a firm unity of all mineworkers in the struggle”.112 The following year he celebrated the fact that “the union is now in possession of its own official organ which can speak to the membership on a Commonwealth basis and develop a uniformity of thought on the major issues affecting the organisation”.113

In the previous chapter we saw that Common Cause passed through three distinct phases in the interwar period, but the newspaper’s efforts to unite the miners nationally remained consistent throughout. By its very nature as a national miners’ newspaper it exposed members to the experiences and opinions of miners in other parts of Australia. Common Cause also frequently highlighted the interests that

110 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, At the coalface: An oral history: 71.
111 “General Secretary Willis’ opinion,” CC 25 November 1921, 3.
113 “Central Council assembles for annual meeting,” CC 15 February 1936, 8.
Australian miners shared, the dangers of mining and the need to struggle together to improve safety. For example, in 1938 Common Cause published a full page of sheet music for a song about the dangers of mining titled “Don’t go down the mine, Dad! (A little child’s dream)”.

There were weekly reports on mine accidents and deaths in Australian mines and the newspaper published safety inspectors’ reports from around the country. When accidents occurred it also called for donations for victims and their families.

*Common Cause* featured many articles on the history of nineteenth-century coal mining in Australia and Britain and the terrible wages and conditions which had only been improved by collective struggle. In the 1920s editor Samuel Rosa, a prominent member of Sydney’s bohemia, published a weekly column titled “A Political History of Australia”, a serialised version of his book of the same name. Terry Irving argued that Rosa’s history was a ground-breaking and radical departure from the conservative academic Australian history of the time which set the path for the subsequent histories of Brian Fitzpatrick and Robin Gollan. It provided a materialist account by placing politics firmly in “the economic development of society” and highlighted the role of popular struggle in political and social change.

Rosa encouraged miners, when reading his history, to “let it fill you with that implacable determination on which success is firmly based, to hold what has been won at such bitter cost and struggle over the past century”.

Entertainment further fostered connections between different mining communities. Sometimes the leadership encouraged this activity but more often it came from local impetus. Local committees formed concert parties, which would visit other areas and perform. Evan Thomas Phillips was a Northern miner in the late 1920s and

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114 “Don’t go down the mine dad,” CC 17 September 1938, 7.
115 “Another victim,” CC 27 January 1922, 4; “Risks!” CC 14 April 1922; “King Coal,” CC 30 September 1921, 4.
117 “Slaves of the pit,” CC 10 February 1922, 3.
120 “The price the miner pays,” CC 16 February 1923, 6.
remembered that the coalfields concerts “were very entertaining and of a very high cultural standard because there were some very outstanding musicians and singers on the coalfields”. “There was no shortage of artists and the groups would do a great circuit of the mining towns and villages”, he recalled.\(^{121}\)

Women formed their own organisation within the Miners Federation in 1934. As a national organisation, the Women’s Auxiliaries officially extended the Miners Federation’s national community to minefield women. They were for the “wives, mothers, sisters and daughters” of Miners Federation members and “any other women interested”.\(^{122}\) The auxiliaries had grown out of the women’s department of the CPA’s Unemployed Workers Movement during the Great Depression.\(^{123}\) Other Communist led unions such as the Australian Railways Union (ARU) and Waterside Workers also formed Women’s Auxiliaries in the 1930s, but these unions were 30 years behind the NSW Labor Party which possessed a Women’s Central Organising Committee from 1904.\(^{124}\)

This 30 year gap partly reflected the differences between trade unions and the Labor Party, which I will explore in following chapters, and partly the fact that coalfields communities were generally slower in progress for women than the cities. Doris Seeton remembered growing up as the daughter of a coalminer in interwar Lithgow. She was “aware of great injustices between what people were allowed to do. My brother was allowed so much more freedom than I, simply because he was male”.\(^{125}\)

The Auxiliaries took the crucial work that women had done to foster local mining communities and brought it to the national miners’ community. They distributed propaganda, did relief work during strikes and organised entertainment, annual picnics, social and sports events, education and discussion classes for women and

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121 Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, *At the coalface: An oral history*: 103.
122 Miners Federation Women’s Auxiliaries Constitution 1934, E165/1/5, NBAC, 2.
youths.\textsuperscript{126} *Common Cause* also introduced a women’s page titled “For Minefields Women”.\textsuperscript{127} Irene Orr, wife of Miners Federation Secretary Bill Orr, was the founding national Secretary of the Women’s Auxiliaries. Its Constitution stated that “women have a special and important part to play in the social, industrial and political work of the minefields, with special reference to work amongst the women and children for support of the campaigns of the Federation”.\textsuperscript{128} The Women’s Auxiliaries’ first objective was “to assist the Miners Federation in its campaigns to safeguard the lives, health and economic well-being of the mineworkers including in times of strikes, lockouts etc., the provision of relief and the organising of suitable propaganda and social activities”.\textsuperscript{129}

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 25** The pink cover of the Women’s Auxiliaries Constitution 1934.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{126} “Proposed women’s auxiliaries,” *CC* 28 May 1938, 4.
\textsuperscript{127} “For minefields women,” *CC* 9 Dec 1939, 5.
\textsuperscript{128} Miners Federation Women’s Auxiliaries Constitution 1934, E165/1/5, NBAC, 1.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{130} Constitution and Rules of the Women’s Auxiliaries of the Miners Federation 1934, E165/1/5, NBAC.
Increasing class consciousness amongst the miners further assisted the formation of a national miners’ community. Class consciousness did not appear automatically. As Gollan and Ross argue, the Federation was born out of a rise in class consciousness caused by the social and economic conditions of the First World War and the prominent radical ideologies of groups like the IWW. They argue that miners were particularly sympathetic to radical critiques of capitalism because the exploitation of workers by owners was so transparent in the mining industry where owners clearly put profits ahead of worker safety. For Gollan and Ross, the economic hardships of the Great Depression then increased the miners’ class consciousness even further in the 1930s.

The historiography has correctly identified the major factors in the development of the miners’ class consciousness. Jack O’Shea worked at the Aberdare Extended Colliery in the Northern district between the wars and recalled that “after Rothbury we became more hostile towards the NSW Government and the bosses who’d locked us out of our pits”. Times were very tough and O’Shea deliberately blew off part of a finger during the Depression for the compensation money. Darcy Rowan worked at the BHP Nebo mine in the Southern District in the 1930s. “The company pushed and pushed” he remembered, “they had visions of Nebo becoming their ‘star’ pit no matter what it cost in human terms”. I want to add to the existing analysis by focusing on three additional factors that contributed to the miners’ class consciousness: the Miners Federation leaders’ more practical application of their radical ideologies, the effects of changing mine management techniques, and the inclusion of women in the miners’ occupational community.

From the beginning of the Miners Federation, its leadership was openly anti-capitalist and explicitly sought to foster class consciousness amongst the miners. Willis and other leaders led the unsuccessful push for all unions to combine into One Big Union to face the government and capitalists as a united force. As the 1920s and then the

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131 Moore et al., *Back at the coalface: volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history*: 37.
132 Ibid., 39.
133 Ibid., 119.
1930s went on the leaders increasingly applied their anti-capitalism in practice. They ignored and concealed the common interests of owners and miners where they arose and depicted mining as a zero sum game. They also ignored and concealed the many rivalries and hostilities that existed amongst mine owners. According to Miners Federation leaders, the owners were a united enemy and part of a united capitalist class. These depictions were inaccurate and oversimplified complicated interactions and relationships within the mining industry and between the mining industry and the rest of society. But this depiction was useful in enhancing class consciousness and uniting Australian miners against a common enemy. It was also derivative of the “class struggle ideology” identified by Miriam Dixson.134

In 1927 the coal owners approached the Miners Federation leadership to join a deputation to the NSW government to reduce state coal charges. As we saw above, the miners’ unions and owners had cooperated in similar ways many times in the past, but not this time. Three years later the SMH was still decrying the “ruthless leaders of the miners” who “would not even reply to the request”.135 Comerford questioned why the leaders did not cooperate with the owners and, ever the wages-and-conditions pragmatist, proposed that perhaps they did not want to get drawn into a discussion that could lead to propositions for wage cuts. As he then pointed out, however, the miners could easily have agreed to the deputation on the condition that wage cuts were off the table. For Comerford, then, the leaders’ actions do not make sense and he concludes that they made a “tactical error”.136

The leaders’ behaviour does make sense, however, if we see it as ideologically driven. It was straightforward compliance with their insistence that the owners and the workers had nothing in common. They were showing the members that even when the interests of bosses and workers appeared to be aligned, they were not going to cooperate with them as a matter of principle. Simultaneously, the leaders made

136 Comerford, Lockout: 19.
renewed efforts to connect the Miners Federation with other working-class organisations. The short-lived Maritime Transport and Mining Union in Newcastle included the Miners Federation, Seamen’s Union and Waterside Workers Federation. The Federation also became more closely involved in the Labor Councils and the ACTU.137

The Miners Federation’s focus on class consciousness increased further under the Communist leadership from 1934. After their election, Orr and Nelson sought to revive the Combined Mining Unions Council which included all mining industry unions and had collapsed spectacularly when the craft unions abandoned the Miners Federation during the 1929 Northern lockout.138 Working-class organisations could be forgiven, but capitalists could not. The leaders encouraged a simple, militant outlook: “us versus them”. When MM member James Jack was elected Northern district president in 1934 he told the miners that his advice to them would always be the same no matter the circumstances: “I will advise you to fight... I do not care what the result may be. Better to go down fighting”.139 As we will see in the following case study, the Communist Miners Federation leaders still tacitly acknowledged the reality that miners and mine owners sometimes had interests in common, and, in extreme circumstances such as the threat of mechanisation, the leaders sought cooperation with the owners. But they did not dwell on these contradictions and maintained that “struggle between the coal owners and the mineworkers is inevitable”.140

An additional factor that cultivated class consciousness amongst the miners was a series of changes in mine management which degraded relations between miners and managers in some mines. Piecework allowed miners significant autonomy over when and how they worked and was an important factor in the miners’ spirit of independence which made them more likely than most other workers to resist authoritarian employers. Piecework limited employers’ ability to control the amount

137 Ross, A History of the Miners Federation of Australia: 360.
138 Ibid.
140 William Orr, Mechanisation: threatened catastrophe for the coalfields, Miners Federation, Sydney, 1935.
of coal or metal that was extracted. Individual miners might choose to work less than a full shift on any given day because they had already earned enough money for that week or because they chose to attend entertainment or social gatherings. The 1930 Royal Commission into the coal industry concluded that “on frequent occasions, mines have been thrown idle on account of the attendance by employees at horse and dog races” and recommended that “every effort be made to abolish these mid-week race meetings of every description and to reduce the number of such meetings at weekends”. 141

Different employers responded to the miners’ independence in different ways. In the interwar period local ownership was increasingly replaced by ownership by large companies. Some of these large companies, such as BHP, adopted an authoritarian position and aggressively confronted the miners, while others such as the Collins House Group adopted more progressive, consultative management. 142 Arthur McIvor and Christopher Wright distinguish between the “confrontational approach” and the rise of “welfarism” amongst employers in interwar Australia. They cite BHP as the prime example of confrontational management and argue that the company “victimised union delegates, established a company union, used staff employees to act as strike-breakers, and in the 1920s, used a lock-out and closure of its steel plant to win major reductions in wages and working conditions”. 143 On the other hand, the Collins House Group “were receptive to new ideas about industrial health and welfare being promoted in Great Britain and the United States as part of a more sophisticated approach to industrial relations”. This approach sought “long term stability and efficiency of the workforce” and “better working conditions was one means of ensuring this outcome”. 144

These alternative management approaches were most clearly displayed in Broken Hill. Until the late 1920s BHP was the dominant mining company in the region and its authoritarian management caused tense relations between owners and miners. From the late 1920s, however, the influence of BHP declined and the Collins House Group came to dominate the Broken Hill Mine Managers Association and “the acrimony which had previously been felt between the unions and the companies gave way to an attitude of ‘give and take’.”

Broken Hill’s turn towards more cooperative mine management was more the exception than the norm, however. Beris Penrose’s analysis of lead poisoning in Mount Isa mine in the 1930s provides an illustrative case study of the dire effects of authoritarian mine management. In 1932, 110 miners received compensation for lead poisoning but the management rejected union calls for the appointment of a safety inspector. The management only employed young miners and “shift bosses who had little or no experience in lead mining or smelting”. The CPA argued that this “allowed management to accelerate the pace of work” by forcing inexperienced workers who did not know better “to rush back into dust and fracteur fumes” at great cost to their health.

Some of these companies, again most notably BHP, introduced “scientific management” and production techniques. The ideas of “scientific management” entered Australia from the US around the time of the First World War and were synonymous with “time and motion experts” with stop watches examining workers and assessing how they could speed up and deskill them, breaking work down into smaller, more repetitive tasks. This degree of division of labour was not possible in coal mines but “scientific management” took other forms such as creating a clearer divide between miners and managers by training mine managers through a cadetship program. In the past, mine managers had been former miners but the cadetship

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program enrolled young men who had never worked as miners.\textsuperscript{148} Rowan recalled that “experienced miners were ignored by company people who thought they knew everything there was to know”.\textsuperscript{149} “There were lots of cases where the miners knew better than these young cadets. The old hands could see dangers where the cadets had no idea. It was the cause of a lot of conflict”, he said.\textsuperscript{150} Tom McMahon worked at Aberdare Central colliery in the interwar period and recalled: “there were some bastard bosses that I wouldn’t even talk to today, even though I’ve been retired for 33 years”.\textsuperscript{151} “We were on one side and the bosses were on the other side”.\textsuperscript{152}

Employer indifference to mining accidents encouraged this view. Jock Graham lost his leg in a mining accident in the 1920s. He later wrote a poem titled “A Man of the Earth”. The third stanza read:

\begin{verbatim}
The court is the gauge that determines my wage,
The parson looks after my soul,
My hands are my boss’s, his gains are my losses,
My body is bartered in coal,
The gaps in the lines red roll of the mines,
Show death has been taking its toll,
While snipers at maimed men and dead men and famed men,
Grow fat on the blood of the coal.\textsuperscript{153}
\end{verbatim}

This poem reflected the view of many miners, probably most, that they were exploited by their bosses who cared more about profits than safety. By the 1930s, there was widespread sympathy amongst Miners Federation members for the officials’ depiction of mining as a zero sum game. As Graham said, the bosses’ gains were the miners’ losses, and vice versa. The localism of earlier decades, and the fact that owners and miners often did have interests in common, was ignored for what miners saw as the greater truth of the class war.

Finally, the Women’s Auxiliaries and the miners’ gradual acceptance that women had a public role to play in the Miners Federation further enhanced class consciousness.

\textsuperscript{148} Moore et al., \textit{Back at the coalface : volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history}: 169.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{153} Moore, Gorman, and Harrison, \textit{At the coalface: An oral history}: 124.
The relegation of women to the private domestic sphere had caused a cleavage in the minefields working class between men and women. From the 1930s, the belief grew amongst the miners that a true working class needed to include women. *Common Cause* encouraged this view and it published a poem by Cecil Watts which concluded:

In lowly little villages they plan for better things,
And a surer hope, a greater strength, each new dawning brings
For it’s no longer Jack and Joan, it is united ‘We’.
Oh comrades toast the Ladies of the Strike Auxiliary.

Dolly Potter, a founding member of the Women’s Auxiliaries, recalled how the women cultivated this united “we”: “if it wasn’t helping local causes it would be raising money for miners elsewhere caught up in a battle with the bosses”.\(^{154}\) This quotation is revealing in its class terminology. The women helped miners from “elsewhere” against “the bosses”. It did not matter where the conflict was occurring; for Potter it was all part of the one struggle between the workers and the capitalists.

**Conclusion**

A democratic national miners’ union required a national miners’ community. Formal national democracy began at Federation in 1915 but the national miners’ community did not instantly come into existence. It had to be built and in order to build it the Miners Federation needed to overcome longstanding local loyalties. The union’s officials and members built their national community through their national newspaper, *Common Cause*, shared entertainment and sport, the creation of the Women’s Auxiliaries and the development of class consciousness. In explaining the development of class consciousness I have focused especially on three previously neglected factors: the leaders’ practical application of anti-capitalist ideology, the influence of changing mine management techniques and the inclusion of women in the miners’ community. The fact that centralisation was slow and contested allowed the Miners Federation to retain high levels of local autonomy and prevented the rise of an oligarchical central leadership similar to that of the AWU.

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\(^{154}\) Moore et al., *Back at the coalface: volume II of the Australian coal miners oral history*: 54.
CHAPTER VI: MINERS FEDERATION CASE STUDY

The miners fight mechanisation 1935-36

By 1935 Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP) was the largest coal mining company in Australia. Looking approvingly at mechanisation in American coalmines, BHP announced plans to open the first fully mechanised coal mine in Australia at Lambton B colliery near Newcastle in NSW. Militantly anti-union, the company saw mechanisation as a way of cutting costs and further weakening the Miners Federation which had suffered from increasing unemployment since the First World War. In turn, the Miners Federation leadership understood the disastrous unemployment that would result from full mechanisation and vowed to resist it. The focal point of the campaign was an electric coal loader in the Lambton B coalmine.

This case study is of the Miners Federations’ unsuccessful five month campaign against the electric coal loader, and mechanisation more broadly, from September 1935 to January 1936. The campaign has received little attention from historians; it was short and unsuccessful and seemed to be struggling against inevitable technological “progress” touted by capitalists and Marxists alike. However, these contradictions also make for an instructive case study. We see a Communist Miners Federation leadership fighting mechanisation in the same month as successful mechanisation in Soviet Union coalmines is making world news. More importantly for my purposes, we see the complexities of Miners Federation democracy in action. Central leadership, a national mining community and working-class solidarity chafe against local community, local autonomy, membership decision-making and pragmatic concerns for jobs, wages and conditions all in ways that demonstrate the union’s high levels of democracy.

Developments in mechanisation

In the 1920s coal mining in Australia became increasingly mechanised with electric boring machines and coal-cutting machines gradually replacing picks and explosives. Between 1929 and 1934 Australian coal production increased slightly while employment fell by 10,000 men; production per miner increased 50 per cent and
wages fell 25 per cent.\textsuperscript{1} Mechanisation caused similar effects in other industries. In 1912-13 the Australian wheat farming industry sowed 733,269 acres of wheat and employed 58,840 men but by 1929-30 cultivation had increased sevenfold to 5,409,408 acres while employment had decreased to 38,049 men.\textsuperscript{2}

In August 1935 BHP announced a massive share release. It would issue 1.5 million shares at £1 each; this was one share for every two existing shares. BHP planned to use this capital for development including further mechanisation in its collieries.\textsuperscript{3} Electric loading machines would be used to load coal into skips at the coalface and locomotives would replace wheelers and horses to take the skips to the surface. In addition to the existing cutting and boring machines, this would entail complete mechanisation from coalface to surface. In early September 1935 the Miners Federation central council decided to fight further mechanisation.\textsuperscript{4} According to the central council mechanisation would result in the majority of coalminers losing their jobs and the destruction of most coal towns. Miners Federation secretary Bill Orr said that with complete mechanisation “a single colliery in America is producing 3.5 million tons of coal annually. Three such mines could supply the whole Australian market and ruin all other coalmining centres in Australia”.\textsuperscript{5} Unlike in other unions such as the Australian Workers Union (AWU), however, the Miners Federation Central Council did not have absolute power. In late September a conference, to which every lodge in the northern district sent a representative, met to decide whether to endorse the central council decision. The conference did endorse the campaign and the fight against mechanisation began.\textsuperscript{6}

Class struggle versus cooperation and localism

The Miners Federation national leadership linked mechanisation to the broader issue of “anarchic cut-throat competition” between coal producers which they said was

\textsuperscript{1} “The menace of the machine,” AW 2 October 1935, 11.
\textsuperscript{2} “Getting unemployed back to work,” AW 23 October 1935, 7.
\textsuperscript{3} “New industry,” SMH 31 August 1935, 17.
\textsuperscript{4} “The unions,” SMH 6 September 1935, 10.
\textsuperscript{5} “Mechanisation,” SMH 25 October 1935, 16.
\textsuperscript{6} “Mechanisation,” SMH 27 September 1935, 11.
the cause of coal companies looking to mechanise. The central council advocated a government set selling price for coal which would allow for higher wages. National president Charlie Nelson said “the price of coal is considerably below the cost of production, and is being maintained there by the intense exploitation and annihilation of the coalminer. The time has arrived for a definite understanding, and concrete action must be taken to stabilise the price of coal ... there has been no declared Newcastle selling price, and intensive competition has been a feature of the coal trade”. General Secretary Bill Orr added that city people who paid 50/- per ton for coal should know that the miners received just 5/- per ton in wages.

The Miners Federation reached out to the big mine owners and sought a cooperative agreement to set a minimum price of coal. But little progress was made because all parties knew that any agreement would be undercut by rival mines. In the 1920s most mine owners belonged to the Northern Collieries Association but by 1935 the two largest coal companies, BHP and J&A Brown Abermain Seaham Collieries, were outside the Association and determined to win a competitive price-war, as were many smaller mines. Almost all the small mines in Australia were in the Northern NSW district and in 1935 small mines whose miners were not Miners Federation members employed 551 miners and produced 246,697 tons of coal (4.34 per cent of the Northern district output).

Orr and Nelson were both members of the CPA and they distributed a pamphlet criticising mechanisation in class struggle terms which concluded that “struggle between the coal owners and the mineworkers is inevitable”. But their actions in criticising competition and calling for a set coal price tacitly acknowledged that mine owners were not one united force and that miners and owners had interests in common. The best course of action for the Miners Federation appeared to be

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7 “Coal mines,” SMH 19 September 1935, 11.
9 “Coal prices,” SMH 20 September 1935, 12.
10 “Miners may cooperate with owners,” SMH 20 September 1935, 12.
cooperation with owners to raise coal prices to the advantage of both. The Miners Federation leaders never publicly acknowledged these contradictions with their class struggle ideology but their actions demonstrate that they were sometimes willing to prioritise wages-and-conditions pragmatism above ideology. This approach explains why they were successful leaders of the Miners Federation even while only a small proportion of Miners Federation members were Communists.

Localism was also a relevant factor which challenged class struggle ideology. Massive unemployment of miners caused by mechanisation would hurt entire coal towns so business people in those towns were worried. Northern district President Tom “Bondy” Hoare told media that “the Federation was sure of having a plentiful supply of speakers from outside its ranks” at the meetings that would be arranged in protest against mechanisation. Some of the speakers would be business people, “who could see their own affairs being affected by the reduced employment which mechanisation would cause”. 13

Meanwhile the Southern NSW miners delegate board decided to “circularise all shire and municipal councils, business people, and others dependent on the industry, asking for their cooperation in the fight against rationalisation and mechanisation”. 14 In November 1935 the Miners Federation held meetings with small businesses in various Newcastle districts and reported that “many small business people agree with the Miners Federation that the introduction of machinery which may increase coalfields unemployment is undesirable”. 15 Coal town churches were equally concerned. At the Provincial Synod of the Church of England in New South Wales, the Reverend A. R. Holmes of Wallsend in Western Newcastle told the gathering that he came from a mining district “where the whole town is likely to be wiped out by the mechanisation of the coal mining industry”. He called on coal companies to “run their business on Christian principles”. 16

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16 “Coal produced,” SMH 15 November 1935, 12.
Many Marxists viewed mechanisation as both inevitable and desirable as a way of increasing productive capacity which would be crucial in the eventual transition from capitalism to socialism. Yet CPA members Orr and Nelson led the Miners Federation against mechanisation and had the official support of the CPA. Ironically, in late 1935 the purported success of mechanisation in coal mines in the Soviet Union was making world news. The USSR claimed that one man, Alexey Stakhanov, had cut 310 tons in 6 hours. He was meant to exemplify the possibilities of socialism in contrast to capitalist wage labour. The average output per miner before mechanisation had been 7 tons per shift. A Jackaroo from north-west NSW, Michael Kartzoff, wrote to the SMH: “can the members of the Communist Party who are associated officially with the Miners Federation and have been to Russia offer any adequate reason why Australian coal industry should not be as thoroughly mechanised as Russia’s is?” In taking the position against mechanisation Orr, Nelson and the CPA once again demonstrated that they could prioritise pragmatic responses to Australian conditions. It was also acceptable to cooperate with small businesses against large businesses like BHP.

The CPA’s newspaper Workers’ Weekly contained regular articles opposing mechanisation and supporting the miners’ fight. “J. McC” wrote a humorous article titled “Some problems of mechanisation” in which he said:

the mine bosses have decided that they will certainly do all in their power to prevent good men from being kept down, that is, when it’s a case of keeping them down a mine and paying them wages when they can get a machine to do the job at a fraction of the cost.

He also included a jab at the AWU:

And again, this trend towards mechanisation opens a big field. When one pictures weary AWU officials worried with the weighty problems of sabotaging cane-cutters' strikes, tolling long into the night jerking open stiff

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20 “Mechanisation,” *SMH* 16 October 1935, 8.
21 “Miners strike against rationalisation menace wide support against mechanisation,” *Workers’ Weekly* 15 November 1935, 3.
sliding panels, one can’t but think how much simpler it would be if all ballot boxes were fitted with automatic sliding panels—press a button and democratically elect yourself at leisure.\textsuperscript{22}

Twelve years later the ballot box scandal was still remembered fondly by those on the labour left.

