



A Short History of Australian Unions

Key moments and achievements of the union movement over the last two hundred years from convict rebellions over work and living conditions through to more recent struggles for maternity leave, superannuation and accident compensation.

The First Two Hundred Years

1788-1849

In this period New South Wales was settled as an English penal colony after the landing of Captain Phillip on 26th January, 1788. The majority of First Fleeters, the convicts, certainly deserve to be called workers, and their struggles were a lead up to unionism in Australia. Some notable occurrences were:

1791 Convicts Strike: demanding daily issue of rations, not weekly issue.

1804 Castle Hill Rebellion: protest on conditions and rations.

1822 James Straighter, convict shepherd sentenced to 500 lashes, one month solitary confinement on bread and water, and five years penal servitude for ... "inciting his Masters' servants to combine for the purposes of obliging him to raise the wages and increase their rations".

1828 Masters and Servants Act of NSW provided that ... "servants could be imprisoned and have their wages forfeited for refusal to work or for destruction of property, and that Masters found guilty of ill-usage should be liable to pay damages up to 6 months wages".

1829 Typographers, supported by carpenters, successfully strike for payment in sterling, against currency reform, which threatened the value of wages.

1830 Shipwrights union formed.

1831 Boatbuilders union formed.

1833 Cabinetmakers union formed.

1838 Society of Compositors strike and win wage increase of 5s5d per week.

1840 Society of Compositors campaign to restrict the number of apprentices. The government uses convict compositors as strike- breakers.

1843 Economic depression leads to the formation of the Mutual Protection Society to protect the interests of the middle and working classes of N.S.W

1844 The Early Closing Movement seeks the reduction of working hours from 14 to 12 per day.

1848 Political activity of the working class leads to the formation of the Anti-Transportation League.

1850-1900

This period saw the early development of Australian trade unions. Legislation had existed in Britain that outlawed unions, similar in intent to the Masters and Servants Act, until the passing of the Trade Union Act in 1871. The English and Irish anti-union legislation was not particularly successful in those countries, nor did it prevent union activity in Australia. Transportation ended in the eastern states in 1853, in W.A. in 1868. Various craft unions were formed. Gold was discovered in Bathurst in 1851.

1850 Stonemasons union formed.

1854 The Eureka Stockade results in the deaths of 10 Irish, 2 Scots, 2 Canadians, 2 English, 2 Germans and 1 Australian.

1856 The 8 Hour Day Movement is formed by the Stonemasons in Melbourne and Sydney. Melbourne Trades Hall Committee help unions to co-operate with each other.

1869 Men of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station Victoria demand wage payments for their labour and official tenure of the station.

1870 The Sydney Trades and Labor Council formed.

1873 The Amalgamated Miners Association formed.

1873 The first Seamans Unions formed in Sydney and Melbourne.

1878 The Seamans Union organises the maritime strike against the use of cheap Chinese labour by the Australian United Steam Navigation Company.

1879 The Inter-Colonial Trade Union Congress - the forerunner of the ACTU - is formed. Congress unanimously opposes Chinese immigration.

1881 The N.S.W. Trade Union Act is passed giving union rights and registration.

1882 The Victorian Tailoresses Union is formed, as is the Waterside Workers Union.

1884 The Intercolonial Trade Union Congress is attended by women delegates.

1885 The first Board of Arbitration resolves the dispute in favour of the workers.

1886 The Shearers Union formed.

1890 Employers form the employers unions - the Pastoralists Union the Chamber of Manufacturers and the Steamship Owners Association.

1891 The Shearers Union strike over freedom of contract.

1892 Miners strike in Broken Hill over wage cuts and employment of scabs.

1894 The Shearers Union strikes again on same issues. The Masters and Servants Act is used against the union - 23 years after England proclaimed the Trade Union Act.

Women win the right to vote - for the first time in the world - in South Australia.

1896 Intercolonial Trade Union Congress resolves to extend the restrictions on Chinese immigration to all non-European peoples.

1900-1939

The experience of the 1890's convinced unionists that legislation establishing Arbitration and Conciliation Courts was required. During the period to 1904 the Australian Labour Federation was formed, the first Labor government in the world was elected in Queensland and the first federal Labor Government was formed in 1904.

1901 Union membership 97200 (population 3,774,000). NSW Industrial Arbitration Act passed.

1902 Women in NSW and Commonwealth receive the vote.

1904 Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission established.

1907 The Minimum Basic Wage is established by Mr Justice Higgins in the Harvester Award.

1911 Union membership 364,700

1912 Strikes in Brisbane over the Tramways Co. refusal to recognise members' right to wear union badges.

1918 The Australian Workers Union formed by rural worker organisations.

1920 44 hour week awarded to timberworkers and engineers. Others follow suit.

1921 Union membership 703,000.

1926 Federal Crimes Act amended to apply to unions - known as the "Dog Collar Act".

1927 ACTU is formed.

1930 Women are receiving 54% of male wage rates.

During the Great Depression the Industrial Court abandons the "needs" concept of wage fixing and introduces a 10% wage cut.

1931 Union membership 769,000.

1937 The "Dog Collar Act" is applied to waterside workers who refuse to load scrap iron for shipment to Japan.

1939 - 1983

World War 2 had a big impact on the Australian workforce. Women entered the workforce in large numbers and, for the first time, many earned wages close to male rates. Large scale post-war migration started to change the nature of the workforce and Australian culture. The Liberal-Country Party was elected to govern Australia for almost 30 years. Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War generated a mass anti-war movement involving some unions. The short term of the Whitlam Labor Government (72-75) saw a number of significant reforms including equal pay (in principle).

1939 As a result of the second World War, women replace male workers in a wide range of industries. Workbased child care facilities are provided and most receive 90% of male rates.