BHP refused to cooperate with either the Miners Federation or rival coal companies. From the 1910s it had adopted a strongly anti-union stance across its business. It brought many of its senior managers from the United States where they had experience in successful union busting. \textsuperscript{23} In November 1935 BHP refused an invitation to meet with the Miners Federation, Northern Collieries Association and J&A Brown Abermain Seaham Collieries Ltd.\textsuperscript{24}

**The strike at Lambton B**

The fight against further mechanisation centred on Lambton B colliery. BHP had bought the mine several years earlier but it had not been operational since. That was about to change as the company began installing electric loading machines and electric locomotives.\textsuperscript{25} Nelson said “the gravity of the position, should this be given general application in the coalmining industry, will be all too evident to everyone dependent on the coalmining industry for a livelihood. It means that thousands at present employed in coalmining will ultimately be displaced, with no hope of ever again entering the industry.”\textsuperscript{26} Northern district vice-president John Kellock added “the position, put plainly, means organised resistance or our complete extinction”.\textsuperscript{27} He continued: “a crew of twelve men... will perform the whole operation [at Lambton B], and the loading machine will handle between 300 to 400 tons a day. This is a complete break with all past customs and traditions of this organisation, and will completely eliminate the miners and wheelers in the industry.”\textsuperscript{28} This reference to

\textsuperscript{24} “Mechanisation,” *SMH* 1 January 1935, 16.
\textsuperscript{25} “Coal mines,” *SMH* 19 September 1935, 11.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} “Mechanisation issue,” *SMH* 21 September 1935, 18.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
“customs and traditions” is important. Miners Federation leaders needed to work within the miners’ customs and traditions upon which their strong occupational communities were based. Work, community, organisation and democracy amongst miners all operated according to longstanding practice.

The central council ruled that no Miners Federation members were to work the mechanised loader. However, it quickly became more pragmatic and said that if BHP was prepared to concede a six hour day and a guaranteed minimum wage it would consider supplying labour for the new machines. On 1 November 1935 Lambton B opened with Miners Federation miners and the loader was not used. One week later mine managers began to use the loader and the Northern district management committee ordered a strike. But as we saw in the previous chapter, the Miners Federation retained high levels of local autonomy so it was not enough that the central council, Northern management committee and conference of northern lodge representatives had all declared against mechanisation. The final decision to strike was up to the men at Lambton B who belonged to the Durham Miners’ Lodge. On 11 November a lodge meeting held outside the Lambton B colliery unanimously supported the strike. The fact that the members got to decide the issue exemplifies the high levels of membership decision-making and local autonomy in the Miners Federation. Simultaneously, however, it seems unlikely that every miner at Lambton B genuinely supported the strike. The unanimous vote for the strike also exemplifies the democratic deficits of open voting at which it would have been difficult to vote or speak against the majority.

The Miners Federation enlisted the help of the Labor Party. Demonstrating the powerful influence that the union had over coalfields MPs, the central and northern executive officers called a meeting at NSW Parliament House with all the Lang Labor

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29 “Miners’ leader,” SMH 3 October 1935, 12.
30 “Miners terms,” SMH 19 October 1935, 17.
32 “Strike ordered,” SMH 9 November 1935, 18.
33 “Mechanisation,” SMH 11 December 1935, 12.
state members representing coalmining electorates. Unsurprisingly, the members agreed to support the fight against mechanisation. Soon caucus meetings of all Lang Labor MPs state and federal had agreed to support the campaign.

Even though relations between Lang Labor and the Miners Federation were strained by 1935, Lang Labor had nothing to lose by supporting the miners. In opposition in NSW and federally, there was not much they could do anyway. MPs questioned the Nationalist NSW Premier and Prime Minister during question time and the Nationalists replied that mechanisation was good because cheap coal would lead to coal industry expansion and more jobs. Cheap coal would also cause expansion in other industries that used coal. Jack Beasley in the House of Representatives proposed a select committee to investigate the actions of BHP on numerous grounds including “the proposal of the company further to mechanise the coal-bearing deposits in the Newcastle district, thus creating more unemployment”. Prime Minister Joseph Lyons replied that Beasley's only complaint was that the company was successful.

In November 1935 a conference between the Miners Federation and the coalmining craft unions unanimously supported the Miners Federation’s anti-mechanisation policy and the refusal to work Lambton B while the electric loader was in operation. The craft unions involved were the Federated Engine-drivers and Firemen’s Association (FEDFA), the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Maitland Deputies' Association, the Newcastle Deputies' Association, the Federated Colliery Mechanics' Association and the Electricians' Union. The unions agreed to support the campaign subject to endorsement by their members which suggests similarly high levels of membership decision-making in the mining craft unions as in the Miners Federation. However, the subsequent membership meetings refused to support

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34 “Miners take action,” *SMH* 2 October 1935, 13.
35 “Mechanisation,” *SMH* 5 October 1935, 23.
36 “Miners campaign,” *SMH* 7 October 1935, 7.
39 “Mechanisation,” *SMH* 7 November 1935, 12.
the miners. Once again the mining craft unions had failed to support the Miners Federation, just as they had five years earlier during the northern district lockout.

In January 1936 the mechanisation dispute took a new turn as the Miners Federation Central Council and Northern district officials recommended a nation-wide strike in solidarity with the Seamen’s Union. The seamen were striking over employers’ victimisation of some members. Again the Miners Federation leaders’ decisions needed to be endorsed by membership votes in aggregate meetings around the country. Conditions for a large-scale coalminers’ strike were not good. The Miners Federation funds were low and the coal companies and other industries possessed large stockpiles of coal “at grass”. Relief payments for striking miners would break the Miners Federation long before these industries ran out of supplies. Unemployed members of the Miners Federation would also lose their government relief if they refused to accept work as strike-breakers.

Nevertheless, the radical Miners Federation leaders encouraged members to support the strike. Hoare said that a strike would “lead to the building up of working class solidarity and to the ultimate victory of this [working] class over their economic opponents”. The SMH said it was an attempt by the Communist Minority Movement (MM) to restore prestige that it was rapidly losing as the Seamen’s strike failed. The SMH editorial employed a nautical metaphor and encouraged the Miners Federation members “that the seamen have thrown overboard all reason and discipline in a revolt which cannot possibly succeed is no ground for the miners being stampeded into doing the same”.

Miners Federation members in NSW overwhelmingly voted against the strike. At Kurri Kurri only 32 miners voted for the strike and 785 against it while at Newcastle the members listened to a speech by Orr in favour of the strike before voting it down

40 “Mechanisation,” SMH 9 December 1935, 11.
42 “Coal unions,” SMH 19 December 1935, 12.
43 “Miners misled?,” SMH 8 January 1936, 12.
44 Ibid.
by 256 votes to 34. The miners did not follow their leaders blindly. Because of the Miners Federation’s strong local organisation and autonomy, there were local leaders able to lead the “no” campaign. The secretary of the Richmond Main lodge, for example, told members “if you accept this resolution, you will be committing industrial suicide”.

Following the decisive defeat of the strike motion in NSW the federal leadership continued to campaign for the strike in other states that had not yet voted. Extraordinarily, the leaders’ goal was to win a national majority for the strike and force the NSW members to strike against their will. This displays a hard, national majoritarian view of democracy and a dismissal of local autonomy by the Communist leaders. At Ipswich in south east Queensland Nelson told a meeting of miners that they should ignore the result in NSW. He appealed to the miners by referring to pragmatic “vital issues” such as “mechanisation of industry” and “stabilisation of wages and hours”. He said the assistance of the seamen in the fight against mechanisation would be invaluable and if the miners wanted the seamen’s support, they must back them now. However, the Ipswich miners voted against a strike by 257 votes to 67 and the motion was similarly defeated nationwide.

The minority vote of 67 for the strike demonstrates that open mass votes did not always prevent a minority from voicing its opinion. Even if the national leaders had managed to win a slim majority in the overall vote, it seems unlikely that they could have successfully forced the NSW miners to strike against their will. Local autonomy in the Miners Federation was still too strong for that and although the union had successfully created a national imagined community of miners, the face-to-face local and district communities remained stronger.

Although the leaders such as Orr and Nelson attempted to justify the strike in pragmatic as well as class terms, the members’ voting suggests the pragmatic arguments were unconvincing then and they appear equally unconvincing now. It seems that in this instance ideology and loyalty to the MM and CPA, which were

45 “A sensible vote,” SMH 9 January 1936, 8.
46 “Direct action,” SMH 10 January 1936, 11.
leading the seamen’s strike, overcame pragmatic thinking for the leaders. Direct membership decision-making and local autonomy saved the Miners Federation from pursuing a hopeless and disastrous strike which would have left it broke and seriously weakened. This example runs counter to two widely held views in the union democracy scholarship: that leaders are usually more conservative than their members and that leaders are in a position to make more informed and rational decisions than members.47

Meanwhile the local anti-mechanisation strike at Lambton B continued and on 10 January 1936 BHP advertised for strike-breaking miners to replace the striking Miners Federation members.48 BHP quickly received hundreds of applications for the strike-breaking jobs and the SMH reported that the company was confident it could just as easily replace mining craft unionists employed at Lambton B if they joined the Miners Federation strike.49 This was the problem that faced every Miners Federation strike in the interwar period. There were simply far more miners than jobs and miners who had been unemployed for months or years were willing to risk the odium of being called a “scab”.

On 12 January the central council endorsed the actions of the Wallarah miners lodge in refusing to supply coal to ships staffed by strikebreaking seamen.50 Once again this demonstrates the strong local autonomy and complexity of Miners Federation politics as the Wallarah lodge was pursuing the sympathy strike despite its overwhelming rejection by Miners Federation members state and nation-wide. The central council announced a 2.5 per cent levy on all members to support the Lambton B men, the Wallarah men and donations to the Seamen’s Union.51 Members did not enjoy paying levies and this may have caused tensions if it had lasted for more than a few weeks.

50 “Miners attitude,” SMH 13 January 1936, 11.
51 “Call for non-union miners,” AW 15 January 1936, 8.
On the morning of 15 January the Lambton B miners met at the pit top and spoke with the district and national leaders Hoare, Orr and Nelson. By this stage the leaders had accepted the hopelessness of the strike and they recommended a return to work and the end of the campaign against the electric loader. This was a complete defeat for the Miners Federation and it ended a five month campaign against mechanisation. Mechanisation developed gradually in Australian coal mines but, fortunately for the Miners Federation, its effects were more than compensated for by the surge in demand for Australian coal during the Second World War.

Conclusion
In the NSW General Strike of 1917 the Miners Federation members had ignored their leaders and joined the strike with disastrous results. The union’s high levels of democracy had hurt it in that instance while undemocratic unions like the AWU had been spared. But in the fight against mechanisation and the unsuccessful seamen’s strike between 1935 and 1936 the Miners Federation’s democracy saved it. The members resisted their leaders’ ill-conceived call to join a disastrous strike in which the miners would have been starved back to work long before the stockpiles of coal were exhausted. The Miners Federation’s new Communist leadership learned a valuable lesson; the miners were not easily controlled from above. This case study provides an example of union members being less radical and more sensible than their leaders which runs counter to the assumptions in much of the trade union democracy literature. It also demonstrates the complexities of Miners Federation organisation and the union’s high levels of democracy and local autonomy in action.

52 “Men resume work,” AW 22 January 1936, 8.
CHAPTER VII
Democratic impulses: The community and rules of the NSW Labor Party

The historiography of the interwar NSW Labor Party is infused with cynicism. According to historians, the party was stuck in an almost timeless loop of oligarchy in which unprincipled union leaders vied for power. Some such as Don Rawson argue that these men sought power largely for its own sake while for others, like Miriam Dixson, some union leaders sought power to promote their radical ideologies. Either way, the consensus is that control of the party passed between different sets of oligarchs and culminated in the corrupt rule of Jack Lang and his “Inner Group”. For these historians, the structural basis of the oligarchy was the fact that trade union leaders enjoyed disproportionate and undemocratic power within the party.¹

This chapter and the following two assess the extent to which the NSW Labor Party was democratic or oligarchic, how and why this was the case, and how the Labor Party influenced the unions and was influenced by them. This chapter focuses on the party’s community and rules, while chapter eight will examine internal opposition, local autonomy and membership decision-making and chapter nine will assess the party in terms of extra-parliamentary control, free communication, corruption and violence.

I argue, in line with the historiography, that the party was an oligarchy, that the historiography’s note of cynicism is well-founded, and that its identification of union leaders’ disproportionate power as the chief anti-democratic influence is correct. But the historiography fails to recognise adequately the countervailing tendencies and forces that were operating within the party in support of democracy, and the many resulting improvements in democracy that occurred between 1910 and 1939. By glossing over the countervailing tendencies, historians have presented an overly pessimistic view of the party and this in turn has caused them to misinterpret key

events. For example, in this chapter I argue, contrary to the historiography, that the 1927 Rules enhanced party democracy.

We have seen how the Miners Federation’s strong occupational community facilitated democracy and how the absence of such in the AWU promoted oligarchy. In the NSW Labor Party there was not an occupational community per se, as members came from all occupations and also included professionals, farmers and businessmen. But some local branches had strong roots in local working-class communities and this gave them significant power over local issues. We will see several examples of local branches winning victories over powerful state-level factions. These local communities had limited influence on the party as a whole, however, because they were localised and could not match the state-wide organisation of the trade unions.

The 1927 Rules instituted a group system for the purpose of electing representatives to the party’s supreme bodies. This enhanced democracy as it gave every section of the party at least one central executive and annual conference representative, enabled the ordinary members to directly elect representatives to the central executive, and allowed for the development of local power bases independent of the state-level factions. The party leaders were motivated to institute these changes by pressure from ordinary members, desire to enhance their own popularity and legitimacy, their support for internal democracy, and the need to curb infighting.

Historians have incorrectly assumed that it was always in the interest of the controlling faction to make the party less democratic. I will demonstrate several examples where it was in the controlling faction’s interest to enhance party democracy in certain respects. These democratic improvements were undermined, however, by the fact that the 1927 Rules continued to give too much power to the leaders of affiliated trade unions. This, along with Lang’s overwhelming popularity with party members, allowed him to secure his domination in the 1930s.

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Requirements for party democracy

In previous chapters I have used the seven key requirements for union democracy as a framework for my analysis. With slight modifications these requirements are also useful for analysing party democracy. Democratic rules, local autonomy, rank-and-file decision-making, internal opposition and free communication are equally important for party democracy as for union democracy. Political parties will not usually have an occupational community because their members will come from a diverse range of occupations, but a strong party community from the local branch level to the national level facilitates party democracy by allowing for membership interest, involvement and empowerment. At the local level, party democracy may be based on existing communities such as working-class suburban communities. At the state and national level party communities must be imagined communities.

Comparison of salary, status, skill and education between members and officials was more complicated in the Labor Party than in the trade unions because members and leaders came from such diverse backgrounds and most extra-parliamentary party positions were unpaid. Political parties also have an additional category of members, the politicians. The status of the politicians compared with the members, and the extent to which a party controls its politicians, is an important additional consideration when assessing party democracy, which I address in chapter nine. The purported aim of Labor Party democracy was for the members to direct the politicians as their delegates in parliament, and without extra-parliamentary control that was not possible.3

The false assumption of trade union democracy

NSW unionists in the interwar period frequently argued that trade union power within the Labor Party was democratic because the union leaders and delegates “represented” hundreds of thousands of members. For example, Albert Thompson, organiser for the Milk and Ice Carters Union, wrote a letter to the Australian Worker

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responding to Inner Group criticisms of certain trade union leaders. He wrote that “to castigate officials in whom thousands of organised workers have reposed their faith by placing them in charge of their economic and industrial affairs” because “they express an opinion, or even dare to express the desires of the rank and file they represent, is... callously stupid”.\(^4\) This argument is based on what I will call the “assumption of trade union democracy” which was a false assumption in many cases, as we saw with the AWU.

The assumption of trade union democracy extended to the effect that trade union affiliation had on the Labor Party. In 1937, when criticising the Inner Group, Labor Council Secretary Robert King said that “in place of the democratic basis and sincere labour ideals of the Labor Party as originally founded by the trade unions... today we have a party machine run along the lines of a fascist dictatorship”.\(^5\) This line of reasoning was that trade unions were democratic organisations and therefore their involvement in the Labor Party would inherently influence the party towards democracy. Both assumptions are false.

**NSW Labor Party historiography**

Historians are sceptical of purported ideological motivations behind factional manoeuvring in the interwar NSW Labor Party. For Jim Hagan,

> it is possible to read the history of the NSW labour movement in the [1920s] as sordid farce. Some of its members were men of unprincipled and naked political ambition who indulged in corrupt practices to further their own interest and the interest of whichever faction supported them at the time. The factions themselves did deals and switched allegiances with every appearance of cynicism.\(^6\)

More recently, Rodney Cavalier argued similarly that

> NSW Labor seemed to be heading for a Shakesperian resolution. As men without principle vied for power, the blood shed in each powerplay washed


into the next and the next and the next. The beneficiary was John Thomas Lang. Serious evil will triumph when good men have abandoned the field.7 Historians focus especially on the bitter personal conflicts between faction leaders, such as Jack Bailey of the AWU versus Albert Willis of the Miners Federation, and on the oligarchical rise of Lang and his Inner Group.8 As with the AWU, there is a historiographical consensus that the Labor Party from 1916 to 1939 was an oligarchy, but much less focus on how or why. Don Rawson’s 1954 PhD thesis provides the most detailed analysis of interwar NSW Labor Party internal politics. Don Aitkin observed that it is “probably the best-known thesis on an Australian subject never to have been published” and it has set the agenda of the historiography to the present.9 There is a note of inevitability and even timelessness to the party’s oligarchy presented by Rawson, and much of the subsequent historiography, which gives it a Michelsian flavour even though no historian engages with Michels or his iron law of oligarchy.

Rawson argues that in the many disputes which divided the party in the interwar period “it is difficult to determine any clearly-marked differences of principle between the two [sides]”.10 For Rawson, the story of the interwar extra-parliamentary NSW Labor Party is almost entirely one of the personal drive for power and its rewards. By the late 1930s, Lang and his Inner Group had become “not only a close oligarchy but one with a number of unhealthy and corrupt features”.11 But this was nothing new: “‘stuffed’ conferences, rigged selection ballots and occasional physical violence were well known in the Labor Party before Lang and there is no evidence that he used them any more frequently than his predecessors, but he was in a position to use them more effectively”.12

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11 Ibid., 314.
12 Ibid., 313.
There is also a historical consensus that power within the interwar NSW Labor Party was built upon union foundations. In 1915 most of the unions combined forces into an “Industrial Section”, took control of the annual conference and changed the party rules to entrench their power. Cavalier argues that the 1916 Conference was the “great dividing line” in NSW Labor history: “Before 1916, the Labor Party was controlled by its [branch] members. After 1916, it was under the control of affiliated trade unions, which meant that the party was in the hands of whatever coalition of union officials could command a majority at the annual conference”.

Vere Gordon Childe, in his classic 1923 study of the NSW Labor Party, How Labour Governs, was generally supportive of this extension of union power. His main focus was criticising the useless and untrustworthy Labor politicians, and he praised the Industrial Section as “a genuine revolt of the unionist backbone of the party against the time-serving and inaction of the politicians”, adding that “it was in the interests of the politicians to strengthen the league representation in comparison with that of the unions, since the latter were most inclined to be critical”. However, Childe was also aware of the negative side of union power, heavily criticising the AWU faction which took control of the central executive in 1919 “not to further any principles or ideals, but to reward their friends and supporters with seats in Parliament”.

Rawson expanded on Childe’s critique of union power. He contended that from 1916 onwards “the argument that the politicians should be subject to the party as a whole now was extending to mean that the party should be subject to the trade unions” and this control was largely undemocratic because “the rank and file unionist had never had much voice in the way his union was represented at ALP Conferences”. No historian has investigated the effects of the unions’ internal politics on the party. When the Industrial Section broke up in 1919, Rawson argued that “it was at this

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stage that we see for the first time a process which was to become typical of the Labor Party in NSW over the next twenty years:

A faction based upon a number of unions revolts against the existing control of the party machine and takes control itself. Then an ‘inner group’ within the faction asserts its right to pre-eminence and begins to cast off its former allies, frequently expelling them from the party. Eventually the stage is reached where there are at least as many unions outside as inside the ruling group. These outsiders combine with the aid of as many party branches and politicians as they can get to support them, and sometimes with the support of the remnants of the old defeated faction. Eventually they overthrow the ‘inner group’ and the process starts again.17

Here Rawson has identified a useful and largely accurate pattern, but the timeless inevitability of the process also obscures important changes that occurred throughout the period and underplays the influence of countervailing forces.

Dixson, and more recently Geoffrey Robinson, have also analysed interwar NSW Labor in terms of union power bases. They are less concerned with internal organisation than Rawson and Cavalier and, unlike them, they are supportive of union power because they argue it caused the second Lang NSW government to be “the most radical government in Australian history”. This was not because of “Lang’s personality” but because he “allied himself with a group of radical unionists who expounded a class struggle ideology”.18 Robinson demonstrated that from the time he became NSW Labor parliamentary leader in 1923 until 1932, Lang and his personal allies were largely dependent on a shifting alliance of unions for their power within the party. Following “Lang’s electoral defeat in 1932”, however, “his union support declined, and his cronies and advisors became increasingly influential”. The loss of union support was especially apparent after 1934, and it was then that the Inner Group increasingly used the advantages of incumbency and corruption to maintain its power. But Robinson too argues that this was nothing new as “accusations of ballot rigging were a consistent theme of interwar NSW Labor politics”.19

17 Ibid., 11.
18 Robinson, When the Labor Party Dreams: 1.
19 Ibid., 27.
Although they do not acknowledge it, there is an important difference between the arguments of Dixson and Robinson on one side and Rawson and Cavalier on the other. For Rawson and Cavalier the factional battles are almost entirely about “men without principle [vying] for power” whereas for Dixson and Robinson the leading trade unionists were seeking influence, at least in part, for ideological causes. Unsurprisingly, there is truth on both sides and I demonstrate that both ideology and personal power were key drivers for most participants. It is not his focus, but Robinson briefly provides some explanation of the underlying forces behind the ideological radicalism in NSW. He says that unlike in the rest of Australia “in NSW the left was eventually victorious” because “miners had more weight in NSW labour, the ambitions of the AWU divided it from potential allies, but personalities were significant, the leadership of the NSW left was more pragmatic, the centre of trade union opinion was more radical and Lang was willing to seek the support of the left”.20

In addition to the unions, Lang’s intraparty power was also based on his immense personal popularity which allowed him to “appeal over the heads of party and union officials to rank and file members”.21 He was a large, imposing man appropriately nicknamed “the Big Fella”. Dixson argues that he possessed many of the key features of Australian masculinity: “physical strength, anti-intellectualism, anti-authoritarianism-in-conjunction-with-authoritarianism in personal relationships; ‘underdoggery’; an emotional bleakness and, correlatively, a tendency to keep women at an emotional distance”.22 He enjoyed the support of the majority of ordinary Labor Party and union members until at least 1938.23

This popularity was largely based on his personal magnetism, his legislative record as NSW Premier and his populist reputation for standing up for the “people” against the “elites” during the Great Depression. It was also based in part on the fact that direct

20 Ibid., 23.
communication with the ordinary party and union members was an increasing source of power throughout the interwar period. This was especially evident in the official NSW Labor Party newspaper, the Labor Daily, which Lang and his allies controlled for most of the period and used to foster his popularity. Hagan and Turner argued that the Labor Daily was of “immense propaganda value to whomever sought to control internal party elections”. 24

Historians contend that Lang and the Inner Group finally lost power in 1939 in conformity with Rawson’s pattern above. They overreached and refused to share power with the union leaders; the ousted union leaders combined to create an opposition coalition and eventually defeated Lang. The fact that it was increasingly apparent that Labor could not win an election under Lang “strengthened Lang’s opponents and demoralised his supporters” until he was finally defeated. 25

The historiography has given less attention to how internal governance within the various labour organisations affected one another. Bede Nairn said that from 1917 to 1923, “the AWU had developed its own brand of internal control and sought to transfer it to the [Labor] Party Executive”. 26 Raymond Markey argued that upon its foundation in 1891, the NSW Labor Party based its party and local branch structure on “the urban craft unions, or maritime, coal mining and other unskilled unions” which all shared a “localised, participatory mode of organisation”. From 1895, however, with the unions greatly weakened by the 1890s strikes, the AWU and professional Labor politicians imposed their “more centralised, bureaucratic form of government” on the party and on the re-emerging unions. 27 I will expand on this analysis.

NSW Labor Party communities

Labor Party members came from all walks of life and almost every occupation. Most were generally of the “working class” but even this broad term does not capture the party as there were many professionals, businessmen and farmers within the ranks. Like the AWU and Miners Federation, the NSW Labor Party’s community was a combination of local face-to-face community in the local branches and an imagined community across the state. As with the Worker newspapers in the AWU and Common Cause in the Miners Federation, party newspapers such as Labor News (1918-24) and the Labor Daily (1922-38) were crucial in creating the state-wide imagined community. In 1928 Rozelle East branch member A.E. Arundel commended the Labor Daily for doing “something to bind [the party’s] scattered sections together”.28

In 1929 the NSW Labor Party reported branch membership of 24,361.29 Unfortunately membership figures are not available for other years because it would be instructive to see how they rose and fell in response to circumstances inside and outside the party. As we saw in the thesis introduction, organisational incentives which cause people to become party members can be either “collective incentives” of solidarity with party ideology, or “selective incentives” of material gain or status. Angelo Panebianco argues that leaders’ legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary members depends on their ability to control and distribute organisational incentives.30

People joined Labor Party branches with a range of different motivations. Support for the party’s ideology was important for many, probably most, but party membership was also a way to socialise, network, promote a business or find a job. Individuals also joined as a favour to a friend or relative to vote for him or her in a ballot (“branch stacking”).31 Labor officials often rewarded their supporters, relatives and friends with “jobs for the boys” within the party, unions and labour newspapers. When in government at local, state or federal levels these spoils could extend to a

28 “Labor Daily the key,” LD 23 April 1928, 4.
wide range of public sector jobs, although this occurred on a minor scale compared with US urban patronage. 32 The Labor Daily publicly defended this practice of hiring relatives: “if Bill Smith’s great-grandson is the deputy-assistant office boy then Bill Smith knows he has got a real battler for Labor with him and not a whisperer and white ant”. 33

Michael Hogan’s history of the Glebe local Labor Party branch in inner-Sydney from 1891 to 2003 is the only detailed study of a local political party branch in Australian history. 34 Hogan shows that around 1920 the branch was sufficiently organised to enjoy autonomy from its state and federal MPs and from the party central executive. This autonomy was achieved because the branch had capable local leaders and its “core of Catholic membership gave it strong roots in the local community”. 35 He finds that branch membership was highest during three periods of state-level factional struggle: between Lang and the AWU (mid-1920s), between Lang and the Socialisation Units (mid-1930s) and between Lang and the Industrialists (late-1930s). This suggests that factionalism enhanced party democracy by stimulating membership interest and providing for opposition and potential leadership renewal, similar to what we saw in the Miners Federation in previous chapters. 36 Hogan argues that by studying the party at the branch level the view from below presents an explanation for particular events rather different from the generally accepted view from above. The rank and file, at least in Glebe, have not always conformed to the generalisations that party and factional leaders might have wished, and their allegiances have been determined by peculiar and local factors not generally discussed in the wider literature. 37

While a detailed exploration of local branch politics is beyond the scope of this thesis, in this section and throughout the remaining chapters I will discuss a series of examples of local branches successfully resisting state-level factions on local issues.

32 Ibid., 71.
35 Ibid., 69.
36 Ibid., 215.
37 Ibid., 1.
The organisation and community of each branch varied but many held regular social functions in addition to branch meetings. These occurred especially when fundraising was needed for an election campaign or a strike. During the 1929 timber workers’ strike, local party members raised money through house parties, gift evenings, euchre parties, dances, street meetings and doorknocking. The party’s organising secretary A.J. Macpherson also made collections outside the Sydney Cricket Ground each weekend and used the party car to deliver 300 loaves of bread to strikers’ homes. This solidarity fostered a sense of community amongst the members and provided a degree of social security in a time of minimal government welfare.

The party encouraged the development of a NSW Labor community through state-wide events. In 1924 the party held its first annual picnic and 4,000 members attended at Clifton Gardens in Mosman in north-east Sydney. Attendees participated in a wide range of sporting events and family activities. That year the party also held its first ever Labor Ball at the Paddington Town Hall. Each branch selected a young woman to be its entrant in the “Queen of the May” pageant. The object was “to raise funds for the party, and, at the same time, to foster a better spirit among members of the Labor movement”. In front of a crowd of 1200 Lang crowned Miss Daphne Houghton of Balmain Queen of the May. Houghton was surrounded by heralds, pages, and maids of honour and dressed in a white satin and crimson cloak as she collected her prize. In 1932 the Central Executive announced a plan to further “stimulate interest” in the party amongst young people. The chief strategies were interleague sports competitions and the production of working-class plays. None of these techniques was particularly innovative; they were borrowed from the unions in many cases and the unions had borrowed them from religious and social organisations that pre-dated unionism.

38 “Raising funds,” SMH 23 April 1929, 12.
40 “ALP ball,” SMH 8 January 1929, 9.
41 “ALP Queen,” SMH 2 May 1929, 15.
Unlike in the AWU and Miners Federation, women played a significant role within the NSW Labor Party from the late nineteenth century onwards. The main reason for this difference was that the pastoral, construction and mining workforces were almost entirely male whereas, from 1902, half the NSW electorate was female, as was an increasing proportion of the white-collar workforce. If the Labor Party was to win elections it would need to appeal to women as well as men.

The involvement of women had similarly positive effects on the party community as it had on the Miners Federation community, with women coordinating welfare, distributing propaganda and organising entertainment and sporting events. But in addition to this more traditionally female work, from the early twentieth century Labor Party women also began to perform more traditionally male public political roles: acting as delegates, running in internal elections and speaking at political rallies. The party rules provided affirmative action for women delegates to annual conference which I will discuss in more detail below. Labor women also formed a Women’s Central Organising Committee in 1904 which, by 1930, represented 26 metropolitan branches and six unions. The party organised social sport for women including tennis and vigoro (a sport combining tennis and cricket). In its internal empowerment of women the Labor Party was thirty years ahead of the Miners Federation and eighty years ahead of the AWU.

Feminist Labor women such as Annie Golding and Kate Dwyer fought for their right to be heard publicly both in society and within the Labor Party. Many within the party supported more traditional roles for women and continued to promote men as sole breadwinners, especially during times of high unemployment. In 1930, for example, “E.G.” of Aberdare wrote to the Labor Daily that “all those women who have fathers and husbands able to support them should be forced to give their jobs to unemployed men”. The Labor Daily claimed to support women running for parliament but in a qualified and patronising way. While stating that in theory women

43 Kate Deverall, "They Did Not Know Their Place: The Politics of Annie Golding and Kate Dwyer " Labour History 87(2004).
45 “ALP tennis,” LD 25 September 1935, 9; “Players from Kurri,” LD 4 May 1934, 16.
should be allowed to run for office, the Labor Daily editorial maintained that as
electioneering was a “highly technical matter” and involved “sustained physical
effort”, it was natural that women would not be well-represented in parliament.47
Nevertheless in 1931 Lang appointed Catherine Green and Ellen Webster as the first
women ever to sit in the NSW Legislative Council. At the time both were prominent
members of the NSW Labor Party central executive.

The Labor Daily recorded local branch affairs in significant detail. In 1924 the
newspaper reported that the Edgecliff branch Christmas tree committee had
organised a night of presents and refreshments for children with a band and
“chocolate waltzes, balloon and streamer dances”.48 The party provided services that
in the later twentieth century were performed by local councils; the St Peters branch
in far western Sydney, for example, had a library.49 Merrylands branch followed suit
and A.E. Dixon reported enthusiastically that “we at Merrylands formed a library
some eighteen months ago and the interest taken in it is beyond all expectations”.50
The Labor Daily also sponsored the first grade rugby league competition which was
called the “Labor Daily Cup”, the equivalent of today’s National Rugby League (NRL)
Telstra Premiership.51

The NSW Labor Party ran education and skills classes for members. As we have seen
in previous chapters, education can be empowering and/or indoctrinating. The SMH
argued that Labor Party education was the latter: “it is strange that such turbulent
zealots should imagine themselves capable of educating anyone”.52 For the SMH
editors, the fact that T. Paine, a former member of the CPA, was the President of the
inaugural Labor Party speaking class confirmed their suspicions. By 1930 there were
100 pupils participating in classes in the federal electorates of East Sydney and
Barton. The curriculum covered articulation, conduct of meetings, debating

47 “Women in the Legislative Council,” LD 17 August 1925, 4.
49 “ALP libraries,” LD 7 April 1928, 6.
50 Ibid.
52 “ALP conference,” SMH 21 April 1930, 8.
technique and public speaking. Macpherson said the “establishment of classes at important centres” had “the object of training young men to become proficient platform speakers”. These classes were more empowering than indoctrinating because they were teaching skills which could be used to advocate any political position rather than teaching oversimplified working-class economic and political theory.

Local branches were strongest where they were built upon existing communities such as the Catholic community identified by Hogan in Glebe or existing working-class and trade union communities. In some areas the local trade union community and Labor Party community were one and the same and this allowed some unions to bring their culture directly into the Labor Party. This blurring was especially strong for miners and railway workers, who had always been able to vote in Labor Party selection ballots at the pit head and rail depots. At the 1928 NSW Labor Annual Conference the distinction between party and union branches dissolved completely for the miners when President Webster ruled that Miners Federation lodges were Labor Party branches. The Miners Federation therefore brought its strong democratic lodge culture into coalfields Labor Party branches.

Overall, however, the local branches could not match the organisational power of the union bureaucracies at the state level. On the annual conference and central executive the unions, which usually meant the union leaders, enjoyed majority control. Furthermore, hundreds of unknown unionists – who often worked away from home in other parts of the state - would flood into each branch at preselection time and greatly outnumber the branch members. There were usually some unions and some branches on both sides of a party division. But on both sides the union leaders wielded the most power. The unions had numerous advantages over the local

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54 “ALP speakers’ class,” SMH 18 January 1929, 14.
leagues in terms of their ability to exercise power within the party. They were organised state-wide and large unions like the AWU and Miners Federation had extensive funds and salaried fulltime staff and officials. Before 1923 the politicians had led the branches in checking union power but, once Lang became parliamentary leader and allied himself with the unions, there was no state-wide leadership for the branches and they became increasingly powerless at the state level. Branches with strong communities did retain some power over local issues, as we will see below.

The NSW Labor Party Rules

Founded in 1891, the NSW Labor Party’s centralised structure was set by the mid-1890s; annual conference had unlimited power and the central executive had unlimited power between conferences. In theory, the annual conference and central executive controlled the politicians. Local branches (through Electorate Councils) and affiliated unions elected or appointed delegates to annual conference according to their membership, and annual conference elected the central executive by block vote.59

Annual conferences were colourful affairs. Former delegate “F.C.B.” recalled annual conferences in the early 1920s for the SMH:

Stirring times they were, for fisticuffs often flew freely, and an ugly right was a greater asset in supporting a charge than a wealth of evidence of the most convincing kind. Conferences in those days were occasions on which everybody accused everybody else of the basest motives, and the lowest crimes; delegates vied with one another in hurling about epithets and expletives in the most indiscriminate fashion.60

This all unfolded in a large room on the ground floor of the Trades Hall in Sydney with hard chairs arranged in a quadrangle. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and noisy electric fans laboured overhead. At the front of the hall the president sat with a large

60 FCB, “A review. Labour conferences. Past and present,” SMH 2 April 1929, 12.
bell to maintain order and the senior vice-president sat at the rear to keep the back rows in line.  

Prior to the 1927 Rules, the AWU had used its money to distort party democracy by paying delegate expenses for some rural branches. Many rural branches could not afford the delegates’ fees, transport and accommodation expenses so the AWU had paid expenses for loyal delegates. In 1928 NSW Labor President Jim Graves said that year’s annual conference “compared more than favourably with former ALP conferences” as all delegates’ expenses “were met either by the bodies they represented or by their own sacrifice” as opposed to the former arrangement when “many of the country delegates were the guests of the AWU oligarchy.”

The annual conference delegates elected the central executive by block voting. Under the block voting system, each voter had the same number of votes as there were places to be filled (approximately 30). The voter put an “X” in the box of each candidate for whom he or she wished to vote, and the candidates with the highest number of votes were elected. Block voting is renowned for its disproportionate representation of voters. Factions can promote “tickets”, organised lists of candidates for the election, and the most popular ticket is guaranteed to win every position. This system thereby enabled dominance by a small group of faction leaders who could organise the most popular ticket. Conference delegates had either to vote for a major ticket or waste their vote, and central executive aspirants had either to submit to the controlling faction or be excluded from their ticket.

Block voting facilitated and encouraged the winner-take-all factionalism that defined the NSW Labor Party from 1916 to 1927. Even when its advantage was slim, the faction with the most annual conference delegates won every central executive position, while the opposing faction got nothing. A majority was not necessary, a faction simply needed more delegates than any other faction. For example, a ticket

that achieved 40 per cent of the vote would win every position if the remainder of the vote was divided between two tickets that each achieved 30 per cent. This oversimplifies things somewhat because some popular individuals appeared on more than one ticket, and not all delegates voted a straight ticket. Nevertheless, the desperation to create the largest annual conference grouping caused bitter hostility between rival factions that could easily slide into dirty tactics and corruption.  

This system also encouraged party splits. In 1919, for example, the conservative faction enjoyed a slight majority of 127 annual conference delegates to the militant faction’s 112 delegates. But this bare majority still gave the conservative faction every position on the central executive. Rawson argued that “the voting on [previous] issues had not prepared the Industrialists for the result of the ballot for the central executive which was almost a clean sweep for the ‘Moderate’ faction... their overwhelming defeat left the Industrialists ready to believe that the ballot had been interfered with”. But this argument reveals Rawson’s lack of understanding of block voting in which a slight majority does deliver a “clean sweep”. Defeated and unrepresented, many members of the militant faction broke away to form the short-lived Industrial Socialist Labour Party.

Dissident democratic activists within the AWU brought their activism into the Labor Party. In 1916 Arthur Blakeley from the AWU Western Branch submitted a new proposed method of electing the Labor Party central executive. NSW would be divided into 15 districts and the branch and union members resident in each district would elect a representative. This was similar to the AWU’s rules from 1914 to 1920 in which each branch was divided into 15 local committees and each elected one representative. This reform was not enacted but it would have been a democratic

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improvement through decentralisation and direct membership election of executive members, both of which later occurred under the 1927 Rules.

At that same 1916 Annual Conference, Jack Cullinan, also from the AWU Western Branch, successfully moved that politicians not be allowed as conference delegates or on the executive.69 This was similar to his unsuccessful attempts within the AWU to prevent individuals sitting on the branch executives and/or federal executive council and also being annual convention delegates. The AWU annual convention and the NSW Labor Party annual conference were supposed to direct and judge the performance of the executives and politicians respectively, so it did not make sense for individuals to be annual conference delegates and direct and judge themselves. Allowing the same small group of individuals to occupy multiple positions allowed them to create and entrench an oligarchy as had occurred in the AWU and to a lesser extent the NSW Labor Party under William Holman from 1910 to 1916. The oligarchic AWU had served as a training ground for democratic labour activists like Cullinan.

By the early 1920s many NSW Labor Party members were increasingly dissatisfied with the party’s constitutional arrangements. The 1926 Annual Conference elected a committee to draft new party rules. The militant faction controlled it, with Willis as the chairman and his private secretary Emil Voigt the secretary, but there were also two representatives from rural local branches.70 The multi-talented Voigt was the primary author of the 1927 Rules.71 Short, lean and athletic, Voigt was the 5 mile running gold medallist at the 1908 London Olympics, and had emigrated from England in 1911. In Australia he worked as a mechanical engineer before joining the Labor Council research bureau and becoming a Trades Hall Red. In 1925, he founded the Labor Council’s radio station 2KY, became Willis’s private secretary and soon abandoned revolutionary communism.72 Voigt argued that the 1927 Rules would give “fair and just representation to every section of the party”.73 Willis similarly

70 “Draft of the proposed new rules,” Labor Daily, 8 November 1926, 7.
maintained that the new rules provided for “decentralisation” and that once they came into operation, no one would “be able to organise any ticket for the executive” which would instead be “fixed back there by the rank and file”. The new rules largely fulfilled these promised democratic improvements.

The Labor Party branches in each state electorate formed an electorate council. Under the 1927 Rules, electorate councils came together in groupings of five, and each grouping elected two (rural electorate councils) or three (metropolitan and district electorate councils) delegates to annual conference. The five electorate councils in each grouping would take turns to elect one annual conference delegate each in rotation. One in three metropolitan delegates and one in four rural delegates had to be women. Each trade union group (see detail below) elected one delegate for every 1,500 members. The unions in a group would elect one delegate each in rotation, regardless of each union’s membership.

The control exercised by ordinary union members over these elections varied greatly, depending on each union’s level of democracy, as had been the case under the former rules. In some unions such as the AWU and Miners Federation, delegates were elected by membership vote, while in others they were selected by the leadership. As we saw in chapters one and two, even in some unions like the AWU where members elected the delegates, the elections were so undemocratic as to essentially amount to leadership selection. Kilburn, a member of the rules committee, dismissed AWU criticism of the new rules. He said that the criticism “comes well from the AWU oligarchy... there is an old saying, ‘search your conscience’, I suggest that the AWU should search for a conscience”.

Under the 1927 Rules the party’s general secretary, organising secretary, president, and two vice-presidents were still elected by majority vote at the annual conference.

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75 “Draft of the proposed new rules,” Labor Daily, 8 November 1926, 7.
76 “ALP Conference,” SMH 15 November 1926, 11.
But the remainder of the central executive was elected in a group system. Voigt based the system on the group system that the NSW Labor Council had adopted in 1923. There were eleven trade union groups: AWU, Miners Federation, metals, building, food, manufacturing, public utilities, printing/non-manual/miscellaneous, transport (water), transport (land), and wood. Each trade union group elected one member of the central executive for every 7,000 members, to a maximum of three. There were also four electorate council groups. The metropolitan and district electorate council group elected four central executive representatives, and the northern, west-central, and southern rural electorate council groups each elected two central executive representatives. Local branch members in each electorate council group directly elected the group’s central executive representatives using the preferential voting system. Meanwhile, the trade unions elected or appointed one delegate for every 1,000 members or part thereof, and these delegates then met in their trade union groups to elect each group’s central executive representatives, also using preferential voting. The first central executive elected under the new rules contained 10 electorate council representatives and 16 trade union representatives (figures 26 and 27).

Figure 26: Simple but divisive: the NSW Labor Party Rules immediately preceding the 1927 Rules.
Figure 27: The NSW Labor Party’s complicated 1927 Rules.\(^\text{81}\)

\(^{81}\) Figures 26 and 27 created by Scott Stephenson.
The commercial press and the AWU branded the new rules the “Red Rules”.$^{82}$ There has been some historical debate over whether the new rules were in fact a Communist conspiracy. Rawson said that “once the rules saw the light of day it was fairly clear that the admission of Communists was not intended.”$^{83}$ Nairn agreed, arguing that the new rules were never “red”, and that claims to the contrary were “irrational and mischievous propaganda”.$^{84}$ Yet Miriam Dixson asserted that there was “more than red-baiting in the use of the term ‘Red Rules’”. She quoted rule 59 which stated that “any delegate elected by a plebiscite of his trade union group shall be deemed a fit and proper person to represent his organisation at the annual conference”, and argued that “many Communists and their friends would have become delegates under this rule, so in this sense the rules were ‘red’.”$^{85}$ Dixson, however, was mistaken. An individual needed to be a Labor Party member to become a conference delegate. The rules barred members of other organisations which ran parliamentary candidates, which at the time included the Communist Party, from membership of the Labor Party.$^{86}$ Furthermore, the Federal ALP rules already prevented Communist Party members from joining any state branch of the party.$^{87}$ Finally, the 1927 Conference amended the new rules to ban Communists explicitly.$^{88}$ Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, meanwhile, confused the issue. They argued that “in return for strengthening Lang’s position, the rules were relaxed to allow members of the Communist Party to also hold membership of the ALP”.$^{89}$ The 1927 Rules never allowed Communist Party members to be members of the Labor Party as well, and Lang was the driving force behind the explicit ban on Communists.$^{90}$

$^{82}$ Henry Boote, “A glaring ray of light on the new rules,” Australian Worker, 10 November 1926, 3.
$^{90}$ “Premier accepts full responsibility for his action,” Labor Daily, 20 April 1927, 6.
The historical consensus is that the 1927 Rules were designed cynically to advantage those who drafted them.\(^91\) Robert Cooksey argued that “elections where the final electors were at one or two removes from the rank and file” instituted by the 1927 Rules “especially furnished opportunities” for factional control. He cites the fact that annual conference delegates were “elected by and from groups of state Electorate Councils who were at two removes from the rank and file, and union groups, made up of delegates from component unions who were at one remove from the rank and file”.\(^92\) But in making this assertion Cooksey assumes that all the delegates in each electorate council and trade union group came together to elect the group’s conference delegates in a single vote. In fact, electorate councils and trade unions within a group elected one delegate each in rotation. Each annual conference delegate was elected by a single electorate council or trade union, one step removed from the ordinary members, the same as under the former rules.

Both Rawson and Cooksey argued that the militant faction leaders designed the 1927 Rules to further entrench their control of the party, and that they did so primarily by designing the rules so that they “favoured a faction whose strength was spread over a number of unions”.\(^93\) But the new rules did not advantage a faction whose “strength was spread over a number of unions” any more than the former rules had. Under both sets of rules, the unions selected approximately two-thirds of the annual conference delegates. The 1927 Rules also gave the unions approximately two-thirds of the central executive representatives, and the electorate councils approximately one-third. But if the unions had voted together under the former rules they would have won every executive position, as I explained in the discussion of block voting above.\(^94\) The establishment of a controlling faction had required considerable union support since 1916 and this continued unchanged under the 1927 Rules.

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In contrast, the 1927 Rules introduced position sharing on the central executive. The new rules dispersed central executive places throughout the party, with every trade union and electorate council group selecting at least one representative. This position sharing guaranteed that there would always be a minority factional opposition on the central executive. For example, the militant faction would never control the three AWU representatives. The positions were dispersed so widely and evenly throughout the party that the position sharing caused a genuine decentralisation of power.

Two additional changes further instituted power decentralising. First, every party member in NSW could now vote directly for their respective electorate council representatives on the central executive. In 1928, 3,419 local branch members, divided into their four groups, directly elected the ten electorate council representatives. That this was only around 15 per cent of the total membership, however, casts doubt on how effectively the party facilitated membership participation. Second, the group system allowed for the development of local power bases independent of the state-level faction. More localised alliances could win control of a group and independently control its annual conference and central executive representatives. These two key changes made central executive elections less predictable and more difficult for state-level faction leaders to control. The new voting system was also significant; preferential voting avoided vote splitting and also allowed electors to vote for “third party” candidates without wasting their vote. Willis had observed the democratic advantages of preferential voting within the Miners Federation for some years. Like block voting, however, preferential voting was still a non-proportional voting system in which a majority secured every position within a group.

96 Amy, Behind the ballot box : a citizen’s guide to voting systems: 50.
One of the few advantages of block voting was that there had been no electoral boundaries or groupings that incumbents could manipulate through gerrymandering or malapportionment. The new rules failed to reward union groups with over 21,000 members with additional places on the central executive. As the AWU was the only union in NSW with over 21,000 members, this was presumably by the militant faction’s design. The AWU could justifiably complain that it should have received five rather than three places on the central executive (35,000 members divided by 7,000 equals five). But Rawson’s contention that the new rules made it “difficult or impossible for the AWU to control the party again” is an exaggeration. To the extent that the AWU leadership had ever “controlled” the party, they had always relied on the support of a coalition of conservative union and branch delegates. The new rules did not prevent them from once again forming such a coalition.

The former rules had contained affirmative action provisions for women. Electorate councils in five-member electorates had elected five delegates plus two woman delegates to annual conference, and electorate councils in three member electorates had elected three delegates plus one woman delegate. Kate Deverall argued that the 1927 rules removed affirmative action provisions for women, but this is incorrect. The 1927 Rules provided slightly better affirmative action for women than the former rules. One in three metropolitan annual conference delegates and one in four rural delegates now had to be women.

Deverall also argued that some Labor women opposed the 1927 rules because they believed “the system of group representation” would “prevent women being elected to the executive”. Because “female delegates came from a wide range of electorates, predominately in metropolitan Sydney”, proposals “favouring regional areas or

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100 Deverall, “They Did Not Know Their Place: The Politics of Annie Golding and Kate Dwyer,” 43.
unions stood to have an adverse effect on women’s representation”. Additionally, “the group system also made it more difficult for women to combine forces on conference floor in support of particular people or policies”. These arguments are plausible, but it seems more likely that grouping Labor women together in the metropolitan electorate council group would improve their chances of gaining places on the central executive. Indeed one woman, Mary Dunn, received the highest number of votes in the first metropolitan group central executive election in 1928. But both possibilities assume that women voted together as women, when in reality there was usually a mix of women on both sides of an issue or factional dispute. The overall gender composition of the central executive did not change notably: five women out of 32 members in 1926, and four women out of 30 members in 1928.

Panebianco would expect the leadership to decentralise power in response to an increase in the substitutability of the organisational incentives that the party provided its members. But no significant increases are apparent around 1927. The most obvious way that the substitutability of the organisational incentives could increase significantly in the short term is through the emergence of a rival party. According to Panebianco, the decentralisation of power would therefore have been more likely in 1919 when breakaways formed a rival party, or in the early 1920s when the Communist Party of Australia was on the rise, or especially in 1931 when the Federal ALP expelled Lang Labor and formed a rival official Federal Labor Party in NSW. Instead, the power decentralising occurred in 1927 when the threat from rival parties was at its lowest. For Panebianco, power decentralising would also be more likely when the Labor Party was out of government, and therefore had less power and prestige with which to maintain or enhance its organisational incentives. But the 1927 Rules were written and enacted during the first Lang Labor government of 1925 to 1927. It was not high substitutability of the party’s organisational incentives that led to the 1927 Rules. Instead, pressure from ordinary members, desire to

102 Deverall, "They Did Not Know Their Place: The Politics of Annie Golding and Kate Dwyer," 42.
enhance their own popularity and legitimacy, support for internal democracy, and the need to curb infighting motivated the party leaders to introduce the reforms. The greater clout of unions such as the Miners Federation also allowed them to import elements of their democracy into the party.