200 of Cummeragunga (NSW) Reserve's 300 Aboriginal residents pack their bags and leave. The mass desertion is both a spontaneous protest about life on the reserve and an industrial action to deprive the management of their agriculture labour.

1941 Annual Leave of one week becomes standard. Union membership 1,076,600.

1945 Total membership of unions affiliated with the ACTU reaches 300,000. Two weeks annual leave is introduced.

1946 Men replace women in industry. Child care centres are closed. Union membership 1,284,300.

Aboriginal workers on stations in the Pilbara, Western Australia, go on strike for better wages and conditions; the strike lasts until 1949.

1948 Queensland Railways strike runs for 9 weeks. Queensland meat dispute - following a campaign organised by the ACTU. 40 hour week is gained. Prime Minister Chifley restores penal provisions.

1949 The Coal Strike for 35 hour week and Long Service Leave result in the use of troops under the "National Emergency (Coal Strike) Act".

1950 The female wage rate is lifted to 75% of the male wage rate.

1953 Cost of living increases are abolished by the Australian Commission. Penal powers over unions give "teeth to the Act", allowing heavy fines and jail sentences to be applied to unions, officials and members who participate in industrial action.

1956 Union membership 1,690,200.

1957 ACTU restructures its Executive to allow unions from each industry group to elect a representative member.

1963 Annual Leave of 3 weeks becomes standard.

1965 ACTU files claims to remove the discriminatory clauses in the Federal and State awards relating to the employment of Aborigines.

- Pastoral Industry Award
- Station Hands Award
- Cattle Station Industry (NT) Award

1966 Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission hands down a decision to grant Aborigines on Northern Territory Cattle Stations equal pay with Europeans from 1st December 1968.

1967 A Federal referendum gives a massive "YES" vote for Aboriginal people to gain Australian citizenship and Federal control of Aboriginal affairs. Aborigines thereafter are to be included in the census.

1969 The ACTU's Equal Pay Case paves the way for women to receive pay equal to that of men performing same duties by 1975.

1971 Union membership 2,436,600.

1972 The ACTU's second equal pay case results in the principle of equal pay for equal work being established.

1973 Four weeks annual leave.

1975 Wage indexation is introduced as the main method of wage fixing. Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) established.

1977 The first work related child care centre since the Second World War is opened at Ryde.

1979 ACTU expands after the merger of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Association (ACSPA). The right of women workers to 12 months unpaid maternity leave is achieved.

1981 Wage Indexation is abandoned. 38 hour week is achieved in federal Metal Industry and other awards. ACTU expands after the merger of the Council of Australian Government Employee Organisation (CAGEO).

1983-1999

The Accord between the ACTU and the ALP, and the election of a Federal Labor Government in 1983 ushered in a new phase in industrial relations. Unions became involved in tripartite processes and significant changes were made to industrial

relations legislation. Maternity leave, occupational superannuation, then later, family leave became award entitlements. Structural problems in the economy were addressed by unions through award restructuring. A policy of strategic unionism was adopted which saw the amalgamation of some 300 unions into 20 "super" unions. Enterprise bargaining became the main avenue for wage increases. In the latter part of this era, conservative State and Federal Governments initiated anti-worker and anti-union legislation

1983 The Accord ushers in a new era for industrial relations and economic management. Cost of living adjustments and a centralised system of wage fixation are introduced. ACTU Congress elects first woman to the ACTU Executive.

1984 Job Protection Case. National Occupational Health & Safety Commission is established. Union membership 3,028,500.

1985 Queensland power industry dispute leads to draconian anti-union law passed by State Parliament. ACTU Congress expands to incorporate State public service unions. The ACTU's test case on adoption leave is successful.

1986 The Accord Mark 2. Introduction of universal superannuation for Australian workers

1987 ACTU Congress elects 5 women to the ACTU Executive. The two tiered wage system is introduced. Unions begin a drive for industry and award restructuring.

1988 ACTU/CAI issue joint statement on participative practices (industrial democracy).

Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904 is replaced by Industrial Relations Act 1988.

Structural Efficiency Principle is introduced.

1989 Unions embark on Award Restructuring process.

1990 ACTU drive to reform the Australian education and training system.

1992 Enterprise bargaining is introduced into Industrial Relations Act. Union amalgamation accelerates. ACTU supports the process of reconciliation with Australia's indigenous people. ACTU wins Parental Leave test case.

1993 Victorian Government introduces legislation to reduce award and union coverage. ACTU Congress launches the Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Trade Union Employment Development Strategy.

1994 Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993 comes into operation.

1995 Jennie George elected as first woman President of the ACTU.

ACTU wins Personal Carers' Leave Test case.

First Organising Works Program begins to train new organisers.

1996 Conservative Howard Government elected - introduces Workplace Relations Act, reducing workers entitlements under awards and severely limiting unions' capacity to organise and pursue members' interests

1998 MUA dispute - union movement stands together and, with community support, wins a great victory against employer and Government attacks on the right to organise and be a union member.

1999 Second wave of anti-union legislation from the Howard Government is defeated by a combination of union and community activity.

Unions @ work adopted by ACTU as blueprint for renewal and rebuilding of the union movement.

The union scorecard

- the right of workers to form a union which elects its own independent representatives;
- award to ensure that employers observe minimum wages and working conditions;
- equal pay;
- long service leave;
- pay loading for evenings, nights and weekends;
- paid public holidays;
- periodic wage increases;
- maternity/adoption/parental leave;
- annual leave and leave loading;
- protective clothing and equipment provided by the employer;
- occupational health and safety laws;
- compensation for injury;
- occupational superannuation;
- the right to be given notice and to be consulted about changes at work (eg new technology, planned retrenchments, new working arrangements);

- personal carer's leave.

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