The majority of the party had been calling for a group system for years. The 1923 NSW Trade Union Conference, for example, passed a motion by 125 votes to 13 supporting “the principle of election of the ALP Executive directly from the industrial trade union groups and electoral groups, in place of promiscuous election from the floor of annual conference”. 105 The ordinary branch members overwhelmingly supported the 1927 Rules. In July 1927, 193 local branches declared their support for the new rules, while only 20 branches declared their opposition. 106 The 1927 Rules were partly a response by the militant faction leaders to this pressure from below. As identification with the party’s ideology was an organisational incentive for most members, the leadership’s legitimacy depended on its ability to be seen to be pursuing “rank and file control”. 107

Support for internal democracy amongst the leaders and their desire to make the party organisation fairer and stronger was also a factor. As discussed in the introduction, most militant faction leaders believed in at least some degree of membership control. Furthermore, they did not consider enhanced party democracy to be a threat to their high standing. Willis, for example, had experienced repeated success in elections within the highly-democratic Miners Federation. 108 Lang too was already popular with ordinary party members. 109 Militants argued that only unpopular figures like the oligarchic AWU leadership had anything to fear from rank and file control. 110

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105 Conference between the ALP Executive and Trade Unions, 28 April 1923, George Buckland papers, MLMSS4320, Mitchell Library (ML), New South Wales (NSW).
106 “Premier accepts full responsibility for his action,” Labor Daily 20 April 1927, 6.
The militant faction leaders were also aware that the constant infighting within the party was electoral poison, and so sought to incorporate the troublesome conservative minority. In 1929 SMH correspondent “F.C.B.” wrote:

ALP conferences lost their glamour and punch two years ago, when the new rules robbed them of the right to select the ALP executive. The executive has always meant power and position to its members, and the scramble at the old conferences for appointment was as hectic as it was undignified.

Many militant faction members had also experienced the damaging 1919 split. Allowing the conservative faction minority representation on the central executive would enfranchise and contain opposition, reducing the chances of another rupture. Central executive decisions were by simple majority vote, so a minority did not have any significant power anyway. This is a good example of why position sharing does not necessarily involve sharing power. Furthermore, removing the election of the central executive from the proceedings would make for more harmonious and productive annual conferences.

Yet the 1927 Rules coincided with a centralisation of power within the party. By 1930 an increasingly oligarchic “Inner Group” of Lang loyalist political advisers and trade union leaders controlled the central executive and annual conference, and by 1934 the Inner Group had resorted to outright corruption of party procedures. But this centralisation of power occurred in spite of the 1927 Rules, not because of them. The majority of party members, trade union leaders and annual conference delegates genuinely supported Lang until at least 1938. I have shown above that it would therefore have been easier for Lang and his supporters to dominate the party under the former rules.

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The new rules made it more difficult for a coalition of trade union leaders to control the party, but they did not remove this possibility altogether. From the perspective of internal party democracy, this was the rules’ great flaw. The trade unions selected the majority of annual conference and central executive representatives and it appears that within most trade unions the leaders firmly controlled their union’s representatives. This was certainly the case in the AWU, and it allowed a relatively small number of key union leaders to form a coalition and effectively control the party with minimal input from the thousands of ordinary party and union members. The fact that trade union leaders continued to enjoy paramount power under the 1927 Rules helped the Inner Group to consolidate its dominance, but equally important was Lang’s popularity throughout the party.

A case could be made, in line with Beer’s analysis of the British Labour Party discussed in the introduction, that the rule of Lang and the Inner Group was not actually oligarchical and that it only appeared that way because of “a broad consensus in the party”. Most party members supported Lang, and most of those who did not simply abandoned the party. Following the adoption of the 1927 Rules, the AWU disaffiliated, and in 1931 the entire conservative wing of the party broke away to form the official NSW Branch of the Federal ALP, in opposition to Lang Labor. But this “broad consensus” did not merely cause the rule of Lang and his allies to appear oligarchic, but in fact enabled them to establish a genuinely oligarchic rule, as we will see in coming chapters.

The controlling faction increased its dominance after 1932 despite the fact that the substitutability of Lang Labor’s organisational incentives increased significantly, with the existence of a rival official Labor Party, and the electoral defeat of the second Lang Labor government that year. Once again, this fails to conform to Panebianco’s expectations. Michels’ explanations for how leaderships entrench their rule is

118 Panebianco, Political Parties: Organisation and Power: 38, 42.
more convincing in this case. Lang and his allies were able to use their positions to control the party and further cement their power. The ordinary members’ “genuine cult for the leaders” was clearly evident, especially with Lang.119

With the defeat of Lang and the Inner Group in 1939 the party rules reverted to the pre-1927 situation in which electorate councils and unions directly elected annual conference delegates who then elected the central executive at the conference. The rules had come full circle and returned to the deeply flawed block voting system in which the most popular ticket won every central executive position. This occurred at the 1939 Unity Conference where the anti-Lang group had approximately 60 per cent of the delegates but won every central executive position.120 Ironically, the 1927 Rules were more democratic than the rules that replaced them in 1939 as part of the supposed “re-democratisation” of the party, but both sets of rules gave too much power to union leaders.

Conclusion
Lang’s domination of the NSW Labor Party in the 1930s is one of countless international examples of the strong tendency towards oligarchy within formally democratic political parties. The 1927 Rules contained a key flaw from the perspective of party democracy in that they invested a large amount of power in the hands of trade union leaders. Although some local party branches had strong communities they were not organised enough to counter union power effectively. Lang used his alliance with key union leaders and his popularity with ordinary party members to cement his control. In accordance with Michels’ iron law of oligarchy, Lang and his allies were able to use their positions further to entrench their own power. Contrary to Panebianco’s expectations, this shift towards oligarchy occurred despite a significant increase in the substitutability of Lang Labor’s organisational incentives. The 1927 Rules could therefore be interpreted as further evidence that

120 “Unity conference,” AW 30 August 1939, 16.
democracy within political parties is a hopeless cause. I have argued, however, that the adoption of the 1927 Rules is also an example of how oligarchy can be resisted within political parties.

Despite their flaws, the 1927 Rules significantly decentralised power within the party by giving every major grouping at least one representative on its supreme bodies, enabling the ordinary members to elect central executive representatives directly and allowing for the development of local power bases independent of the state-level factions. The militant faction leaders were motivated to institute these reforms by pressure from ordinary members, a desire to increase their legitimacy and popularity, support for a degree of internal democracy, and with the goal of reducing infighting. The 1927 Rules therefore support those who have argued, contrary to Michels, that political parties can successfully repel the tendency towards oligarchy, while also demonstrating the potentially anti-democratic influence of trade union leaders within labour parties.121

CHAPTER VIII

Organised opposition: Factions, membership decision-making and local autonomy within the NSW Labor Party

Organised opposition existed within the NSW Labor Party in a variety of forms. This chapter focuses on three: factionalism, membership decision–making and local autonomy. Rival factions provided organised opposition to the party leadership. Membership decision-making deteriorated throughout the interwar period but some local branches organised to oppose the decline. Finally, the ruling NSW Labor faction successfully opposed the federal Australian Labor Party’s (ALP) attempts to reduce the autonomy of state branches within the party.

The NSW Labor Party generally tolerated factionalism. Factions enhanced party democracy throughout the period by holding one another to account, providing opposition in elections and stimulating membership interest and debate. Trade union affiliation had mixed effects here. Supporting democracy, individual trade unions were the most important building blocks of the party-wide factions. Undermining democracy, however, each union also operated within the party as its own quasi-faction and the power of each union was not necessarily proportionate to its membership numbers. All unions operated as quasi-factions, even those with only one delegate, but the larger the union the more likely it was to wield significant power.

Pre-selections of parliamentary candidates were the primary site of direct membership decision-making within the party. Over time, however, the central executive increasingly took this power for itself. Local party communities were sometimes strong enough to successfully resist the executive, but this was the exception rather than the norm. At other times the ruling faction actually increased membership decision-making, but for its own advantage.

From the mid-1920s the NSW Labor Party enhanced democracy by asserting its local autonomy from the federal ALP. In this situation local autonomy especially enhanced democracy because the federal ALP conference and executive were undemocratic
with equal representation from unequally sized state branches and three steps removed from members (branch members → electorate council → state annual conference → federal conference/executive). This assertion of NSW branch local autonomy was another example of the controlling faction cynically improving democracy in its own interests.

While they were enhancing NSW autonomy against the federal ALP, the NSW Labor leaders were undermining local autonomy within the NSW party. The central executive gradually expanded its own authority at the expense of the local branches, electorate councils, trade unions and even annual conference, which was supposed to be superior to the central executive. The central executive selected parliamentary leaders, failed to hold annual conferences, barred unions from electing certain delegates and tried to prevent affiliated unions from holding conferences. In the 1930s the Inner Group delegated central executive power to sections, committees and individual members of the executive so that a huge amount of power came to be wielded by a handful of Inner Group leaders.

Historians have recognised the importance of 1916 in setting the scene for much of what was to come in the following decades. That year the Industrial Section changed the rules to entrench union dominance, barred politicians from the central executive and expelled high-profile politicians including the NSW Premier William Holman and Prime Minister Billy Hughes. But historians have not adequately recognised the importance of the 1923 dispute between the politicians and the AWU faction. This was the first time a central executive asserted the right to choose the parliamentary leader and to suppress free speech within the movement. It was also the first significant test of the federal ALP executive’s power to intervene in state affairs.

**Factionalism**

Throughout the interwar period the NSW Labor Party broadly tolerated internal organised opposition, except for members of the Communist Party. This internal organised opposition manifested in factions, which are stable alliances of individuals
within a political party. \(^1\) Informal factions always exist within any ostensibly democratic political party. As Rodney Cavalier argues:

Factions are the unavoidable consequence for an organisation in which there is a democratic and competitive struggle for power ... in any grouping much above two, alliances will form: people have ideas in common, interests in common. Ambitions overlapping cause individuals to coalesce ... Alliances may be shifting; they may exist for a single purpose. When alliances are settled and become part of the institutional arrangements of the party, more formalised factions become part of the landscape.\(^2\)

At their most formalised, factions can become “a party within the party”, with their own meetings, elected officers and journals.\(^3\) The first and last public, formalised faction within the interwar NSW Labor Party was the Industrial Section from 1915 to 1919. After that organised factions still existed but they were more clandestine and did not publicly acknowledge their existence.

After 1919 factionalism and especially “tickets” for party elections were tolerated but frowned upon. Leading officials hypocritically spoke against factionalism even while they organised factions surreptitiously. At the 1923 Annual Conference, for example, Albert Willis was a leading organiser for the militant faction but, when his ticket swept the ballot and he won the presidency, he falsely presented himself as a peacemaker who “refused to take sides” and had not been nominated for president by either faction but by his “colleagues the miners”.\(^4\)

In 1926 the annual conference amended the party rules to ban factional organising. Rule 30 provided that “if any members are found holding secret meetings for the purpose of creating a section or faction, such members may be reported to the conference, and if found guilty shall not be allowed to take their seats. Further, such member or members will not be eligible for any office or position in the movement”.\(^5\)

Under the 1927 Rules the annual conference no longer elected the central executive

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\(^2\) Ibid.


\(^4\) “Mr Dooley Readmitted,” *Australian Worker*, June 13, 1923, 5.

but it did still elect important committees such as the agenda committee and the appeals committee. Tickets for these committees were now against the rules and needed to be organised in secret; the days of openly handing out “how to vote” cards at annual conference were over. The *SMH* summed up the strange position concisely: “although the constitution of the party prohibits secret factional meetings, the rules in this regard have little effect”. Every significant person in the party broke this rule and no one was ever disciplined, so we can say that while factionalism was technically banned, in reality it was tolerated except in the case of Communists or members of other rival political parties.

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, from 1923 to 1931 the party was divided into two main factions, a controlling militant faction led by Willis and the Miners Federation and Jock Garden and the Trades Hall Reds, and a minority conservative faction led by the AWU. After the conservative faction split from the party in 1931, the factional divide amongst the militants increasingly became those loyal to Lang versus those who opposed him. We have already seen throughout the thesis how rival factions enhanced democracy by scrutinising one another, providing alternatives in elections and stimulating membership interest and debate. Indeed organised opposition is one of the reasons historians have so much evidence; any alleged misconduct was widely publicised by rivals. The ballot-box scandal is one example. Unions such as the AWU and Miners Federation and union leaders such as Jack Bailey and Willis were instrumental in the factions and so the unions must receive much of the credit for the democracy-enhancing effects of factionalism.

In 1930 the socialisation units formed within the party and quickly became the basis for new factions. The units had their own newspaper called *Socialisation Call* with a claimed circulation of 40,000 and presented a socialisation committee segment on 2KY. There was a generational divide between the leaders of the socialisation

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movement and those of the Inner Group; most socialisation leaders were junior union officials under 40 years old. Clarrie Martin, for example, was a Teachers Union official who lived and organised in Sydney, Newcastle and then Young on the south west slopes of NSW. His grandson Nick Martin argued that he “represented a different strand within the NSW ALP from the dominant industrial left” with a guild socialist ideology based on “decentralised power, industrial unionism and the expansion of workers’ education”. This ideological position was similar to that of Willis up to the 1920s. Martin became a Labor MLA in 1930 when he won the seat of Young. Some members of the socialisation movement, such as Jack Hughes, were also members of the CPA and were participating in the ALP without disclosing that membership.

Many within the broad Inner Group coalition were current or former militants and radicals and initially saw the socialisation units as complementary to the ruling group. The conflict began at the 1931 Annual Conference when the socialisation units proposed that Labor’s policy for the next election should be government regulation to implement socialism within three years; “socialism in our time”. The Inner Group opposed this electoral poison but the proposal won a narrow victory. The following day the Inner Group successfully rescinded the motion with only around one third of annual conference delegates supporting it, mostly from the local branches.

Undeterred, and now in open conflict with the Inner Group, the socialisation units sought to win control of the party. Martin complained in his diary that Lang behaved in “a dictatorial and undemocratic fashion”. He was one of the only MLAs who openly disagreed with Lang in caucus. The socialisation units rejected Queensland AWU leader Clarrie Fallon’s offer of an unholy alliance between the AWU and socialisation

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9 Ibid., 178.
10 Ibid., 181.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 184.
13 Ibid., 182.
units to defeat the Inner Group. The *Labor Daily* refused to publicise socialisation unit events and was increasingly critical of its leaders like Martin and Bill McNamara.\(^\text{14}\)

At the 1933 metropolitan conference the socialisation units enjoyed a strong majority but the *Labor Daily* misrepresented the outcome of the conference and subsequently only published branch resolutions against socialisation while ignoring those in favour. Martin wrote in his diary “ye gods, it’s quite impossible to overcome the *Labor Daily* influence and Lang idolatry ... What a travesty it is that the official organ can declare a conference majority to be traitors and get away with it”.\(^\text{15}\) At the 1933 Annual Conference the Inner Group supporters easily outnumbered the socialisation supporters and passed a motion disbanding the units.

The Inner Group had successfully repressed the socialisation movement by using the official party apparatus and newspaper. After the 1933 Annual Conference the Inner Group expelled some socialisation advocates and internal divisions within the socialisation movement sped up its dissolution. The Inner Group’s suppression of the units was made easier by the fact that Lang was still very popular throughout the party and there simply was not majority support for socialisation amongst party and union members, let alone the wider electorate. Several years earlier Martin had lamented in his diary the absence of the radicalism necessary to implement socialism: “the people seem to be growing even more conservative and I am convinced that we will never have a chance of introducing any radical measures and also winning office”, he wrote.\(^\text{16}\)

Perhaps most important of all, the socialisation units did not win much support amongst union leaders. The second Lang government had done enough to please even the more radical union leaders and they saw no advantage in toppling the current leadership in exchange for a socialisation policy which would lead to certain

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 187.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 189.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 185.
electoral defeat. Even Martin himself wrote in his diary that the socialisation policy would “probably mean political wilderness for 15 years”. Socialisation had been defeated but the sentiments against Lang and the Inner Group remained amongst a significant minority of the party. Unions such as the Miners Federation and Australian Railways Union (ARU), which had supported the socialisation units, never re-entered the Lang fold and as the 1930s progressed they were joined by more unions until the stage was set for Lang’s defeat.

From the mid-1930s this growing coalition of union leaders argued two clear truths: Lang and the Inner Group were oligarchical and corrupt and NSW Labor would not win a general election under Lang. The union leaders also wanted to restore their own power within the party. Former allies of Lang turned on him one after another, deriding his corruption, egotism and delusion. This list included Lang’s closest allies from the 1920s and early 1930s such as Willis, Garden, Oscar Schreiber and Ted Magrath.

At a 1936 anti-Lang Conference Robert (Bob) King, NSW Labor Council Secretary, recalled his time on the committee that decided Labor’s 1932 election slogan. The committee decided on “Labor is right and Labor is always right”. They sent it to Macquarie Street and “heard no more about it” until they saw pamphlets and posters declaring “Lang is right!”.

J.J. Maloney of the Boot Trades union received thunderous applause when he told a subsequent conference that “Lang is the most blundering tyrant who ever became leader of any political party in the world”. Even when they were outside the party, the AWU and its newspapers provided effective opposition to the Inner Group. In 1937 the NSW Labor Council passed a resolution “that we urge all Laborites to read the Australian Worker regularly each week as it is giving the important news of happenings within the party that are suppressed by the Labor Daily”.

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17 Ibid., 179.
18 Ibid., 191.
19 “Special trade union conferences,” AW 16 September 1936, 4.
20 Ibid.
Opponents threw every insult they could think of at Lang and his allies. Lang was “dictator-in-chief”, 23 “arrogant”, “tyrannical” and “reckless”. 24 His Inner Group was the “old gang”, 25 a “junta”, a “fascist dictatorship”, 26 an “oligarchy”, 27 “treacherous and dishonest political gangsters”, 28 “yes men”, “crawlers”, “time-servers”, “splitters”, 29 “lower than the sewer rats”, 30 “ballot-fakers and rule jugglers”. 31 The Inner Group tried to suppress internal opposition, as we will see in detail below in the section on local autonomy, but they were unsuccessful largely due to the structure of the Labor Party itself. The unions came into the party as ready-made quasi-factions with their own salaried staff, funds, organisations and members. The Inner Group tried to counter this organised union opposition by running their own candidates in union elections with the hope of taking control of the unions. This was unsuccessful but it marked the beginnings of tactics that were more fully and successfully expressed by the anti-Communist Industrial Groups in the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1937 the central executive began to target individuals, threatening to withdraw the endorsement of Labor local council members who were also union officials unless those officials supported Lang. The central executive withdrew the municipal endorsements of W.E.R. Bates and J. Morey, both of the Clerks Union. 32 The Inner Group also resorted to bribery and gave Trades Hall typists movie tickets in return for their votes in a Clerks Union ballot. 33 None of these Inner Group attempts to control the unions was successful. As we saw with the Miners Federation in chapter four, many union members who supported Lang were equally loyal to their own union leaders and did not appreciate “outside interference” in their unions.

23 “Protest against expulsions,” AW 2 September 1936, 18.
26 “Special trades union conferences,” AW 16 September 1936, 4.
28 “Protest against expulsions,” AW 2 September 1936, 18.
30 Ibid.
31 “Revolt against Inner Group,” AW 26 January 1938, 14.
The involvement of trade unions as ready-made quasi-factions within the Labor Party also had anti-democratic effects within the party. Unions often used their positions to attempt to influence Labor Party decisions in ways that gave them more power than their membership numbers warranted. From the early twentieth century, the AWU constitution had held that “any member of parliament who fails to advocate the preamble and constitution of the AWU shall not be eligible to continue his membership in the union”. This provision potentially undermined Labor Party democracy as once an AWU member became a politician they were pledged to following the policy of the party’s annual conference and caucus decisions. When AWU and Labor Party policy diverged, the AWU constitution attempted to force “their” politicians to privilege AWU policy over Labor Party policy.

The internally democratic Miners Federation also attempted to control “their” politicians in a similar way. With its members concentrated in mining electorates, the Miners Federation was in the strongest position of any union in the state to successfully promote or block the pre-selection of politicians. Coalfields MPs could not win pre-selection without Miners Federation support and the union took full advantage. In 1938, for example, the AW reported that “pressure is to be exerted by the Miners Federation to force their parliamentary representatives to join forces with the [anti-Lang] unions who are seeking to clean up the Labor movement in NSW”. If the politicians refused “action would be taken to defeat them in the [pre-selection] ballots” and they would be expelled from the Miners Federation which “would place them in an exceedingly embarrassing position”.

The Miners Federation leaders threatening to expel “disobedient” politicians based on their votes within the Labor Party was a problem involving the contested definition of labour democracy. Did an MP represent the NSW Labor Party members as a whole or did he represent the party members in his electorate? The Labor Party constitution favoured the former view with each MP being pledged to follow annual conference decisions and to vote as one in parliament. But a view of Labor MPs being

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responsible first to party members in their own electorates would have been equally valid from a democratic standpoint with the added advantage of promoting local autonomy.

The Clerks Union was another union that tried to wield disproportionate power within the Labor Party. All Labor Party members had to belong to a union and the most common union for Labor politicians was the Clerks Union which organised office support workers. This was the closest fit for many Labor MPs who were professionals and businessmen. In 1926 the Clerks Union expelled Premier Lang, Deputy Premier Loughlin and several other Labor politicians for failing to give effect to union policy of improving public service conditions.\footnote{“Expelled,” \textit{SMH} 8 September 1926, 15.} This was largely a publicity stunt but it does further demonstrate the dilemma of the Labor politicians who were pledged to obey annual conference and caucus but then also faced pressure from their own unions and local branches.

Unions also used their wealth to influence the party undemocratically. The bulk of party funds came from the unions and large unions could threaten to withdraw financial support or even disaffiliate from the party if their wishes were not met. For example, in 1928 the AWU told the ALP federal executive that unless it overturned some NSW central executive expulsions the party would not have AWU assistance at the next federal election.\footnote{“Labour Party,” \textit{SMH} 9 January 1928, 12.} In 1930 the central executive’s failure to repudiate war debt resulted in the Federated Ironworkers Union threatening to disaffiliate from the party; at the time it was the party’s third largest union.\footnote{“ALP,” \textit{SMH} 30 August 1930, 15.} This is another problematic issue for party democracy. On the one hand, affiliated unions should maintain their autonomy and have the right to disaffiliate from the party. On the other hand, a large union threatening to withdraw from the party over a specific issue is likely to disproportionately influence party decisions.
A final potential for undemocratic influence existed when a delegate from one union was employed by a different union. S.J. Stanbridge, for example, was president of the Typographical Association and worked on the AWU’s Australian Worker newspaper. At the 1916 Annual Conference, Stanbridge claimed that AWU delegate Jack Cullinan had tried to intimidate him. Cullinan had said that if he was on the Australian Worker board of control he would have Stanbridge sacked for the conservative positions he had taken at annual conference.\(^3^9\) This anti-democratic behaviour demonstrates the complexity of party democracy down to the individual level, as we have already seen that Cullinan was a famous democratic advocate within the AWU and Labor Party.

**Direct membership decision-making**

Direct membership decision making was limited within the NSW Labor Party in the interwar period. As we saw in the discussion of the rules in the previous chapter, most party decisions were made by elected delegates several steps removed from the ordinary members. One of the democratic improvements contained in the 1927 Rules was the direct election of some members of the central executive. The most significant site of direct member decision making was in pre-selecting Labor candidates to contest NSW Legislative Assembly seats and federal House of Representative seats for NSW. Several months before an election the branch members and trade unionists could vote in the pre-selection ballot for their preferred candidate in the electorate in which they lived. Given that the central executive had complete power between annual conferences, however, membership decision-making power over pre-selections was never absolute.

By 1910 the party rules stated that the central executive could choose the parliamentary candidate for an electorate if members had not chosen one three months before a general election or one month before a by-election. The 1911 Annual Conference changed the rule to give the central executive complete discretion to select candidates “in electorates where the local branch or council shall have failed to take the necessary steps, in the opinion of the executive, to select a
candidate”. The central executive could cancel or overturn pre-selection ballots for personal or factional advantage or because it believed that members would not select the candidate most likely to win in a general election.

An example of electoral pragmatism occurred in 1929 when the central executive withdrew the pre-selected Labor candidate for North Sydney and instructed Labor voters to vote for Billy Hughes. Despite being the most prominent “Labor rat” in history, Hughes had led a small section of Nationalist Party members to vote down the Nationalist government’s attempted abolition of the federal industrial arbitration system. The central executive knew that Labor would never win the safe Nationalist seat, so an unholy alliance with Hughes was considered the best option to disrupt the Nationalists.

From 1924 Garden and other Trades Hall Reds began to argue for the abolition of selection ballots and for candidates to be chosen directly by unions or by the central executive. Their argument was that selection ballots had become so corrupt that it was better to do away with them altogether. Ballot corruption was a huge problem, as we will see in the next chapter, but the argument that selection ballots should be eliminated rather than cleaned up was indicative of the thinking of the Trades Hall Reds, and union officials more broadly. Union selection in most cases would have meant selection by the top officials in the union and demonstrates their disregard of the importance of rank-and-file decision-making. The attempts to abolish selection ballots were unsuccessful but the central executive did impose its own candidate on the members in an increasing number of electorates.

Prior to the 1927 Rules, annual conference delegates were generally chosen by electorate councils which were themselves made up of delegates elected by the ordinary members in their local leagues. Annual conference delegate election was

42 “Not for Hughes,” SMH 9 October 1929, 14.
43 “Split expected,” SMH 8 September 1924, 11; “Union scheme,” SMH 3 December 1925, 12.
therefore one step removed from the ordinary members (members → electorate council → annual conference delegates). Yet in 1926 the central executive insisted that delegates be elected directly by the ordinary members in certain electorates where the electorate council was known to be controlled by opponents of the controlling faction.\(^{44}\) The controlling faction knew it had a better chance of winning at least some of the delegate positions though a direct membership vote. This is another example of the controlling faction cynically and unevenly improving democracy to its own advantage.

The central executive’s power to select a candidate was limited in some electorates. In 1928 the central executive tried to parachute one of its preferred candidates into the Northern coalfields federal seat of Hunter. The local Labor members and officials, mostly miners, were not impressed and insisted that there would be a rank-and-file ballot. The central executive quickly folded.\(^{45}\) Mining electorates were among the few electorates in which an independent labour candidate could defeat an official Labor Party candidate.

The miners’ strong occupational community and organisation, as well as their localism, meant that they would not accept an outsider forced on them by the central executive and would gladly elect an independent candidate instead, as had occurred in 1919 when Percy Brookfield won the Legislative Assembly seat of Sturt in the Miners Federation stronghold of Broken Hill. In mining towns almost all Labor Party members were Miners Federation members so the Miners Federation’s strong occupational community also doubled as a readymade local party community. Greg Patmore argued that in Lithgow support for independent labour political candidates weakened the Labor Party.\(^{46}\) But it arguably strengthened party democracy because the competition forced the Labor Party to give local members greater authority.

\(^{44}\) “ALP,” SMH 22 March 1926, 9.
\(^{45}\) “Hunter seat,” SMH 4 October 1928, 13.
Resistance could also be successful in non-mining electorates if the local members had a strong party community. In 1931, in the inner-western Sydney federal electorate of Reid, the central executive disallowed the pre-selection ballot for “alleged irregularities” and ordered a new ballot. The Reid Electorate Council, by 54 votes to 19, opposed any further ballot and insisted on the selected candidate, C. A. Morgan, being endorsed by the executive. It declared it was insisting on the “principles of local autonomy in all selection ballots”. 47 The central executive’s returning officer Harry O’Regan addressed a meeting of Reid Electorate Council and declared that if Reid would not cooperate with the fresh ballot, the central executive would simply appoint their preferred candidate. This announcement was met with boos and cries of “burglars”, “Ned Kellys” and “Rafferty’s rules”. Central executive president Paddy Keller was more conciliatory, saying “I belong to a union which stands for rank and file control” and that “the wishes of the rank and file will be consulted”. 48 The following month the central executive folded and endorsed Morgan. 49

The most famous example of the central executive holding out against the wishes of local members and officials occurred in 1933. Willis wished to stand in the by-election for the NSW Legislative Assembly seat of Bulli on the south coast near Wollongong but Lang and his Inner Group saw Willis as a potential leadership rival. The central executive claimed there was not enough time to hold a preselection ballot and instead selected its preferred candidate, J.T. Sweeney, a former Miners Federation official. But the local leagues held their own preselection ballot and Willis won. When the central executive refused to accept the preselection result the Bulli Electorate Council and the southern district of the Miners Federation pledged to support Willis who said: “when it became known that I was a candidate, ALP officers including Mr Keller interfered and it was stated that the controlling authority did not want me for Bulli”. 50 A notable part of the dispute was that Baddeley spoke for Sweeney and

47 “Reid ballot,” SMH 17 August 1931, 9.
48 Ibid.
49 “Reid’s revolt,” SMH 28 September 1931, 7.
against Willis. He had chosen loyalty to Lang over loyalty to his old friend and ally from the Miners Federation. The *Australian Worker* reported that “general surprise was expressed on the coalfields that Mr Baddeley would take the platform against Mr Willis”.  

Despite strong local support Willis was unable to contest the seat as a Labor candidate while the central executive opposed him. As well as not wanting to “rat” on the party, Willis was probably dissuaded from standing as an independent because he knew his chances were poor. Unlike on the Northern coalfields, miners were a minority of Labor Party members in the southern and western districts and Sweeney was a local Miners Federation official anyway. With his conflict with Lang now in the open, Willis defected to the federal NSW ALP Branch where he joined his former enemies such as Jack Bailey.

**Local autonomy: state versus federal**

Throughout the interwar period the federal ALP bodies increased their own power and reduced the local autonomy of the states. This increase in federal power within the ALP both influenced, and was influenced by, the High Court’s corresponding constitutional increase in power of the Australian federal government at the cost of the states. Rawson argued that the NSW Labor factions’ position on federal intervention in state affairs was completely cynical. “The attitude of the NSW party to federal intervention in domestic disputes was simple”, “those who controlled the party condemned it; those who were seeking to control the party welcomed it”, he declared. The AWU faction resisted federal intervention in 1923 then called for it frequently for the remainder of the interwar period, while the militant faction called for federal intervention in 1923 then opposed it for the remainder of the interwar period. In addition to these more cynical motivations, however, there was also a

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51 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 53.
rising sense of isolationism and independence in NSW Labor that began in the mid-1920s and culminated in the 1931 split.

Each state branch of the ALP received the same number of delegates to the federal conference and federal executive, similar to the equal state representation in the Australian Senate. Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991 to 1996) famously disparaged the Australian Senate as “unrepresentative swill” and the same argument applies to the federal ALP bodies on which representation was clearly disproportionate. The counterargument is that this was simply a different kind of democracy, federal democracy rather than unitary democracy, but from the perspective of one person, one vote it was undemocratic. Federal delegates were several steps removed from the rank and file and because decisions were made by the combined votes of representatives from six states, it was difficult for the ordinary members in any one state to influence federal decisions. For large, federally organised trade unions like the AWU, however, the federal ALP bodies were ideal. Given AWU dominance of Labor in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, the AWU maintained a large influence on the federal ALP throughout the interwar period.

In the 1920s the federal ALP bodies greatly increased their own power. The first federal ALP conference occurred in 1902 with six representatives from each state. It met every three years ordinarily but could have special meetings. It was not until 1915 that federal conference formed the federal executive as the supreme federal body between conferences.\textsuperscript{55} It consisted of two representatives elected by each state and the scope of its powers were vague. Its original rules stated that the executive was to implement the decisions of federal conferences and “interpret” the party constitution.\textsuperscript{56}

The scope of the federal executive’s power to intervene in state affairs was first tested in the 1923 dispute between NSW Labor parliamentary leader James Dooley and the AWU faction in NSW. The controlling AWU faction denied the federal

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 37.
executive’s right to intervene but the federal executive intervened anyway and organised the Unity Conference at which the AWU faction lost control of the party. Soon afterwards the AWU executive council sent a letter to the ALP federal executive requesting a federal inquiry into the ballot box scandal of which the AWU would bear the cost. The federal executive refused the request and stated that its policy was no intervention without a state executive request. Federal President R. Summer said “in state matters the state executive must be supreme”. Both the AWU and the federal ALP had switched their positions within a matter of months, reflecting both the cynicism of those involved and the ambiguous powers of the federal bodies.

NSW Labor attitudes became increasingly hostile to the federal ALP. By 1926 J.F. O’Reilly, NSW representative on the federal executive, was warning that body against intervention in NSW: “this state has had the experience of the federal executive interfering in its domestic affairs on other occasions. We are not going to stand idly by and be overridden by anybody in the future". In 1928 the federal executive ruled that members of the ALP could not advocate the policies of the CPA. The NSW Branch replied with three principles that later became known as the “Local Autonomy Declaration”:

1. The executive of the ALP, state of NSW, is the creation of the rank and file in conference and in all domestic matters recognises only the authority of the rank and file of the ALP state of NSW as expressed in conference or by plebiscite.

2. It is contrary to the democratic principles of the Australian trade union and Labor Movement and to the working class movement in all civilised countries that a small group of officials such as is comprised by the federal executive and conference should have the extraordinary power to override the expressed will of the rank and file to whom they owe their existence and sustenance.

3. Therefore the executive of the ALP state of NSW will maintain the right of autonomy in all domestic matters which the rank and file of the party in NSW in conjunction with the parties in all other states have enjoyed since the inception of the Australian Labour Parties and this executive consequently will repudiate any ruling or dictum of federal officials on any domestic matter

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57 “Animated debates,” SMH 21 April 1924, 7.
which has not first received approval of the rank and file of the party in NSW.\textsuperscript{59}

That same year the federal executive instructed the NSW executive to readmit some expelled party members. NSW President Webster said “the federal executive has not the power to give the ruling”. “The labour movement in this state can tell them to go to a much hotter place than Bourke”, he continued, “if the annual conference at Easter decides to lift the suspensions they can do so, but they are the only body who can do it.”\textsuperscript{60} The federal conference held strong and in 1931 gave the federal executive plenary powers over all matters in the ALP nationwide.\textsuperscript{61} In the sixteen years of its existence the federal executive had come to claim complete power over the state branches.

After 1928 the NSW Labor Party fought back, not only rejecting the federal bodies’ right to intervene but also trying to win control over the federal ALP caucus. The NSW executive began to threaten federal ALP politicians from NSW with dis-endorsement or expulsion. In 1930, for example, the NSW executive instructed federal members to oppose any wage reductions by the federal government.\textsuperscript{62} The following year the executive required all federal candidates to sign a pledge committing to local autonomy and the “Lang plan”.\textsuperscript{63} But NSW was not able to make a significant impact on federal policy. Ted Theodore, former Queensland Premier and now federal Labor Treasurer, representative for the NSW seat of Dalley and long-time personal enemy of Lang, announced that the government would "not submit to non-parliamentary dictation nor allow its authority to be usurped by anybody."\textsuperscript{64}

In 1934 the NSW Labor Party annual conference sent its delegates to federal conference to propose big reforms. The federal conference’s role would be limited to formulation of federal policy, the federal executive would be eliminated and state representation at federal conference would be on “more democratic lines than at

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present exists, such representation on the basis of party membership in each state”. 65 This would have been a democratic improvement but unsurprisingly the other states rejected it. Most NSW Labor Party members and officials continued to support state autonomy even once they had turned against Lang. In August 1938 the majority of the anti-Lang Industrialist coalition rejected the idea of asking for federal intervention because they believed it would reduce their legitimacy in the eyes of members. 66

Throughout the period there were dissenting voices against state autonomy within NSW, chiefly from the AWU. Henry Boote wrote in the Australian Worker that “there is only one way in which essential unity can be secured. That way is by submission to the majority decisions of the highest authority the movement has created for its own guidance and preservation... what the [federal] conference decides will be the final word for all loyal labourites”. 67 The AWU did not believe in local state autonomy within its own organisation nor within the ALP nor the government. Its federal annual convention and executive council had complete power and it consistently supported an expanded federal government and federal arbitration system.

In 1931 the lack of state branch autonomy in the AWU had undermined state branch autonomy in the ALP. All three NSW delegates on the AWU executive council voted to support Lang Labor in its dispute with the federal ALP but they were outvoted by the executive council members from other states. The AWU executive council announced that it considered “the maintenance of the federal authority” to be “a basic principle from which no deviation can be tolerated”. State branch autonomy “would be fatal to the national aspirations of the ALP, and would dissolve our movement”. 68 Prime Minister James Scullin, a former AWU organiser, praised the decision as “consistent with the traditions of the union”. "I expected that decision”, he continued, “the AWU is an all-Australian organisation, which, in addition to its

65 “Set back to unity negotiations,” AW 4 April 1934, 14.
68 “AWU scheme,” 22 April 1931, 12.
valuable work in the industrial field, has played a very important part in building up the political Labor movement in Australia”. 69

The Miners Federation was also organised federally and its most prominent leader, Willis, supported a more powerful national government in his union and in Australia. In 1925 he challenged “anyone to prove that it is possible for the state government to socialise industry. Socialisation is a federal matter, and impossible for the state alone. The first step to socialisation in Australia, by constitutional means must be the nationalisation of the banking system, and control of the credits of the nation”. 70 But as we saw in previous chapters, the Miners Federation retained strong local autonomy for lodges and districts, so the opposition of Willis and the Miners Federation to absolute federal ALP power was consistent with their own internal union organisation.

The decline of local autonomy and the expansion of executive power

The increase in local autonomy of the NSW Labor Party against the federal ALP occurred alongside a decline in local autonomy within the NSW party. In the 1910s, despite the party’s centralised constitution, the leagues retained significant autonomy. Following the money is usually instructive, and of each member’s sixpence membership fee, 4d went to the local branch and 2d to the central executive. 71 This reflected the fact that election campaigns were organised largely at the local electorate level. In the decades to 1939, however, the central executive gradually increased its own power at the expense of both the local branches and the annual conference.

From the 1890s onwards, controlling factions had deliberately failed to address certain matters at the annual conference so that the central executive could decide the issue later. 72 As we have seen above, from 1919 the controlling AWU faction

69 Ibid.
70 “Socialisation,” SMH 19 May 1925, 9.
71 “NSW Labor Conference,” Worker (Wagga) 6 February 1913, 19.
72 “ALP,” SMH 23 April 1926, 11.
greatly expanded executive powers which culminated in 1923 when the central executive expelled the NSW Labor parliamentary leader, Dooley, elected his replacement and gagged the leagues and unions. But expansion of executive authority did not end with the AWU faction’s defeat.

In 1925 the executive went one step further and failed to hold an annual conference at all. Initially it postponed annual conference from Easter to June because of the 1925 NSW election and then following the election, the executive cancelled the annual conference altogether saying the party needed to save its funds for the next federal election.\(^73\) The opposing conservative faction argued that the cancellation occurred because the ruling militant faction feared it would lose control of the conference and the new executive.

In the executive’s annual report for 1925 it noted that "the executive takes this opportunity of refuting the contention that it had something to gain by not calling a conference" but this was a weak argument given that it had effectively doubled its term from one to two years.\(^74\) The AWU released an official statement that “the present NSW Labor executive is controlled by an oligarchy that is prepared to break the rules and override the constitution in order that it can remain in office.”\(^75\) This was a hypocritical statement coming from one of the most oligarchical unions in the country, but it was nevertheless true. The episode highlighted the tension in the party rules which made the annual conference supreme but also gave the central executive plenary powers between annual conferences. Cancelling the annual conference and staying in power indefinitely took the central executive’s authority to its logical extreme.

From the mid-1920s there were also ongoing disputes within the party over the central executive’s control over who leagues and unions could select as annual conference delegates. This conflict usually involved professed or alleged

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\(^73\) “Abandoned,” *SMH* 25 June 1925, 10.
\(^74\) “ALP,” *SMH* 26 March 1926, 6.
\(^75\) “ALP,” *SMH* 26 June 1925, 6.
Communists. The Russian Revolution had occurred in 1917 and fear of Communism was widespread amongst both Labor and Nationalist voters. From 1924 the federal ALP rules prevented Communist Party members from joining any state branch of the party. The NSW Labor Party’s 1927 Rules then banned Communist Party members explicitly.76 The Nationalist Party and commercial press continually tried to link Labor with Communism and argue that the party was secretly “red”. In 1925 a SMH editorial noted that in the US there was a “much keener appreciation” of the danger posed by Communism and cited approvingly that “active membership of Communistic organisations is in California an offence punishable by long terms of imprisonment”.77 Communism was electoral poison and most Labor officials understood that they needed to take a strong stand against it or be wiped out electorally.78

The Trades Hall Reds protested that the unions and leagues were the foundational elements of the party and that for the state bodies to decide who the leagues and unions could elect to represent them at annual conference or on the central executive amounted to turning the party’s democracy on its head.79 In 1928, for example, the Coachmakers Union moved an unsuccessful resolution that “every union must have unrestricted right to select its own delegate to conference and to the [executive]“.80 From the perspective of a majoritarian view of democracy there is no problem with a majority of delegates telling a minority that they cannot elect certain people as delegates. Such action is more problematic from a democratic perspective that supports minority-rights but even then, a political party barring members of rival political parties from involvement is the norm. The real problem arose in the mid-1930s when the Inner Group began to use the label of “Communist” as an excuse to marginalise and expel its enemies. When the Industrialist Party split from Lang Labor in 1938 its president Frank O’Neill said that, under the new Labor

77 Editorial, “Camouflaged violence,” SMH 3 November 1925, 10.
78 “Communists excluded,” SMH 30 October 1924, 9.
79 “Split expected,” SMH 8 September 1924, 11.
80 “Metropolitan conference,” AW 15 February 1928, 18.
executive, branches would be given “genuine local autonomy” in contrast with “the behaviour of the Inner Group who expelled as Communist any who questioned their dictatorship”. O’Neill said that “no one worried about being expelled” by the Inner Group, in fact, “it was regarded on the contrary as a compliment”.\footnote{Swing away from Lang,” AW 27 July 1938, 7.}

Unions and individual union leaders who were either Communist, anti-Communist or somewhere in between brought these positions into the Labor Party. The Trades Hall Reds and their unions initially pushed for cooperation and even fusion between Labor and the CPA. On the other side unions like the AWU fought against Communists inside their union and the ALP. At the 1939 Unity Conference, AWU General Secretary and President of the Federal Labor executive, Clarrie Fallon, presided and began by ejecting various delegates who he knew or suspected to be Communists.\footnote{“Unity conference,” AW 30 August 1939, 16; Rawson, “The Organisation of the Australian Labor Party 1916-1941,” 311.}

From the mid-1930s the Inner Group began a major assault on local autonomy as it clung to power against an increasingly influential opposition. A group of trade unions planned to hold a conference on 1 August 1936 to discuss party reform and Inner Group domination, but the central executive announced that it prohibited the unions from meeting. The union leaders were bemused; they were affiliated to the Labor Party but they were independent institutions, so for a central executive to tell them they could not hold a conference was a blatant example of over-reach. When the unions proceeded with the conference the central executive established a “Special Investigation Committee” to investigate the conference. The secret police overtones added weight to the rebel unions’ descriptions of the Inner Group as increasingly “fascist”.\footnote{“Special trades union conferences,” AW 19 September 1936, 4.} Following the investigation the central executive expelled 17 union officials and four MLAs. Boote wrote in the Australian Worker that the expulsions were “tyranny utterly devoid of sense or reason”\footnote{“NSW again!”, AW 26 August 1936, 3.}. The editorial of the Barrier Daily Truth proclaimed: “surely a dictatorship that has found it necessary to expel men of a lifetime of devoted service to the party because they attended a trade union
conference is nearing the end of its baneful existence. Nothing short of Hitlerism has
got the movement in its grip, but this must not and will not last much longer.85

The Inner Group also increasingly delegated central executive authority to sections,
committees and individual members. The executive’s plenary power was condensing
into the hands of a smaller and smaller group of men. For example, the executive
elected a five-person disputes committee annually and this small group began to
wield the full power of the executive in relation to a range of matters that fit into the
broad category of “disputes”.86

The controlling faction sought to closely control branch affairs. In January 1931 the
central Bankstown branch met to resolve a local factional dispute. Just as the meeting
opened two men began to fight, exchanging blows as the chairman called for order.
Amongst the rush of bodies a woman added to the mayhem by swinging an umbrella
at one of the combatants. C. S. Matthews, chairman of the disputes committee,
entered the hall and adjourned the meeting indefinitely.87 Granted this was an
extraordinary meeting, but nevertheless one member of the central executive was
personally wielding the power of the full central executive and overriding the local
branch’s authority to run its own meeting. Matthews had less luck in future attempts.
At a Glebe branch meeting he was literally shoved out of the chair and left the
meeting with some 60 supporters while 185 members remained to continue the
meeting under local control.88

In 1937 the central executive delegated the authority to expel members and leagues
to a “Discipline Committee” of three Inner Group leaders: Keller, Graves and Martin.
Jack Hughes of the Clerks Union complained that “never previously in the history of
the political Labor movement has such bureaucratic power been given to executive
officers. When three dictators are set up in this way it indicates that they fear they

86 “ALP disputes,” SMH 10 January 1931, 14.
are losing the support of their own executive”. The Inner Group also began bypassing the central executive and selecting Labor Senate candidates itself.

Conversely, the Industrialists at least gave lip service to local autonomy. They sold books of coupons to raise funds to organise against Lang and the money went 50:50 to the Industrialist executive and local branches. But in general it claimed similar power to direct members and branches as the Inner Group. For example, it instructed members that they “should not withdraw” from Lang Labor branches “until the question of the particular branch had been considered by the [Industrialist] executive”.

Conclusion
Organised opposition is the inevitable result of the pursuit of power and positions within ostensibly democratic political parties. This chapter has examined three sites of organised opposition: factionalism, the defence of membership decision-making and the promotion of local autonomy. Factions enhanced party democracy throughout the period by holding one another accountable, providing resistance in elections, and by motivating membership involvement. Trade unions were crucial in forming and maintaining the factions but they also entered the party as individual quasi-factions which could exercise undemocratic influence. Throughout the period the central executive increased its own power at the expense of membership-decision making, but some branch communities were strong enough to resist. The NSW Labor Party itself was also strong enough to successfully resist domination by the undemocratic federal ALP conference and executive. The ruling NSW faction resisted the federal ALP bodies more out of self-interest than ideological support for local autonomy and it was happy to undermine local branch and union autonomy to its own advantage.

89 “Revolt,” *AW* 15 December 1937, 8.
90 “Lang faction,” *SMH* 29 December 1937, 12.
92 “Unity move,” *SMH* 20 April 1938, 18.
CHAPTER IX

A Lang dictatorship? Extra-parliamentary control, free speech, corruption and violence within the NSW Labor Party

The image of “Dictator Lang” hung over the NSW Labor Party for more than a decade until he was finally deposed in 1939. This chapter focuses on four key pillars of Jack Lang’s allegedly dictatorial rule: extra-parliamentary control, the suppression of free speech, corruption and violence. The NSW Labor Party became increasingly undemocratic under Lang and by the mid-1930s it was a closed and corrupt oligarchy. Yet oligarchy was never absolute or uncontested; democratic struggles and improvements occurred throughout the period. The strength and organisation of the unions as independent institutions allowed for resistance and eventually leadership renewal. The broader NSW democratic political system and society was also crucial in undermining Lang and his allies. He could not silence criticism in the commercial press and he was fatally weakened by the NSW voters’ repeated rejection in general elections.

The so-called “Lang dictatorship” began in 1926 when the annual conference asserted the power to elect the parliamentary leader. Contrary to the historiography, I will argue that this alleged “dictatorship” actually enhanced party democracy by establishing extra-parliamentary control over the politicians for the first time in the party’s history. In 1910 there were high levels of free speech and free communication within the party but these declined greatly to 1939. The first major assault came in 1923 when the central executive expelled the parliamentary leader and then banned members from discussing the issue. As the 1920s went on labour newspapers such as the Labor Daily and Australian Worker were increasingly biased and closed to critical voices, becoming blunt weapons of factional warfare. By the late 1920s criticism of Lang and the party had become unacceptable and the leaders increasingly used accusations of “Communism” to silence opponents.

Some degree of corruption was a constant feature of NSW Labor Party politics. It is difficult to say whether corruption increased or decreased overall between 1910 and 1939 but the extent to which the spoils of corruption became concentrated into the
hands of one faction did peak at two times; with the AWU faction in the early 1920s and the Inner Group in the mid-1930s. The Inner Group also used violence and intimidation on an unprecedented scale. The brand of corruption discredited the party and added to Labor’s eventual un-electability under Lang.

Figure 28 Jack Lang addressing a crowd in Moore Park in Sydney in 1930.¹

Controlling the politicians

In theory, the extra-parliamentary Labor Party controlled the politicians who were the “servants” of the movement. All Labor politicians signed a “pledge” promising to do their best to implement party policy, as decided by the annual conference and interpreted by the central executive, and to vote as one in parliament, in the way that a majority had decided in a caucus meeting beforehand. Once elected, however, politicians proved difficult to control. The Australian Constitution gave power to the elected individual rather than the party, so even when the annual conference or central executive expelled a politician, the rebel kept his place in parliament. The politicians also tended to be more well-known and charismatic than members of the central executive and could often gain the support of the party rank and file in a dispute with the party’s extra-parliamentary institutions.

¹ Ted Hood. State Library of NSW 51104.
As we have seen, from its election in 1910 the NSW Labor government’s refusal to follow party policy had alienated an increasing proportion of the party. The first major attempt to assert control over the politicians in the twentieth century was the Industrial Section in 1915. The second major attempt has received far less attention from historians and occurred in 1923 when, for the first time in the history of the party, the central executive removed the parliamentarians’ right to choose their own leader. By convention, the Labor parliamentarians had always chosen their leader, yet there was nothing in the party rules to prevent the executive from taking this power for itself. The executive claimed that it was acting within the power granted to it by NSW Labor Party rule 33, which stated that “the executive between conferences has plenary powers to deal with all matters of policy, platform and rules, and their decisions must be observed by all members of the movement”. The AWU faction lost control of the party at the 1923 Annual Conference which restored the politicians’ right to choose their leader, but this restoration was short-lived.  

The third major attempt to control the politicians, and by far the most successful, was the “Lang dictatorship”. In November 1926 a Special Conference declared Lang the leader for the life of the current parliament irrespective of the wishes of caucus. This continued until Lang and his allies lost control of the party in 1939. As the name “Lang dictatorship” implies, it was criticised as undemocratic by the conservative wing of the party and the commercial media, but is this justified? The motion did give Lang something like dictatorial control over his fellow politicians in that it removed their right to replace him and empowered him “to do all things and exercise such powers as he deems necessary”. But Lang was still answerable to the central executive and annual conference. So from 1926 to around 1934 a more accurate (though less elegant) name would be the “annual conference and central executive dictatorship”, or simply “extra-parliamentary control”, which is what the party was supposed to be all along. The “Lang dictatorship” enhanced labour democracy by enabling effective extra-parliamentary control for the first time in the party’s history. By the mid-1930s, however, Lang’s dominance of the extra-parliamentary bodies

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2 Hogan, Labor Pains Volume IV, 332.
made their control illusory, so from then onwards the term “Lang dictatorship” is more appropriate.

The party privileged the view of politicians as delegates rather than trustees. As I argued in the thesis introduction, the delegate view is more democratic as it implies that the members have more direct control over decisions. Lang was very popular with the union leaders and party members, but his poor treatment of his parliamentary colleagues had seen deputy leader Peter Loughlin go within one vote of deposing him in a caucus ballot in September 1926. The central executive responded by calling a Special Conference for November with the goal of entrenching Lang as leader.

At the conference, the longstanding hostility of the extra-parliamentary party to the Labor politicians was clear. John Kilburn said he “would sooner be a captain of a regiment of workers than a performer in the parliamentary circus”. “Again and again the workers have been betrayed politically and industrially”, he concluded. ³ Ossie Schreiber, Secretary of the Furnishing Trades Union, then moved the famous resolution:

That this Conference has complete confidence in the leadership of John T. Lang, Premier of New South Wales, and hereby confirms him in the leadership of the Parliamentary Labor Party for the period of the present parliament, and recognising that unity is essential to the successful carrying out of the platform and policy of the Labor Party, the Premier is hereby authorised in the event of circumstances arising which, in his opinion imperil the unity, to do all things and exercise such powers as he deems necessary in the interests of the movement. Schreiber said the party had “come to the parting of the ways”; they must “decide whether they would stand idly by” and see the politicians’ “treachery and intrigue get the upper hand”. Lang had “made the boldest possible bid to translate the platform of the party to the statute book of the state”. Schreiber’s motion carried with over 300 votes for and only four against.⁴

³ “ALP Conference,” SMH 15 November 1926, 11.
⁴ “ALP,” SMH 13 November 1926, 17.
We can safely assume that a majority of the politicians opposed the “Lang dictatorship”; only half had even voted for Lang in the recent leadership ballot. But the politicians understood Lang’s popularity and felt the mood in the party; they did not dare to protest for fear of expulsion or dis-endorsement at the next election. Three years later at the 1929 Annual Conference Lang was able to claim that “the parliamentary section is working in perfect harmony with the executive, and perfect amity pervades the party”. Geoffrey Robinson argued that the second Lang government (1930-32) was “the most radical government in Australian history” because of the influence of “a group of radical unionists who expounded a class struggle ideology”. This governance by Lang and the leading unionists was only possible because the politicians had been tamed.

In 1931 the SMH reported that although “there is an influential section of caucus which threatens to revolt” these members “have confided in their friends that they will pick their own time and their own battleground”. By 1938 Carlo Lazzarini, one of the few Labor politicians openly hostile to Lang, declared that “if there was a secret ballot for the leadership of the parliamentary party, and members voted in accordance with their beliefs, Mr Lang would not get five votes”. Yet Lang continued as leader. Extra-parliamentary control had been implemented to an extent that was almost unimaginable in the early 1920s.

A common scholarly argument against intraparty democracy, and one made regularly by the Nationalist Party in this period, is that politicians should only be responsible to the electorate, not their party. In the 1925 NSW election, Nationalist Attorney General Thomas Bavin said “the choice is not really between Sir George Fuller and Mr Lang, it is between Sir George Fuller and a body of men outside parliament having no responsibility to the people, whose names probably they have never heard, the men who constitute the governing body of the ALP”. Today we would use the term

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5 “Mr Lang,” SMH 2 April 1929, 6.
7 “State politics,” SMH 1 January 1932, 4.
8 “Inner Group disruption,” AW 27 April 1938, 7.
9 “Appeal to women,” SMH 28 May 1925, 12.
“faceless men”. From a broader state-level view of democracy this is an important question. As I discussed in the thesis introduction, it is debatable which model is more democratic and it depends on an individual’s subjective view of democracy and, in particular, how participatory that democracy should be. However, from an intraparty view of democracy, which is the focus of this thesis, the situation is clear. Party democracy requires members to decide party policy, and extra-parliamentary control of the politicians is essential to ensure that the politicians follow party policy.

Extra-parliamentary control is necessary but not sufficient to provide membership control over the politicians. The second essential component is that the members control the extra-parliamentary institutions. As we have seen in previous chapters, the NSW Labor Party members did not exercise significant control over the annual conference and central executive which were instead controlled largely by union leaders. Like the 1927 Rules, the “Lang dictatorship” was an important step towards democracy but was not in itself sufficient.

**Free speech and free communication**

The first major suppression of free speech and communication within the party occurred in the 1923 dispute. Early that year the central executive dubiously expelled Dooley from the party and on 9 March ruled that, as the Dooley matter would be resolved at annual conference, “branches, members and councils must refrain from further discussion of the merits of the case” until then. AWU factioneer George Buckland explained that this would mean that conference delegates would be “untrammelled in any way by resolutions for or against” the executive’s actions, and would be “free to record a vote in the way that they thought was right ... after hearing the evidence from both sides”.

The executive’s ruling was designed to minimise the issue, and prevent Dooley and his supporters from arguing their case to the leagues. When the majority of leagues ignored the executive’s gag order, it began to expel them, and form new leagues to

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replace them. By 9 April, the executive had expelled 53 leagues, 11 state Electorate Councils and 3 federal Electorate Councils from the party.\(^{11}\) This tyrannical behaviour alienated a significant section of the AWU faction’s former supporters and it lost control of the party at the 1923 Annual Conference.

The various labour newspapers’ Labor Party annual conference reports were never completely objective in what they included and excluded from their accounts. After the AWU faction’s defeat in 1923, however, a clear change in reporting is evident and the *Australian Worker’s* annual conference reports became openly biased. In 1926, for example, Willis unsuccessfully presented a motion to amend the party rules, as was the right of any conference delegate. However, the *Australian Worker* recorded it as: “Mr Willis had to abandon his attempt to tamper with the rules”.\(^{12}\)

The *Australian Worker’s* main labour newspaper rival was the *Labor Daily* which was founded as the official newspaper of the NSW Labor Party in 1924. The newspaper was Willis’s creation and to do so he had converted the Miners Federation newspaper, *Common Cause*, into the *Labor Daily*. The *Labor Daily* was governed by a board of management of six union officials elected by shareholding unions, one vote per pound invested.\(^{13}\) This bestowed power on the leaders of several wealthy unions, especially the Miners Federation. Willis even bought 500 shares personally.\(^{14}\)

The *Labor Daily* proudly declared itself “a daring challenge to capitalism and its right-wing supporters in the ALP and trade unions”.\(^{15}\) The first edition of the *Labor Daily* on 23 January 1924 featured a shrine-like image of Willis, federal Labor leader Matthew Charlton and Lang.\(^{16}\) The supremacy of the extra-parliamentary party was clear in the positioning of Willis above Charlton and Lang (figure 29). Later that year

\(^{12}\) “Special Conference,” *AW* 17 November 1926, 15.  
\(^{13}\) “Labor Daily,” *SMH* 26 January 1924, 9.  
\(^{15}\) “Enemy within,” *LD* 12 May 1928, 4.  
\(^{16}\) “Leaders,” *LD* 23 January 1924, 1.
a puff piece on Miners Federation President Baddeley praised, among other things, his “splendid physique and aggressive features”.  

Figure 29 The Labor Daily 23 January 1924.

While the Labor Daily did feature articles critical of factional enemies like the AWU, its message was generally one of party peace and inclusion. In 1928 a Labor Daily editorial deemed it “most regrettable” that the AWU was not represented at that year’s annual conference, provided a balanced outline of the dispute between the AWU and NSW Labor and then suggested arbitration by an impartial third party to heal the breach. The newspaper also published even-handed debates between the AWU officials and former AWU-president-turned-dissident Arthur Rae.

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17 “A miners’ man,” LD 8 December 1924, 4.
18 “Not capitalist,” LD 8 December 1924, 8.
20 “Mr Rae,” LD 6 January 1925, 6.
Figure 30 Labor Daily cartoonist Fred Brown called for NSW Labor Party unity in 1927.²¹

The Labor Daily had a daily column of short letters to the editor. It was titled “The Man on the Street” and featured an image of a man using a rolled up Labor Daily newspaper as a megaphone.²² In its early years the Labor Daily even printed several letters criticising Lang. In 1924 the Goulburn eight hour committee wrote to the Labor Daily complaining that Lang had not appeared nor sent a representative to their march. The letter condemned “the unpardonable discourtesy of Mr Lang” and

²² “The man in the street,” LD 5 May 1934, 4.
his “insulting tactlessness and neglect”. The following year the Labor Daily published a debate between Lang and Jock Garden over a maritime dispute. Such criticism of Lang was unthinkable ten years later.

The 1920s saw the rise of radio in Australia and labour leaders quickly understood its potential propaganda value. In 1925 Willis warned in the Labor Daily that radio “could be utilised by capitalism to mislead the people; and therefore Labor must get in first”. Willis’s private secretary Emil Voigt had developed a keen interest in radio during his travels in the US in 1923-24. In January 1925 when he returned to Australia he successfully promoted the idea of the NSW Labor Council forming a radio station and later that year it created 2KY. 2KY ran at a profit and also served as a valuable labour propaganda tool, taking its news directly from the Labor Daily.

Lang too was quick to appreciate the power of radio. He believed that if the public could hear him directly, rather than through the hostile commercial press, he could win them over. Lang had influence over the Labor Council and 2KY but he did not control it. He investigated the possibility of state radio controlled by the government. This would have given the incumbent government a huge propaganda advantage and the scheme was never realised due to constitutional complications. The commercial press had been quick to criticise the potentially anti-democratic effects and many within the labour movement feared that future Nationalist governments could use state radio to entrench themselves. Lang had to settle for 2KY and in 1932, on the eve of his dismissal, he asked 2KY to transmit the entire session of parliament, a first anywhere in Australia. Later that year Labor estimated that 250,000 people listened to Lang’s election policy speech.

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23 "Non-union," LD 5 November 1924, 5.
24 "Mr Garden," LD 8 January 1925, 5.
26 Ibid., 121.
27 Ibid., 134-35.
28 Ibid., 131.
29 Ibid., 134.
30 Ibid.
By the late 1920s the Labor Daily had become closed to critical voices. This became worse after Willis lost control of the newspaper to the Inner Group in 1932. The following year he criticised the Labor Daily’s “refusal to print one word of criticism or correction of the actions and statements of its controlling authorities – the Inner Group”. \(^{31}\) This intolerance of critical voices extended throughout the party.

Past failures of loyalty to Lang were not forgotten. At the 1928 Annual Conference William Davis, Secretary of the Building Trades Union, was speaking when Jack Hooke interjected: “did you not work against Mr Lang and support an opponent in his electorate [in a preselection ballot four years earlier]? Davis admitted that he had, but said it was a mistake and that Lang had “proved to be the best leader NSW has ever seen”. \(^{32}\) This exchange demonstrates the extent to which opposition to Lang had become taboo within the party. That year the central executive expelled Australian Worker editor Boote from his membership of the Rose Bay Labor branch over an article he had written criticising the Lang government. \(^{33}\)

In 1930 the central executive recommended A.J. Macpherson be dismissed from his position as organising secretary because “he had made disloyal remarks regarding [Lang] and had plotted to bring about his downfall from the position of leader”. Annual conference voted to dismiss Macpherson. \(^{34}\) The following year the central executive’s attempt to stop Macpherson from speaking at Labor Party rallies resulted in an almost slapstick chase around Sydney. At 8pm on 6 March 1931 word reached party headquarters that Macpherson was planning to speak at a meeting on Edgecliff Road in East Sydney. Two party cars sped to the scene but were told they were too late, Macpherson, a regular Scarlet Pimpernel, had already spoken and left. The cars then drove to various local rallies but Macpherson managed to evade them and spoke to two more large gatherings that night. \(^{35}\) In 1936 the central executive introduced a bylaw preventing expelled members from attending branch meetings.

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\(^{32}\) “Must belong,” LD 7 April 1928, 5.
\(^{33}\) “Mr Boote,” SMH 12 April 1928, 13.
\(^{34}\) “NSW Labor Conference,” AW 23 April 1930, 18.
\(^{35}\) “Banned,” SMH 7 March 1931, 16.
and arguing that they should not have been expelled. Mr T. Falkingham of the Boilermakers Union complained that the bylaw “amounted to suppression of free speech” and was further “evidence of a fascist-like dictatorship in the movement”.

The gag order was similar to the AWU faction’s suppression of free speech in 1923.

Above I argued that the Labor Party’s bar on members of other political parties, including the CPA, was democratic. However, it became undemocratic and repressive when the definition of “Communist” began to change from meaning a member of the CPA to meaning someone with “communist” opinions. In November 1923 when Willis controlled Common Cause it editorialised that “any communist who is not a member of the Communist Party has an unquestioned right to membership of the Labor Party”. But many in the state and federal ALP leadership did not agree and in 1928 the federal executive ruled that ALP members are prohibited from “advocating the policy of the Communist Party”. Exactly what constituted the “policy of the Communist Party” was unclear and this prohibition gave the NSW central executive free rein to redbait against opponents. By 1938 the Australian Worker claimed that “opposition to the Lang dictatorship and the Inner Group gangsters is to be recognised as ‘doing the work of the Communist Party’”.

In the mid-1920s the Labor Daily had a circulation of around 100,000. By 1930 it had dropped to around 70,000 but it reached a peak of 162,000 on 14 May 1932 following Lang’s dismissal as Premier of NSW. That year Lang appointed Norman McCauley, the brother of his private secretary, as editor and A.C. Paddison as lead writer. The Labor Daily offices on Brisbane Street, Sydney became an unofficial headquarters for the Inner Group. By the mid-1930s the Labor Daily’s editorials and Lang’s speeches were indistinguishable. On 5 September 1935, for example, the front

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36 “Special trades union conferences,” SMH 16 September 1936, 4.
42 Ibid.
page showed Lang speaking on a podium draped in the Australian flag with the headline: “No war of plunder”. That edition’s editorial was titled “A war of plunder” and reiterated Lang’s isolationist stance against Australian involvement in a European war against fascist states.  

The Labor Daily did not have a monopoly on communication with Labor Party members who could get party news from rival labour newspapers, such as the Australian Worker, from the NSW Labor Council’s radio station 2KY and from the commercial media. Nevertheless, the Labor Daily was probably the most trusted source of party news for most party members and it did enjoy a monopoly over some party information. For example, in 1928 the central executive voted that only the Labor Daily could attend and report on central executive meetings. It is difficult to assess the capacity of the Labor Daily to influence party members’ opinions, but the ferocity with which the rival factions fought for control of the newspaper demonstrates that they believed it was of immense propaganda value.

The oral histories recorded by Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taska added further weight to this position. In their interviews they found that the Labor Daily “had a unique status in working-class circles” in the inter-war period. Several interviewees independently referred to it as their “Bible”. Railway cleaner John Mongan appreciated that “you could read about what your life was really like” and remembered that he would buy two Labor Dailys each morning to give one away to workmates and “spread the news trying to get them to read the Labor Daily”. A labourer, Albert P., recalled the Labor Daily was “the accepted thing in most homes in those days, wherever you went, in the snooker rooms, barber shops, any sporting venues, the Labor Daily was always there”. This pervasiveness in working-class circles and venues suggests that the Labor Daily’s influence was far greater than its circulation of 70,000 to 100,000.

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44 “ALP,” SMH 18 January 1928, 16.
45 Lyons and Taksa, Australian readers remember: an oral history of reading: 75.
46 Ibid., 76.
47 Ibid.
In 1936 the courts blocked an attempt by the Inner Group to dilute the unions’ shareholdings in the *Labor Daily*.\(^{48}\) To cement his control Lang had personally lent the *Labor Daily* £13,764. He attempted the same tactic with 2KY by lending the station £1000 but the Labor Council quashed the scheme.\(^{49}\) When it appeared that the Inner Group would lose control of the *Labor Daily* to the Industrialist union coalition in 1938, Lang tried to retain control by calling in the debt. The dispute came to a head at the shareholders’ meeting on 2 February 1938. The *Australian Worker* reported that “pandemonium reigned” as James Tyrell, director representing the unions, blasted Lang for his “cowardly act” to “grab control of the paper from the unions” which was “unprecedented in the history of the Labor movement”.\(^{50}\) Later that month the unions won control of the *Labor Daily* from Lang in the NSW Equity Court. The unions settled Lang’s debt for £23,239, almost £10,000 more than he had loaned the newspaper. In its typical “scorched earth” fashion, the Inner Group did their best to destroy the *Labor Daily* before they surrendered control. They cancelled all subscriptions and advertising contracts and removed all records and paperwork.\(^{51}\) The Inner Group quickly established the *Century* as a pro-Lang labour newspaper.\(^{52}\)

Industrialist control did not mean a return to free speech. On Tuesday 22 February 1938 the *Labor Daily’s* editorial read: “the dictatorship has ended”. “After years of waiting, after months of interminable and wasteful litigation imposed on us, the *Labor Daily* is back under the control of the directors and the trade unions”, it continued.\(^{53}\) But rather than restoring balance to the *Labor Daily*, and instituting some level of freedom of speech and communication, the Industrialists simply used the newspaper in the same blunt manner as the Inner Group. As their first act after winning control the trade union directors informed the staff that “no support for the

\(^{48}\) “Special trades union conference,” *AW* 5 August 1936, 4.

\(^{49}\) “NSW Labor Conference,” *AW* 15 April 1936, 8.

\(^{50}\) “Control of Labor Daily,” *AW* 9 February 1938, 8.


Lang dictatorship would be tolerated”. In their war against the Inner Group the Industrialists had taken on some of the characteristics of their enemy.

“Ballot fakers and rule jugglers”: corruption, intimidation and violence

It is safe to assume that some level of rule bending, dirty tricks and outright ballot-rigging had occurred within the NSW Labor Party from the outset. By its clandestine nature it is difficult to say whether corruption increased or decreased in the interwar period but it does appear to have been used most effectively in two periods. The first was from 1919 to 1923 when the AWU faction controlled the NSW Labor Party. As Jim Hagan and Ken Turner note, in this four year period “there were almost endless allegations of forged ballot papers, multiple voting, ballot box stuffing, ‘crook’ ballot boxes and impersonation” and that “most of the accusations pointed back to the [AWU faction] executive”.

Under NSW Labor Party rule 6 any member of an affiliated trade union could vote in pre-selection ballots in electorates in which they claimed residence. Time and again pre-selection ballot results were determined by the hundreds of postal ballots that flooded in from distant workers via their union’s headquarters. The AWU made best use of this system; it was the largest union in the state and printed ballot papers in the Australian Worker for its members to fill in and mail. Once the ballots reached union headquarters it would have been easy to alter or replace them, or to add ballot papers supposedly mailed from distant pastoral stations but actually completed by the union officials in Macdonell House. In chapter two I demonstrated how the AWU leaders used fake voting slips to corrupt internal AWU postal ballots and it appears that they simply transposed this system into the Labor Party. On 20 September 1922, James Catts, Labor MHR for Cook, launched a long and detailed attack in the House of Representatives against the “extensive and thinly veiled criminality” of Bailey and his Central Branch AWU “junta”. Originally one of their closest allies, Catts had fallen out with the AWU leaders in 1920 when the AWU’s Blakeley ousted him as federal

54 "Bailiff paid off," LD 23 February 1938, 7.
ALP Caucus Secretary. The AWU faction-controlled executive had subsequently expelled Catts from the NSW Labor Party in April 1922 for sectarianism.\textsuperscript{56}

Catts said that it had been proved at the 1920 AWU annual convention that 250 faked AWU voting slips had been used in the Labor Party’s 1919 Namoi pre-selection ballot. Dissident AWU official Jack Cullinan had discovered the fraud. He recalled: “I had the [fake] slips with me, and I might tell you that I also had my automatic revolver, because if some persons knew that I had the slips I could not tell what might happen”. “The slips were placed in a safe in Macdonnel House”, he continued, “but on the safe being opened up the following morning these documents were missing. This is one of the most damnable things that has ever happened”.\textsuperscript{57} This was a clear case of AWU officials corrupting Labor Party pre-selection ballots but it was never proven exactly which officials were responsible.

Catts also said he had a signed statement from a former AWU organiser named Dick McDonald that, in his 1919 Goulburn pre-selection ballot, Bailey had “put in 300 crook [postal] votes” and that W. Minter of the Clerks Union also claimed to have overheard Bailey and Buckland discussing this scheme. Catts conceded that the AWU convention had investigated these claims and found them to be false. Finally, Catts said that an unnamed “member of the Municipal Employees Union” had told him that in Lambert’s West Sydney pre-selection ballot, eight cars had been used to transport a team of men to vote in multiple booths using fake union tickets. None of these claims were ever proven. Lambert replied that Catts’ speech had been a “long and dreary compilation of incorrect allegations” that relied on the “statements of self-confessed criminals” and “unscrupulous persons”.\textsuperscript{58}

These accusations of AWU faction corruption culminated in the 1923 “ballot box scandal”. In July 1922 the NSW Labor executive loaned several ballot boxes to the

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{57} “Cullinan,” \textit{Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser} 16 July 1920, 3.
Clerks Union. The union discovered that the boxes were “crook”. They had a secret sliding panel, complete with dummy nail heads, which allowed locked boxes to be opened, and ballot papers to be removed and altered or replaced. A committee appointed by the 1923 NSW Labor Party Annual Conference to investigate the ballot box scandal, and consisting entirely of the AWU faction’s enemies, found that Alderman R. Bramston, Australian Railways Union NSW branch Secretary Arthur Buckley and AWU officials Gavin Sutherland and Bailey were responsible for the creation of the fraudulent ballot boxes. The executive immediately expelled them from the Labor Party. Over the following years various labour organisations and courts conducted numerous inquiries, some finding that Bailey and others were responsible for the crook ballot boxes and some finding they were not.

It is certainly clear that there was widespread corruption within the party in this period. Many cases of ballot rigging were proven but it was difficult to show who was responsible. In the case of the ballot-box scandal, for example, either someone built the boxes to corrupt ballots or the AWU faction’s enemies built them to frame the AWU. Although no case against them was ever proven conclusively, given the

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number and detail of the accusations against the AWU faction leaders most historians have been satisfied that they were the chief source of corruption. With so much smoke, historians argue, there must have been fire, and on the balance of probabilities they are probably correct. It is also damning that the AWU officials were accused of remarkably similar methods of tampering with postal ballots within both the AWU and the Labor Party.

Ousting the AWU faction from power in 1923 did not end party corruption and almost constant accusations and counter-accusations remained a permanent feature of the party in the interwar period. A perverse kind of natural selection had occurred in which most of those who had survived as pre-selected candidates or central executive members had probably needed to engage in some degree of rule bending. There were, however, some genuine attempts to clean up the party. The militant faction tried to reduce ballot fraud by introducing a rule that union members must sign a branch roll book before voting in pre-selections. But there were exceptions for remote workers in the AWU, Miners Federation and ARU and the signatures of uninterested or fictional union members were easily forged. The ongoing extent of the ballot problem was highlighted in the absurd cases where more “votes” were cast for a Labor candidate in the pre-selection ballot than in the general election that followed.

As the Inner Group lost support amongst the trade unions in the mid-1930s it increasingly resorted to ballot manipulation. The Inner Group achieved this efficiently through the appointment of a central returning officer who took full control of all party ballots. Local counting was abolished and all ballot boxes opened for the first time in the party headquarters. The Inner Group claimed the reform would clean up the ballots but it was really designed to ensure the Inner Group a monopoly over ballot rigging. In a fantastic semantic twist their choice for returning officer was named Harry O’Regan, which the Inner Group’s opponents delighted in mispronouncing as Harry O’Riggin’. His team of ballot officials who counted the

61 “Lithgow ALP, SMH 10 February 1928, 12.
62 “Labour ballots,” SMH 29 August 1929, 10.
ballots in Room 32 of the Trades Hall became known as the “Inner Group mathematicians”.  

In 1937 Henry Boote wrote:

"As corrupt as an ALP selection ballot", is a phrase that has been coined as a result of the ballot box scandals in Room 32. Branches and Electorate Councils are denied the right to count their own selection ballots, but the ballot boxes must be forwarded to the Trades Hall. Why, if there is no reason for suspicion, as the Inner Group suggests, are not the votes counted by the local ALP officials as soon as the poll closes, a record of the voting made, then the boxes resealed, signed and forwarded to the Trades Hall for checking, if this be necessary? 

J.J. Maloney of the boot trade union complained “there is not one straight selection ballot conducted in NSW today. Months before even the nominations are called the successful candidate is known.” The following year Bob Heffron said “it must be apparent to all that it is impossible to win from within the party while these ballot fakers and rule jugglers are in control”. In 1936 an Industrialist conference had passed a motion that unions and leagues should count their own ballots before sending them to party headquarters. This proposed reform would have eliminated the centralised ballot corruption that had occurred under the Inner Group but it would not have prevented the more localised corruption that had preceded it.

Like corruption, some level of violence and intimidation had always been present in the labour movement and NSW Labor Party. Threatened violence against “scabs” had always been used during strikes. Some union leaders also employed hired thugs within their unions; dissident AWU meetings were often broken up violently, but of course the officials denied any responsibility. The AWU leaders probably used similar tactics within the Labor Party. At the 1924 NSW Labor Party Annual Conference a mob forced their way in and began brawling with delegates and the door keepers. Willis later told conference that AWU leaders Bodkin and Bailey were

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64 “Inner Group,” AW 29 December 1937, 14.
67 “Special trades union conference,” AW 5 August 1936, 4.
68 “A review,” SMH 2 April 1929, 12.
responsible but they denied it. In 1931 the NSW Labor Party organising secretary Plugger Martin led a push for Communists to be banned from the socialisation units. Soon afterwards he was attacked by four Communists in the corridor outside his office in the Sydney Trades Hall. Beaten into semi-consciousness, he was later treated in hospital for a broken finger, gashed forehead and extensive bruising. From then on police guards stood on duty outside the Trades Hall.

Nevertheless, the Inner Group’s sustained, organised use of violence and thuggery from the mid-1930s was unprecedented. It used hired thugs for legitimate purposes as bouncers and security and for illegitimate purposes such as intimidation, breaking up meetings and violence against dissidents. B. Toner of Armidale wrote to the Cessnock Eagle explaining how “Mr Lang and his Inner Group [get] what they say through at the Easter Conference — that is to have his basher gang present at conference, and if any of the delegates dare to open their mouths against Mr Lang, then they are ejected from the meeting and given a bashing which they don’t forget in a hurry”. This was an oversimplification of Inner Group methods but it did contain some truth. One of the more high-profile beatings occurred at the 1938 Annual Conference where Miners Federation delegate W. Crook was bashed when he said he intended to speak against Lang. The Inner Group bouncers threw him down a flight of stairs and then kicked him repeatedly. R. Byers of the Amalgamated Engineering Union received a similar bashing. A Miners Federation statement lamented that “in its whole content the Easter Conference of the Inner Group revealed the drift to fascist policy and outlook while outside the doors the basher gang did its work”. The SMH was not surprised by the bashings: “the dominating idea of Langism is to ride roughshod over everything to the galloping tune of ‘The Basher Gang and the Smasher Lang’, an election slogan which we offer free to the state ALP”.

70 “Gang assault,” SMH 16 September 1931, 11.
71 “Labour review,” SMH 1 January 1932, 7.
72 “Control,” AW 9 February 1938, 8.
73 “Bashing,” Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder 29 April 1938, 8.
74 “Labor unity,” AW 27 April 1938, 18.
75 Editorial, “Governor’s powers,” SMH 28 May 1932, 12.
Following the defeat of Lang and the Inner Group at the 1939 Unity Conference, the new Industrialist central executive moved into the ALP headquarters at the Sydney Trades Hall and discovered that “many important records and other property of the party were missing”. The Inner Group had hidden or destroyed them and they were never found. Perhaps the Inner Group was worried the records would expose their corruption and violence, or perhaps it was simply a “scorched earth” tactic to obstruct the new executive. Either way it was a fittingly shameless final act for the Inner Group.

**Conclusion**

Was Lang the dictator of the NSW Labor Party? In the latter half of the 1930s, perhaps. He certainly dominated the party to an extent not seen before or since. This chapter has focused on how Lang and his Inner Group cemented their authority through extra-parliamentary control, the suppression of free speech and the use of corruption and violence. I have argued that the so-called ‘Lang dictatorship’ initially enhanced party democracy; it was only once the Inner Group had suppressed free speech and resorted to corruption and violence that they could really dictate to the party. Even then a growing Industrialist coalition resisted the Inner Group and defeated it in 1939. The unions retained their independence and provided the organisation and impetus to resist Lang successfully. The Inner Group did not have a monopoly on information, which was available to members from a wide range of sources critical of Inner Group control. This free speech and democracy within the wider NSW political system further undermined Lang’s position as the majority of voters rejected him repeatedly.

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Chapter X: NSW LABOR PARTY CASE STUDY

“Labor without Lang”: The 1938 New South Wales election

During the 1938 NSW election campaign opposition leader Jack Lang claimed that the government had “seized the opportunity for an election because it thought there was trouble in the Labor ranks, and was trying to instil into the public mind that disruption and confusion existed in the party”.¹ Such ideas did not require much “instilling” as a large Industrialist section of the party, which included most of the trade union leaders, was in open rebellion against Lang and the Inner Group. The Industrialists ran candidates against Lang Labor candidates in six seats under the slogan “Labor without Lang”.² On 26 March 1938 the people of NSW overwhelmingly re-elected Premier Bertram Stevens and his United Australia Party (UAP)/Country Party coalition government. It was Lang’s third successive defeat and his final NSW election as Labor leader.

Historians have given little attention to the 1938 election, preferring to group all of Lang’s post-1930 election defeats together and explaining his lack of success as a result of his personal unpopularity with the majority of the electorate, party infighting, “red” scare campaigns by conservatives and general voter doubts about Labor’s ability to manage the economy. Don Rawson does not discuss the 1938 election at all while Jim Hagan and Ken Turner simply summarise the election results.³ Even Bede Nairn, who provides the most detailed narrative of the period, provides only a brief report of the election with no real analysis.⁴

The 1938 election is particularly relevant to my purposes because it took place at the tipping point for Inner Group oligarchy. It is also notable for the perfect storm of bad timing suffered by Lang and NSW Labor. In the final month of the campaign Lang lost control of the Labor Daily and a Royal Commission disproved his claims of

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¹ “Lang at Eveleigh,” SMH 2 March 1938, 14.
government corruption. This case study explores the interplay of these factors in Labor’s election defeat.

Lead up to the election

In the first half of 1937 the NSW Labor Party central executive expelled leading Industrialist members of the NSW Legislative Assembly (MLAs) R.J. (Bob) Heffron, Carlo Lazzarini, Mat Davidson and Ted Horsington for their involvement with the Industrialists. When branches in Heffron’s Botany electorate and Lazzarini’s Marrickville electorate refused to recognise the expulsions, the central executive expelled the branches and formed “loyalist” replacement branches. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) federal executive then ordered the NSW central executive to reinstate Heffron, Lazzarini, Davidson, Horsigton and several other expelled Industrialists.

Among the reinstated members was Jock Garden. He was the sitting member for the federal seat of Cook but the central executive had expelled him and excluded him from the Cook pre-selection ballot which had elected Tom Sheehan. The federal executive ruled that there must be a new ballot which included Garden. The debate at the federal executive meeting highlighted the uncertainty that remained over the federal ALP’s control of state branches. Federal leader John Curtin argued for local state autonomy, saying that the federal executive “could only recommend the reopening of the ballot”. If the NSW executive declined to hold another ballot it was “quite entitled to do so”. But Curtin was overruled by seven votes to five.

Nominations for Labor Party pre-selections for the 1938 NSW election closed on 7 October 1937 and the ballots occurred on 18 December. All but eight sitting members were unopposed in the pre-selection ballots. High-profile Lang supporters challenged the four expelled MLAs: Alderman Frank Kelly against Heffron in Botany,
former Attorney General Joseph Lamaro against Lazzarini in Marrickville, former President of the Carpenters Union James Smith against Davidson in Cobar and former Mayor of Broken Hill John Barnes against Horsington in Sturt. Heffron and Lazzarini lost their pre-selection ballots because the branches which contained their strongest supporters remained expelled. At Broken Hill the Barrier District Assembly rejected the central executive’s instructions to send the unopened ballot boxes to Sydney for counting and declared Davidson and Horsington selected. The central executive did not press the issue. Broken Hill was able to assert its local autonomy because its local party community was so strong that the central executive knew it could not overrule it. Both Davidson and Horsington were re-elected unopposed at the general election which highlights how important internal party processes were for wider NSW democracy.

In September 1937, six months before the election, the conservative Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) had begun its campaign against Labor. “However deafening the oratorical artillery from the Left”, it editorialised, “the people are unlikely to be rendered insensible to the promptings of memory”. The editorial continued, “the Scullin [federal 1929 to 1932] and Lang [NSW 1930 to 1932] administrations, both, in a sense, victims of external misfortune, accentuated the evils of the recent depression by inopportune extravagance, crushing taxation, and legislative quackery”.

The Industrialists were also starting to organise their election campaign against Lang and the Inner Group. In November 1937 the majority of the unions in NSW, including the AWU and the Miners Federation, met in conference and pledged themselves to win control of the party from the Inner Group. They employed Bill Evans of the Municipal Workers Union as a full-time organiser to speak at local branch and union meetings against the Inner Group.
Unlike previous rebel conferences, the central executive did not attempt to prevent the conference or discipline attendees. The *SMH* reported that “the Inner Group has suffered so many reverses lately that its former policy of swift reprisals has been abandoned in favour of peace at all costs”. This is an example of the complex effects that internal opposition can have within a party, ranging from repression to toleration to leadership renewal. At first, the Inner Group responded to internal opposition with repression. But when this was unsuccessful they were forced to tolerate, or at least ignore, the opposition which eventually defeated them.

This Inner Group toleration for internal opposition still had limits, however. In December 1937 the Industrialists ran candidates against NSW Labor in the Paddington municipal elections and the central executive summoned the assistant secretary of the Clerks Union, Jack Hughes, to attend the disciplinary committee. The disciplinary committee was one of the ways that the Inner Group had condensed central executive authority into an ever smaller group of its leading men. The disciplinary committee was President Paddy Keller, Secretary James Graves and Organising Secretary Plugger Martin, and they claimed the power to discipline and expel party members. Hughes refused to appear and challenged the legitimacy of the “transfer to the three executive officers of the party authority to suspend or expel members”.

Also in November 1937, Lang used parliamentary privilege to make sensational corruption charges against the government. He claimed the government had sold assets in state pipe works, brick works and metal quarries under value and that senior ministers and public servants had been paid hush money and kickbacks. Stevens denied any government wrongdoing and appointed a Royal Commission to investigate. These corruption claims proved to be a central issue in the election campaign.

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15 “Losses by Lang faction,” *SMH* 1 December 1937, 12.
16 “ALP factions,” *SMH* 14 December 1937, 12.
The following month the Industrialists decided to "starve the Lang faction financially" and recommended that unions stop paying affiliation fees to the party. Unions provided the bulk of party funds and by threatening to withdraw funds, a small group of top leaders in a large union could wield significant influence over the party. These officials would not necessarily reflect the views of their members, let alone the remainder of the party rank and file, and could potentially wield undemocratic influence. In January 1938 the Industrialists met in conference. About 400 delegates attended, representing 46 unions and 62 local branches. The Industrialists and media reported that the conference “represented” 200,000 workers, but in reality many members of the unions would have supported Lang. The conference decided not to form a new party but to run Industrialist candidates against the ALP candidates at the election.

In February 1938 the Miners Federation central council stepped up its campaign. “For too long has the Federation left the direction of Labor politics in the hands of a coterie in control”, the central council declared. The Miners Federation Northern district management committee followed the central council’s lead, pledging to fight Inner Group control and calling for federal ALP intervention. But it decided to fight from within the party and continued to pay affiliation fees. The Miners Federation called a meeting of coalfields MLAs, all of whom attended the meeting and agreed to lobby Lang to withdraw his debenture on the Labor Daily, once again showing the power of the Miners Federation over coalfields politicians. But the MLAs did not completely cave to Miners Federation pressure and they made it clear that they did not endorse the union’s opposition to Lang and the Inner Group. The coalfields politicians were stuck in an awkward position between the Miners Federation and the Inner Group and were trying to appease both as far as possible. Many members of the Miners Federation had divided loyalty between their current leaders and their former leader

18 “ALP factions,” SMH 14 December 1937, 12.
20 “Miners Federation,” SMH 2 February 1938, 23.
Baddeley, who was the most prominent coalfields MP, deputy parliamentary Labor leader to Lang and one of his closest allies.

At the lodge level the Miners Federation was deeply divided into pro-Lang and anti-Lang groups. Officials at several lodges in the Cessnock area asked Eugene O’Neil to stand for Cessnock as an Industrialist candidate against Baddeley. Lodge officials at Kurri Kurri immediately decried the move and began campaigning for Baddeley.22 In March eight aggregate meetings took place on the northern coalfields and six adopted resolutions critical of the Inner Group and calling for federal ALP intervention.23 Plugger Martin spoke at the Cessnock meeting where his criticisms of the central council caused “uproar” from the crowd and he was interrupted by a sustained applause greeting Orr’s arrival at the meeting.24 The close-knit miners did not appreciate criticism of their union from an “outsider”. A meeting of Cessnock lodge officers endorsed O’Neil but those present had been handpicked Industrialist supporters and a later, larger meeting of Cessnock lodge officials declared their support for Baddeley and stated that “if all lodge officers had been invited” to the previous meeting “Mr O’Neil could not possibly have received endorsement”.25

The campaign
The policy centrepiece of Labor’s 1938 election campaign was a 40 hour week with a minimum wage of £4/2/6. Vague additional promises included cracking down on monopolies, fair rents and prices and full-time work for all. In rural NSW Lang promised closer settlement (breaking up large land and water holdings) and government relief for small farmers. He also pledged increased government spending on special maternity hospitals, cheaper milk and reduced railway fares.26 There was little explanation of where the money for such promises would come from. Fitting with their claim to simply be “Labor without Lang”, the Industrialists did not vary significantly from Labor policy, promising slightly better pay and conditions for...

22 “Miners,” SMH 2 March 1938, 14.
23 “Miners in north,” SMH 7 March 1938, 8.
24 Ibid.
workers and even more government spending. The Labor Council announced that Lang had no authority from the unions for his minimum weekly wage of £4/2/6 and that it should be £5.

A policy of reduced hours and increased wages at the state level risked encouraging businesses to leave NSW for states with more employer-friendly laws. Queensland Labor Premier William Forgan Smith had recently ruled out the legislated 40 hour week in Queensland for this very reason and said it must be introduced at the federal level. Stevens argued that in reality the 40 hour policy would “reduce the working time of many from 44 to 0” hours. A writer calling him or herself “Dinkum Labour” from Redfern wrote that “any person with even an elementary knowledge of economics and interstate trade, must realise that a 40-hour week to be effective must apply to the Commonwealth. To be adopted by only one state would lead to economic chaos and to the industrial ruin of that state”. Lang’s advocacy of policies better suited to the federal level was not surprising. He had frequently demonstrated his willingness to make unrealistic promises in election campaigns. He also had well-known ambitions to become Prime Minister. These ambitions mixed strangely with what Bede Nairn called Lang’s “eerie post-1932 dream world of frustrated states-rightism”. Advocating state rights suited Lang and his allies at the time because they controlled the NSW Labor Party, and potentially the NSW government. Lang was above all an opportunist.

The UAP/Country Party coalition and commercial press argued that, if elected, Labor would bring its internal conflict into government. Stevens said “two groups of political opportunists are struggling for mastery of the Labor machine” and that this “strife means that the Labor Party is totally unfitted to govern”. Conservatives also linked lack of democracy in the Labor Party with a potential undermining of

29 “40 hour,” SMH 9 March 1938, 16.
30 “Minister criticises,” SMH 10 March 1938, 17.
31 “The bailiff election,” SMH 8 March 1938, 6.
33 “Labour divided,” SMH 5 March 1938, 11.
democracy in the state. The *SMH* editorialised that “the [Stevens] government is standing for our traditional freedom of democracy against the particularly rabid form of internal fascism into which the state Labor Party has degenerated under the ruthless rule of Langism”.34 These claims of a potential descent into fascism under Labor were bolstered by the context of European totalitarianism. Communists had entrenched their rule in the Soviet Union, fascists were in power in Germany and Italy and in Spain war raged between leftist Republicans and rightist Nationalists. Stevens said “the fact that the Labor Party has endured this man’s dictatorship for nine years is a poor recommendation for its power to safeguard our democracy”.35

In February 1938 the Industrialists finally won their long legal battle with Lang for control of the *Labor Daily*. The newspaper had been blatantly pro-Lang and in the space of one issue became equally anti-Lang. There was no space for dissenting views. William Young of Redfern wrote to the *SMH* saying “strong appeals are being made to the rank and file for support at the present juncture; it is only on such occasions that they are considered as of any importance. Their opinions have never been considered as of much consequence by the official organ of the Labor Party, and the mere rank and file now feel obliged to seek the hospitality of the ‘capitalist’ press for the right to express an opinion”.36

Lang’s desperate attempt to maintain control of the *Labor Daily* by calling in his personal debt was politically disastrous. The man who had built his public persona on fighting against wealthy elites and money lenders had called in the bailiffs on his party’s own newspaper. A.P. Macindoe of Hornsby observed that Lang’s policy speeches in the 1938 election were “largely a repetition of former ones” except that “it was conspicuous that he did not make any attack on the pitiless money-lender. Evidently he regarded his own actions to the *Labor Daily* as all too fresh in the minds of the electors to indulge in his usual tirade of abuse of the ruthless blood-sucking

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35 “Cost of living,” *SMH* 11 March 1938, 10.
money-bags”. 37 Claude McKay wrote to the SMH that “Mr Lang has committed the deadly political sin. He put the bailiffs in! And where? Into Labor’s own newspaper! Wriggle and squirm as he may, that is his brand of the capitalist. He has committed the unforgivable act in the eyes of the underdog”. 38

On 18 February 1938 the Industrialist leaders held a rally in Lang’s seat of Auburn. Their strong criticism of Lang drew a mix of cheers and boos from the crowd, representative of the deep divide in the labour movement. 39 Two victories for the Industrialists occurred soon after as, first, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) announced that it would broadcast Heffron’s policy speech in addition to those by the leaders of Labor, UAP and the Country Party. 40 Second, Curtin announced that he would not take any part in the NSW election campaign. 41 This was a tacit but clear censure of Lang.

Things got worse for Lang Labor on 2 March when Justice Halse Rogers delivered his judgement in the Royal Commission into the sale of state assets, finding Lang’s charges completely disproved. 42 Lang had appeared as a witness in the Royal Commission and had all but admitted that he had no evidence to support his claims. 43 John Manton of North Sydney wrote to the SMH that Lang “must have been fully aware of the fact that his reckless charges of fraud and corruption against the highest and most respected citizens in this state could not be proved. As one who has worked 40 years for a crust, I can assure Mr Lang that he is labouring under a big delusion if he thinks these tactics are going to be tolerated by the average worker”. 44 Stevens also linked the episode back to Lang’s contempt for democracy. Lang’s “shocking abuse of Parliamentary privilege” risked bringing government “institutions into discredit” and “prepares the way for a dictatorship”. 45 Lang added more fuel to that

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38 “The bailiff election,” SMH 8 March 1938, 6.
40 “Not a gentleman,” SMH 4 March 1938, 8.
41 “Mr Curtin,” SMH 4 March 1938, 11.
42 “Royal Commission,” SMH 3 March 1938, 8.
43 Editorial, “Mr Lang’s policy,” SMH 9 March 1938, 16.
44 “The bailiff election,” SMH 8 March 1938, 6.
45 “Cost of living,” SMH 11 March 1938, 10.
fire by persisting with his accusations and dismissing the Royal Commission as a “whitewash”. 46 This response demonstrated the pride and failing political judgement that had made him increasingly unelectable.

On 7 March Heffron delivered the Industrialists’ policy speech at Mascot. Several Lang supporters repeatedly interrupted the speech, including a woman who shouted “rat, rat, rat” at Heffron. Eventually police removed the interjectors. 47 This disruption appeared organised and the fact that it occurred during Heffron’s most important campaign speech, which was broadcast on radio, and not during his many other speeches, was presumably planned. Two weeks later UAP MLA Waddell complained of “gangs which are attempting to wreck UAP meetings in the Waverley electorate”. He blamed the Inner Group and said the tactics were “consistent with those that had disgraced the Labor Party since Mr Lang became its leader”. 48

Exactly who planned these disruptions is impossible to prove but it fits neatly within Inner Group tactics of disruption and violence at meetings and the use of hired thugs. In keeping with the Inner Group’s “scorched earth” approach to internal opponents, the Labor Party advised supporters to give second preferences to a non-labour independents over Industrialists in several seats including Bulli. 49 Conversely, the Industrialists took the moral high ground and advised voters to preference the ALP second and to vote for ALP candidates where an Industrialist was not running.

Lang addressed a crowd of 1400 people in Auburn on 9 March. For the first time in a NSW election Lang’s speech was broadcast outside the venue by “amplifiers of tremendous power” which the SMH described as “a new and terrible election weapon” that could be heard one mile away. 50 The supportive crowd greeted Lang with shouts of “good on you John”, “make them take it”, “go your hardest”, “we’ll be

48 “Candidate defies gangs,” SMH 21 March 1938, 10.
with you” and a chant of “good old Jack”.\textsuperscript{51} At the end of the meeting Baddeley proposed a motion of “complete confidence” in Lang. One brave individual dissented and was rewarded with shouts of abuse from others in attendance. On 18 March Lang spoke to a crowd of 1,000 in Heffron’s electorate of Botany and received an equally positive response as he had in Auburn.\textsuperscript{52} Lang spent little time campaigning in his own electorate, publicly dismissing the threat posed by his Industrialist challenger Jack Hooke, and instead visited almost every electorate in the state.\textsuperscript{53}

In the closing days of the campaign some branches, such as Randwick in east Sydney, carried resolutions expressing “the fullest confidence” in Lang and the central executive.\textsuperscript{54} Others such as Corrimal in northern Wollongong rejected Lang and reformed as a branch of the Industrialists.\textsuperscript{55} In the northern coalfields a meeting of Abermain number one miners’ lodge pledged to support the Industrialist candidate O’Neill against Baddeley in Cessnock. Soon afterwards a subsequent meeting overturned the decision and pledged to support Baddeley.\textsuperscript{56} The rank and file was deeply divided. “X” of North Strathfield summed up the campaign in a letter to the \textit{SMH}, asking “could any man do more than (or as much as) Mr Lang has to serve up the election on a plate to the united parties?”\textsuperscript{57}

**Results and aftermath**

A record nineteen MLAs out of 90 were elected unopposed: ten ALP, six UAP and three Country Party.\textsuperscript{58} This is another reminder of the importance of internal party politics as in these 19 seats party pre-selections essentially took the place of the general election. The Stevens UAP/Country Party government won the election easily. Labor received just 35 per cent of the vote and 28 out of 90 seats, only winning 18 out of the 71 seats contested. It was Lang’s third successive general election

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\textsuperscript{51} “Barrage of sound,” \textit{SMH} 9 March 1938, 17.
\textsuperscript{52} “Lang at Mascot,” \textit{SMH} 18 March 1938, 8.
\textsuperscript{53} “Whirlwind tour,” \textit{SMH} 21 March 1938, 10.
\textsuperscript{54} “Bitter union ballot,” \textit{SMH} 31 March 1938, 6.
\textsuperscript{55} “Industrialists branch,” \textit{SMH} 24 March 1938, 8.
\textsuperscript{56} “Coalminers,” 25 March 1938, 19.
\textsuperscript{57} “Lang conundrum,” \textit{SMH} 11 March 1938, 8.
\textsuperscript{58} “Election,” \textit{SMH} 5 March 1938, 1.
\end{flushright}
defeat (1932, 1935, 1938) and NSW Labor’s worst performance since 1907. The ALP received 570,000 votes, 142,000 fewer votes than Labor in NSW in the federal election six months earlier. This means that 20 per cent of federal Labor voters in NSW were unwilling to vote for Lang. A further 40,000 Labor voters (7 per cent) chose Industrialist candidates over ALP candidates, despite the fact that they only ran in six seats.

Lang Labor beat the Industrialists in four out of six seats contested. In Auburn Lang defeated Hooke with 9,380 votes to 6,759 (58:42 per cent). Heffron won Botany with 12,909 to F.D. Kelly’s 8,616 (60:40 per cent). The only other Industrialist to win a seat was Lazzarini in Marrickville who won 6,483 votes to F. Rushton (UAP) on 5,380 and L.E. Balzen (Lang Labor) with 4,229. In Cessnock two thirds of the miners remained loyal to Baddeley who defeated O’Neill with 11,222 votes to 4,910. In Glebe the Lang Labor candidate W.J. Carlton narrowly beat the Industrialist H.J. Foley after preferences by 6,573 to 5,617, with 1,881 votes going to an independent. In Leichhardt Lang Labor’s C.H. Matthew, 9,127, easily defeated the Industrialist JP Dunn, 3,656. The fact that all six seats went to the incumbent suggests that the results may have reflected local loyalty and familiarity as much as support for Lang over the Industrialists. Other local factors were also in play; for example, Botany had a strong history of electing independent labour men.

In the face of a third straight defeat Lang and his supporters remained defiant. At the NSW Labor Party annual conference the month after the election Lang was greeted with “tumultuous applause” and delegates sang "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow". Lang blamed the Industrialists and Communists within the labour movement for his defeat and called for “an Australia-wide conference to evolve plans for eradicating Communists from the movement”. Even the fiercely anti-Communist Henry Boote did not buy the Communism excuse, writing: “Lang and the junta that run him, the

59 “Labor’s sorry plight,” SMH 6 April 1938, 7.
60 “Results,” SMH 28 March 1938, 8.
61 “Labour split,” SMH 1 November 1937, 11.
62 “Welcome for Lang,” SMH 16 April 1938, 16.
63 “Labor conference,” SMH 19 April 1938, 3.
champion election losers of this or any other country, trot out the poor old battered Communist bogey to cover their disgrace! The Industrialists were strengthened by Lang’s defeat and intensified their attacks, saying there could be no compromise with Lang and the Inner Group. Lazzarinni said, “if I see a black snake, I do not compromise with it; I kill it.” It would take another year of organising before the Industrialists could strike the fatal blow.

**Conclusion**

Elections are complicated affairs decided by large numbers of voters with a wide range of motivations. It is unnecessary for my purposes to try to rank the reasons for Labor’s 1938 defeat. It is enough to say that the struggle for power within the labour movement was an important factor in the outcome of the election. The undermining of Labor Party democracy by Lang and the Inner Group had caused the Industrialists to form an internal opposition which had divided the party and exposed its oligarchy and internal dysfunction to public view. The fact that the trade unions enjoyed strong local autonomy from the party allowed union leaders to form an independently organised and well-funded rebel grouping. In turn, the strength of this internal opposition forced the Inner Group to tolerate it after attempts to crush it had failed. Ironically, if the party had been even more oligarchical it could have quickly quashed the dissent and may have fared better in the election.

Despite a campaign marred by poor judgement and bad timing, Labor received 35 per cent of the primary vote. One third of the electorate was still willing to vote for Lang, and a large proportion of Labor Party members still supported him, probably a majority. This performance highlights an important point; the party was never so oligarchical that Lang and the Inner Group could have continued without widespread support amongst branch and union members. By 1938 this rank-and-file support was at a tipping point and the party was deeply divided right down to the local level.

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64 “Conference that failed,” *AW* 27 April 1938, 1.
65 “Unity move,” *SMH* 20 April 1938, 18.
One of the UAP/Country Party’s key campaign arguments was that, if Labor was elected, oligarchy and dictatorship within the Labor Party would be translated into oligarchy and dictatorship in government. This argument was made more plausible in the minds of voters by the 1930s context of the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. In hindsight it is tempting to dismiss these arguments as alarmist; Lang and the Inner Group were not fascists. But they had repeatedly shown contempt for democracy within the Labor Party. They had also demonstrated disregard for Australia’s Constitution, courts and federal government, especially during the crisis in 1932. The extent to which their attitudes towards party democracy would have been reflected in their attitudes towards democracy in government was a valid concern and a risk that most voters did not want to take.
CONCLUSION

Oligarchy, interconnections and resistance

The NSW Labor Party and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) were oligarchies in the period from 1910 to 1939 and both became more oligarchical over time. I have not attempted to classify strict “levels” of oligarchy in this thesis, but it seems fair to say broadly that the NSW Labor Party went from somewhat oligarchical to clearly oligarchical and the AWU from clearly oligarchical to highly oligarchical. Both organisations fit with the sociological consensus that most ostensibly democratic parties and unions will be oligarchies and become more oligarchical over time. The pillars of Robert Michels’ iron law of oligarchy were evident throughout with disempowered and/or uninterested members and deference to strong leaders like Jack Lang in the Labor Party and Jack Bailey in the AWU. Yet these oligarchies still required certain additional conditions to thrive. I have explored these conditions by assessing each organisation’s community, rules, local autonomy, rank-and-file decision-making, internal opposition, free communication and equality between officials and members. Furthermore, oligarchy within both organisations was widely resisted; impulses towards democracy were always operating in some form even when the organisations were at their least democratic.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Miners Federation was a democratic exception to the oligarchic norm. Here too the conflicting tendencies towards oligarchy and democracy played out, but democracy won for various complicated reasons centred on the miners’ work and occupational communities. Even in the Miners Federation, however, Michels’ observations were relevant as voting turnout suggests that around a quarter of members were disengaged and there was significant deference to leaders from Albert Willis to Bill Orr. The Miners Federation also became less democratic over time, particularly under Orr’s Communist leadership from 1934.

The fact that these three organisations influenced one another further complicated the picture. Usually the effects were straightforward with methods and cultures transposed from one organisation to another but at other times the effects were
more counterintuitive. Overall, oligarchy prevailed more often than democracy but democratic resistance was always present. This conclusion draws out these two key threads of the thesis: interconnections between the organisations and resistance to oligarchy.

**Interconnections**

Organisations within the interwar NSW labour movement influenced one another greatly. Trade unions influenced one another within the Labor Party, peak bodies and the industrial sphere and also formed the most influential building blocks of the Labor Party. In turn, the Labor Party influenced the unions by enhancing the power and prestige of union officials, providing a forum for organised opposition to union leaderships and through legislation when in government. The NSW labour movement was a complicated web of hundreds of organisations and thousands of individuals influencing one another in big and small ways. One thesis can only do so much and I have focused on three of the largest and most influential organisations. By necessity this presents an incomplete picture but it still provides a range of informative categories and examples of influence that deliver valuable insights into the overall web.

Affiliation with the Labor Party increased the status gap between members and officials in the AWU and Miners Federation and encouraged officials to behave in oligarchical ways. Union officials often became Labor Party officials and/or politicians which amplified their power, fame and status. This, in turn, made union officials more desperate to keep their union positions and therefore more motivated to behave undemocratically. Political affiliation also meant that many union officials were less concerned with winning improvements for their members and more concerned with maintaining their union as a large, stable power base. In the democratic Miners Federation membership pressure forced the leaders to focus on wages and conditions in order to keep their union positions but this pressure was less pronounced in the AWU. Even in the Miners Federation, however, in the mid-1920s Albert Willis and Jack Baddeley led the union to ally closely with Jack Lang and privilege political action over industrial action, thereby encouraging more passive
membership involvement. In this period the miners’ newspaper *Common Cause* became a supplement to the *Labor Daily* and lost much of its role as a forum for free communication within the union.¹

Both the AWU and Miners Federation successfully pursued various forms of compulsory unionism. I have argued that this undermined democracy by creating a significant minority of uninterested and even hostile members.² Labor Party affiliation further exacerbated this problem as the party required all members to join their trade union. Neither the arbitration courts nor the Labor Party considered leaving one’s union to be a valid expression of dissent, even when it was the only option remaining to members of oligarchical unions like the AWU.³ This was only one of many ways in which arbitration undermined democracy in both the AWU and Miners Federation, but the effects were less pronounced in the latter, which maintained a more contested relationship with arbitration and continued to strike.

Unions could also use their power within the Labor Party to attempt to silence dissenters. For example, in 1930 the AWU tried to have the NSW Labor Party Central Executive withdraw Arthur Rae’s endorsement as a Senate candidate because he was leading the dissident Bushworkers Propaganda Group (BPG) within the AWU. Rae countered successfully that the BPG was a rank-and-file reform movement within the AWU.⁴ Labor Party affiliation had the potential either to provide a platform for union dissenters or to silence them.

Labor Party affiliation also had positive influences on democracy within the AWU and Miners Federation. Most importantly, the Labor Party acted as a forum for criticism and opposition to sitting union leaderships. While the AWU leadership was able largely to suppress organised opposition within the union, it was not able to prevent

⁴ “ALP preparing,” SMH 5 November 1930, 13.
criticism from its factional opponents within the Labor Party. The militant faction’s Labor Daily became a forum for critique of the AWU and, unlike the AWU’s Australian Worker, it published critical opinions from AWU members and dissidents.\(^5\) Factional attacks could have devastating effects for AWU leaders and the best example is the ballot box scandal which destroyed NSW AWU leader Jack Bailey’s reputation in the 1920s.\(^6\)

At times the Labor Party officially supported dissident movements within the AWU such as the Railway Workers Industry Branch Rank and File Committee in 1928.\(^7\) Affiliation also brought Labor Party disputes into the unions, a development that encouraged membership involvement. The AWU’s opposition to the highly-popular Lang caused many AWU members to join opposition groupings within the union or rival unions such as the United Labourers Union (ULU) or Pastoral Workers Industrial Union (PWIU).\(^8\) In 1934 the controlling Lang faction in the Labor Party even ran candidates in Miners Federation elections in an attempt to displace the Communist leadership. The attempt was unsuccessful but it still enhanced democracy by providing electoral opposition and encouraging membership interest and involvement.\(^9\)

Union affiliation also had mixed effects on democracy within the Labor Party. Often unionists transposed their union’s methods into the party, or at least tried to do so. The Miners Federation especially brought its strong democratic lodge culture into Labor Party branches in mining areas.\(^10\) Dissident democratic activists within the AWU such as Arthur Rae and Jack Cullinan brought this activism into the Labor Party.\(^11\) When designing the 1927 Rules, Willis brought preferential voting into the party which he had observed to be successful within the Miners Federation. He also

\(^5\) “‘Bosses’ and Alleged ‘Moderation,’” LD, 15 July 1927, 4.
\(^7\) AWU Annual Convention, AW, 23 January 1929, 17.
brought with him his guild socialist ideals and a support for democracy bolstered by his repeated personal success within the democratic Miners Federation. On the other hand, the AWU leaders transposed their oligarchical methods into the Labor Party, the most extreme example being ballot corruption using phoney postal ballots. These are only a handful of the many examples we have seen throughout the thesis.

Factionalism enhanced democracy within the Labor Party by providing opposition to leading party officials. Unions like the AWU and Miners Federation provided the core organisation for these factions and therefore must receive much of the credit for the democracy-enhancing effects of factionalism. Union independence and organisation also allowed for successful opposition to strongly entrenched party leaderships such as the Inner Group. However, the fact that unions came into the party as strong, independent organisations with extensive funds and full-time salaried officials could also undermine democracy by allowing union leaders to exercise enormous power within the party without accountability to their own members and which the more democratically organised local branches could not match. Union strength, most obviously the Miners Federation in the coalfields, also allowed the party rank and file to assert local autonomy and successfully resist the party executive in some electorates.

Each union entered the party as a ready-made quasi-faction and this could allow them great influence over Labor Party decisions. Both the AWU and Miners Federation leaders threatened to expel politicians who were also members of those unions if they did not support union positions. Both unions also used their wealth to influence the party. For example, the Miners Federation used its money to exercise a large influence over the Labor Daily and the AWU used its coffers to sponsor loyal

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local branch annual conference delegates.\textsuperscript{16} AWU and Miners Federation affiliation to the NSW Labor Party had important but mixed effects on democracy in all three organisations and it is not possible to conclude that affiliation had clearly democratic or oligarchical effects overall.

Resistance
Democratic impulses and countervailing tendencies against oligarchy were constantly operating to varying degrees within the AWU, Miners Federation and NSW Labor Party in the interwar period. At its most organised level this involved rival dissident factions such as the BPG in the AWU, the Communist Minority Movement (MM) in the Miners Federation and the Industrialists in the Labor Party. The BPG was a persistent gadfly to the AWU leadership exposing its oligarchy and corruption, the MM built up a strong critique of the Miners Federation leaders and eventually deposed them, and the Industrialists overthrew the most entrenched oligarchy in NSW Labor Party history, the Inner Group.

A key countervailing tendency is ideological support for democracy amongst leaders. This was apparent to varying degrees for most Miners Federation leaders, many Labor Party leaders and even some leaders in the AWU like Rae and Cullinan. The most important countervailing tendency, however, is membership pressure from below. Even in the oligarchical AWU the leaders needed to pay some attention to membership opinion. In all three organisations, oligarchy was weakest where ordinary members lived and worked in strong communities. Almost all Miners Federation members lived and worked in such an environment and this was the primary reason for the union’s high levels of democracy. Members successfully resisted leaders on many issues from work-sharing to local stoppages to large-scale strikes and lockouts.\textsuperscript{17} The miners’ strong communities also enabled them successfully to assert their local autonomy within the Labor Party. Similar resistance could succeed in non-mining electorates only when the local members had behind them a strong party community. In 1931, for example, party members in the inner-

\textsuperscript{17} “Minutes,” \textit{CC} 17 February 1922, 6; “Aggregate meeting,” \textit{SMH} 7 December 1929, 17-18.
western Sydney federal electorate of Reid successfully asserted their right to select Labor’s candidate by membership ballot.\textsuperscript{18} Strong party community in inner-western Sydney was probably based upon the occupational communities of the area’s urban craft unions.\textsuperscript{19} Conversely, most AWU members were scattered and/or itinerant and did not form strong communities which meant they were generally unable to resist oligarchy. When AWU members did live and work together in permanent communities, however, they were able to resist oligarchy successfully. Port Kembla AWU members have provided such a case study.\textsuperscript{20}

Resistance to oligarchy could also come from outside an organisation. We have seen how the AWU and its factional opponents within the Labor Party persistently sniped at one another throughout the period. Aside from the Labor Party itself, the most influential organisation in this regard was the CPA. It was instrumental in the PWIU, which opposed the AWU leaders, and in the MM, which opposed and then deposed the Miners Federation leadership. It also had considerable clandestine involvement with the Industrialists and their successful fight against the Inner Group.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Oligarchy is the norm within ostensibly democratic organisations including trade unions and political parties. It may not be quite the iron law that Robert Michels claimed, but it is certainly a strong tendency. The three NSW labour movement organisations studied in this thesis add further support to this scholarly consensus. The tendency to oligarchy is evident throughout but so is the potential to resist oligarchy even within the most undemocratic organisations like the AWU. Also evident is the possibility for highly democratic organisations like the Miners Federation to exist, which in itself disproves the claim that oligarchy is an iron law.

\textsuperscript{18} “Reid’s revolt,” \textit{SMH} 28 September 1931, 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Port Kembla, \textit{South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus}, 22 July 1927, 10; “AWU members locked out,” \textit{AW}, 13 August 1924, 16.
The effects of trade union affiliation to the Labor Party were important but mixed for democracy in both the unions and the party. This is actually a positive finding for labour parties because it contradicts the argument made by some both within and outside the labour movement that union affiliation has inherently undemocratic effects. 21 Furthermore, much of the anti-democratic influence of unions on the interwar NSW Labor Party came as a result of a lack of democracy within the unions themselves rather than because of structural effects of affiliation. Democratic labour parties do not need to drop union affiliation but they must acknowledge the tendency to oligarchy within their affiliated unions and take a greater interest in ensuring that their affiliates meet basic democratic requirements before they are allowed to exercise power within the party.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF KEY OFFICIALS

AWU

John (Jack) Bailey: Central Branch President (1915-33).
John (Jack) Barnes: national President (1924-38).
Henry Boote: *Australian Worker* editor (1914-43).
George Buckland: Central Branch Secretary (1921-1933).
John (Jack) Cullinan: Western Branch Secretary (1917-20).
Clarence (Clarrie) Fallon: Queensland Branch Secretary (1933-50).
Edward Grayndler: General Secretary (1912-41).
William (Bill) Lambert: Central Branch Secretary (1915-21).
Hector Lamond: *Australian Worker* editor then manager (1895-1916).
Arthur Rae: AWU national President (1895) and General Secretary (1898-99) then organiser of the Bushworkers Propaganda Group (1920s) and Pastoral Workers Industrial Union (1930-37).
William Spence: General Secretary (1894-98) and national President (1898-1917).

MINERS FEDERATION

John (Jack) Baddeley: national President (1915-21).
Dai Davies: General Secretary (1926-31).
Thomas (Bondy) Hoare: northern district President (1922-42).
Charles (Charlie) Nelson: national President (1934-41)
William (Bill) Orr: General Secretary (1934- 40).
Daniel Rees: national President (1922-34).
Samuel Rosa: *Common Cause* editor (1923-25).
Arthur Teece: General Secretary (1925-26 and 1931-33).
Albert Willis: General Secretary (1915-25).

NSW LABOR PARTY

James Dooley: parliamentary leader (1921-23) and Premier of NSW (1921-22).
James (Jim) Graves: General Secretary (1930-39).
Robert (Bob) Heffron: parliamentary leader of the anti-Lang Industrialist section (1936-39) and later Premier of NSW (1959-64).
Harry O'Regan: returning officer (1931-39).
John Storey: parliamentary leader (1916-21) and Premier of NSW (1920-21).
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  - E154/4 Constitution and General Rules of the proposed Australiasian Workers Union (OBU)
  - E154/6 AWU head office ledger 1914-20
  - E154/7 Petty cash books and wages tax book 1933-49
  - E154/8 audited balance sheets, statements of income and expenditure, revenue accounts, guarantee fund and journal entries 1919-41
  - E154/14 AWU branches monthly statements of receipts and expenditure 1922-35
  - E154/17 AWU annual conferences official reports with head office and the worker accounts 1902-1957 (some missing)
  - E154/18 AWU annual conferences ancillary papers including reports, agendas, verbatim reports and miscellaneous items 1912-54
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- E154/37 pamphlets and leaflets published by the AWU 1922-58
- E154/39 pamphlets, books and circulars by the AWU 1910-59
- E154/40 AWU NSW country branches annual reports and balance sheets for Cobar, Moree, Inverell, Bourke, Wagga and Goulburn 1891-1918
- E154/41 AWU NSW Branch annual reports and balance sheets for Central, RWIB and NSW Branch 1905-1957
- E154/42 AWU NSW branch AWU central branch and RWIB ledger, journal, relief tax book and bank pass book 1916-33
- E154/26 – lots of records about arbitration cases
- E154/27/2 Bailey Exonerated a Frame-up exposed report 1923
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- E154/37/9 A little journey to Macdonell house 1922
- E154/37/11 OBU why it failed 1924
- E154/37/13 treachery to Labor JT Lang 1937
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- E154/40/6 Bourke Branch annual reports and balance sheets 1894-1918
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- Reel 30 item 107 western branch minutes Jan-Apr 1915
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**P52**
- P52/13/1 cuttings from Argus and Sun 1915
- P52/13/2 miscellaneous cuttings 1930
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**N117**
- N117/4-34 Annual convention minute book 1910-40
- N117/205-224 executive council meeting papers postal ballots and related correspondence 1915-40
- N117/517 papers regarding OBU
- N117/642 legal opinion Grayndler v Labor Daily
- N117/1232-1241 photos of delegates at annual conventions
- N117/1331-1336 unidentified meetings early 1900s
- N117/1337-1349 photos of leaders
- N117/1361 Arthur Rae 1910
- N117/1371-1373 AWU HQ early 1900s
- N117/1431 Macdonell House The Building Universally Known
- N117/1441 The truth about the attack by the NSW branch on the AWU
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- T3/9 Rough minutes of Illawarra Miners 1912-13
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- T3/35 Miscellaneous rough notes by AC Willis
- T3/37/9 Report of Royal Commission appointed to inquire into and report upon the coal industry (Sydney 1930)

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- T31/2 Miners Federation minutes 1915-26
- T31/8 Verbatim account of 1938 Miners Federation National Convention
- T31/6 Report of the first Miners Convention held at Sydney Trades Hall 20 October 1925
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- T32/1 Minutes of Council Meetings of the Miners Federation 1926-41

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• E165/2 Minute books of meetings of Central Executive and Central Council of Miners federation 1917-29
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  - News cuttings, other printed and Mss. re One Big Union movement and ALP internal crisis 1918-22; 2 Vols.
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  - Papers re, i.a., ALP conferences and election materials; 1915-31.
  - Papers re political involvement with ALP, P.L.L., and as an MLA: (xiv)1911-15; (xv) 1922-30; (xvi) 1926-28
  - Papers re Political Labor League, 1910-15;
  - NSW ALP Conference papers 1920-21

- MLMSS 398:
• 1901-1928; Printed material re the A.L.P., the NSW Labour Council and the Political Labor League; includes balance sheets, annual conference papers and Labor Daily material (Call No.: MLMSS 398/1)

• 1905-1928; Printed material relating to the Australian Workers Union, the Great Strike of 1917 and miscellaneous trade union material; includes newscuttings and conference papers. (Call No.: MLMSS 398/1)

• Waite, George:
  o George Waite papers, 1885-1926 MLMSS208 0.51 metres of textual material (3 boxes)

• Mutch, T.D.
  o See Bibliography of selected manuscripts relating to Australian politics since 1890 held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney by Peter Loveday and Helen Nelson

• Black, George
  o Item 2 ALP (NSW) Report 1918

• Holman, W.A.
  o Uncat MSS Set 111 (1 box) proposed standing orders for NSW Labor Party, letters 1917-19 re organisation of parties (Federal national Party and LP)

• IWW
  o Set 262, Item (box) 3, AWU: Sneaking in Conscription (Sydney) n.d. (c. 1914) Dodger
  o A1333, AWU: Ballot Ticket np 1900?
  o A1334, Miners Federation circular regarding proposed amalgamation with AWU, 4 pages, Melbourne, 1916

• Molesworth, Voltaire
  o Set 71 (9 boxes)
Item 1:
- Parliamentary LP of NSW minute book Nov 1911-Apr 1916
- Political Labor League Homebush Minute book 1924-26

Item 2:
- Industrial Section including reports, rules and constitutions, history

Item 4:
- WIUA (Illawarra) balance sheets 1922-29
- Union rules and constitution (n.d.)
- Notes re ALP Easter conference 1927
- Typescript: How “Reds” Captured the ALP Machine (1927)
- LP NSW standing orders 1925
- Bailey, John MLA: dastardly frame-up: Eden-Monaro charges disproved, Sydney, nd, 4 pages
- Garden on Willis notes

Item 6:
- ALP list of Executive members 1919
- Official manifesto by NSW Central Executive 1919
- Industrial Section materials
- Ford, William: The “Pommie” Takes Command: A warning to Australian Workers, Sydney, 1919, Poster

Item 7:
- Typescript:
  - Dooley-ALP Dispute 1923
  - Some Aspects of Dooleynism: How the Movement was Betrayed
Findings of the Disputes Committee of the ALP regarding the appointment of JB Suttor to the LC

- Molesworth, Voltaire
  - Uncatt MSS Set 243
    - Item 1
      - Volume C
        - LP crisis of 1919 typescript
        - ALP NSW Conference 1919
        - ALP NSW Conference 1919
          - Executive for 1919
          - List of branch delegates
          - Ford, William. The Pommie Takes Command
      - Volume D
        - PLL Auburn Branch Constitution
        - Barrier Industrial Assembly Platform and Rules
        - List of delegates to annual conference 1917
        - Pamphlet: the official history of the reconstruction of the LP 1916 together with the 12th annual report of the Women’s Central Organising Committee Sydney 1916
      - Item 2
        - Volume G
          - Western Sydney Labor selection ballot
        - Volume H
          - PLL NSW: includes regulations adopted by PLL Executive for the guidance of branches regarding conduct of selection ballots
    - Item 4
      - Folder 23
Power, JM MLC NSW Labor Mix-up (c. 1921)
Report of Committee appointed to inquire into allegations made by Mr McGirr against his colleagues 1923

- **Item 5**
  - Letters and notes regarding Willis and the LP 1928
  - ALP selection ballots 1919
  - Folder 9
    - Correspondence Lang-Willis 1931-32
    - Notes regarding Labor Daily

- **Item 6**
  - Many relevant NSW ALP reports, delegate and resolution lists, selection ballots
  - ALP NSW Conference 1926 list of union delegates, notes and newscuttings
  - ALP NSW conference 1923 list of delegates
  - Molesworth, Voltaire
    - Set 398

- **Item 1**: Labor Council of NSW agendas, annual conferences 1921, 24, 27, 28
  - Labor Council Railway Strike 1917 report and balance sheet
  - To the members of the miners union 1928
  - Australasian Workers Union
    - Election results
    - Business sheet for Annual Conference 1923
    - Notes taken by Jack Bailey MLA during Conference 1923
  - CPA: The CPA and the LP 1924 (15 pages)

- **Item 2**:
• The New ALP Rules. Why they are Red

• AWU:
  o Grayndler replies to enemies of the AWU 1923
  4 pages
  o Apology to Buckland 1928
  o Rank and File Committee of the AWU circular
    letter and manifesto 1928
  o How the present ALP executive organises 1926
    o

• NSW Labor Council:
  o The Labor Daily is Black 1925
  o The truth about the Labor Daily 1925
  o Packing Conference. Tyrrell-Magrath faction
    exposed 1926
  o Report and balance sheet 1909-10

• Mutch, TD
  o Set 426
    ▪ Item 8
      • PLL NSW: Resume of the correspondence and
        negotiations in respect of the branches in the Belmore
        electorate Sydney 1915
    ▪ Item 45
      • South ward Municipal League: Rules and By-laws
        Randwick nd 193?
    ▪ Item 50
      • Reasons why the red rules should not be adopted
        • Bailey, John election dodger 1917
    ▪ Item 75
      • Judd, EE the Brisbane street whore (alias the Labor
        Daily) 1927

• O’Sullivan, TJ
• Waite, George
  o Set 208
    • Item 1
      • Anon: Fourteen points about Gardenism
      • Waite, George what’s wrong with Labor (8 pages) 1922
      • Berry, Bailey Lambert and Co Ltd secrets exposed 1922
      • Majority Australian LP constitution and rules
      • HEB, An alleged Labor Daily for Sydney 1924
      • W Blake, Secretary, Conference of the Left Wing movement of the NSW coalfields. The Miners Money n.d.
    • Item 2
      • Interpretation of rules, selection ballots 1924 4 pages
      • Statement of the attitude of the LC on the political situation at the present time 1922
      • Berry the infamous iron hand: Bailey’s stranglehold 1921 4 pages
    • Item 3
      • RWIB mass meeting 1923
      • RWIB Organise! Organise! For closer unity 1924
      • WH Lambert Independent Labor (Sydney, nd)
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- *Communist* (Vol. 1, no. 20 (May 6, 1921)-v. 2, no. 20 (July 21, 1922); No. 73 (July 28, 1922)-no. 117 (June 15, 1923), microfilm NLA) (Shearers’ Strike Bulletin supplement Aug. 25, 1922).
- *Labor News* (NSW Labor Party official newspaper) (1918-24, digitised on Trove)
- *Socialisation Call* (NSW Labor Party Socialisation Committee’s official newspaper) (Vol. 1, no. 1 (Apr. 1931)- Ceased Apr. 1933, microfilm NLA)
- *Sydney Morning Herald* (entire period, digitised, searchable)
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