

The impact of privatisation on union membership and density

A Western Australian case study

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## Abstract

Falling membership numbers and declining union density are issues of concern for Australian unions, and especially those in the transport and manufacturing sectors. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that between 2005 and 2008, trade union membership declined from 22.4 per cent to 18.9 per cent of the workforce. Studies and statistics have consistently shown that union membership and density is lowest in Western Australia and this is a continuing trend, despite reversals elsewhere. Using the Western Australian branches of two 'blue-collar' unions – the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union, WA Branch [RTBUWA] (which includes the former Locomotive Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners Union of WA, the WALEDF&CU), and the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union [AMWU], which now covers a wide range of metal working, printing and other manufacturing trades – as examples, this paper examines whether privatisation has contributed significantly to falling trade union density and membership in this State. The RTBUWA and the AMWU are unions whose predecessors represented large public sector workforces. In order to test the hypothesis that privatisation has adversely affected union membership and density, the paper examines three areas: changing policies in the Australian Labor Party [ALP], the breaking down of union culture, and changes in trade training and concludes that privatisation is a significant factor in the recent decline of these two unions.

## Key Words

Privatisation	trade union membership	Australian Labor Party
Western Australia	apprenticeships	union density

## Introduction

For labour historians making connections between the historic past and the present, contemporary issues that are of concern to trade unions are of immense interest. Even a cursory survey of current 'blue-collar' trade union web sites, media releases and newsletters to their memberships will reveal perhaps half a dozen issues of particular concern to unions representing workers in the manufacturing, construction, transport and maritime industries. These include training and work safety, and the removal of jobs offshore. But underneath these concerns, less overtly canvassed but evident in the constant appeals to increase membership, lies a growing

anxiety over falling numbers and the even more dramatic decline in union density in the trades they represent.<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] figures show that between 2005 and 2008, trade union membership declined from 22.4 per cent to 18.9 per cent of the workforce.<sup>2</sup> Studies and statistics have consistently shown that union membership and density is lowest in Western Australia and this is a continuing trend, despite reversals elsewhere. A 2008 study found that ‘Western Australia had the lowest level of trade union membership of any state in Australia, with only 14.3% or 142,600 employees being unionised’ and that this figure had declined by 1.4% from 2007.<sup>3</sup> The ABS figures for Australian trade union membership in August 2012 confirm this, showing Western Australia’s as the lowest, with only 14 per cent of the workforce unionised<sup>4</sup> – a further drop of .3% from the 2008 figures. Research conducted in 2010 found a corresponding fall in the membership of some manufacturing and construction unions during this period.<sup>5</sup> The author’s own research has revealed that the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union’s [AMWU] federal membership fell from 135,000 in 2005 to around 100,000 at the end of 2012. In WA, the union’s membership fell from 8,463 in mid 2005 to 7,371 in mid 2012.<sup>6</sup>

Using the Western Australian branches of two ‘blue-collar’ unions – the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union, WA Branch [RTBUWA] (which includes the former Locomotive Engine Drivers’, Firemen’s and Cleaners Union of WA, the WALEDF&CU), and the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union [AMWU], which now covers a wide range of metal working, printing and other manufacturing trades – as examples, this paper examines whether privatisation has contributed significantly to falling trade union density and membership in this State. The RTBUWA and the AMWU are unions whose predecessors represented large public sector workforces. In order to test the hypothesis that privatisation has

adversely affected union membership and density, the paper examines three factors: the Australian Labor Party's [ALP] adoption of privatisation as a policy in the late 1980s, the breaking down of union culture,<sup>7</sup> and changes in trade training.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The nationalisation of industry, unionisation and apprenticeship training represent the traditional foundations of the organised labour movement in Australia. Aided by the 'closed shop' system that mandated union membership as a condition of hiring in many factories, the skilled trades elite of the blue-collar workforce was highly unionised, and each skilled trade union demanded a certain standard of training prior to being admitted to its membership. The shrinking proportion of the workforce occupied in manufacturing trades has doubtless contributed to the overall decline in numbers of union members in recent decades, but what has caused the fall in union members as percentage of the workforce?

A number of factors have contributed to declining trade union membership and density. These include demographic changes in the workforce resulting in an increase in trades and professions that are traditionally less likely to be highly unionized (such as tourism and hospitality) and decrease in manufacturing, where 'closed shops' were once common; the increase of part-time and casual work and (some argue) the instigation of anti-union sentiment, particularly under the Howard administration of 1996 to 2007. For example, as early as 1998, in his book, *Unions in a Contrary World* Professor David Peetz wrote of 'an institutional break in union membership' and 'a paradigm shift in the way in which unions were treated by the society in which they operated'. Ellem and Franks, however, argued that this shift predated the Howard administration by a decade in the form of 'anti-unionism', which

saw ‘workers in union strongholds [suffering] attacks from employers and lobbyists of the ‘New Right’ on sites as far apart as Sydney and Robe River.’<sup>8</sup>

But there is a significant literature that draws a correlation between declining union membership and the increasing privatisation of public industries. Studies in both Australia and Britain have indicated that privatisation of the industrial work force is a significant factor in reducing union density, and at times has been used as means of weakening union power, despite this usually being denied by corporate management. In 1998, for example, British Rail’s last Chairman, John Welsby, said that, while ‘some people’ saw ‘breaking the power of the unions’ as an aim of privatisation, he would ‘say it was the opportunity to bring working arrangements more into line with the norms applying at the end of the twentieth century’.<sup>9</sup> In his study of the privatisation of British Rail, Tim Strangleman observed that ‘though not the only reason for privatisation’, one of its main ‘advantages’ was the ‘marginalisation of organised labour through a breaking down of the collective structures of industrial relations’.<sup>10</sup> Robert Griffiths, the historian of Britain’s oldest rail union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers [ASLEF] concluded that:

Privatisation of the railways represented a historic defeat for the people of Britain, for the labour movement and for the railway unions including ASLEF. In an era of management power, technological change and union mergers, what future could there be for one small union in such circumstances? The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen had become an anachronism.<sup>11</sup>

In another study, Ralph Darlington showed how, during the privatisation of British Rail, mass redundancies targeting older workers achieved a generational change and effectively got rid of the railway – and union – culture that might otherwise have taken two decades to remove. The membership of ASLEF’s rival railway employees’

union, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers [RMT] was almost halved between 1992 and 1999.<sup>12</sup>

Australian studies have also demonstrated strong connections between privatisation of industries and loss of union density in the workforce. In a paper discussing the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the Australian privatisation process by the end of the 1990s, economist Roger Wettenhall found trade unions to be among the ‘losers’. He wrote that the ‘combination of political, economic and social forces’ that had resulted in a ‘rapid increase in the number of Australians holding shares (and winning the financial benefits that come with them)’ had also produced ‘significantly higher unemployment levels’ and ‘a weakening of trade unions which have long protected worker interests’.<sup>13</sup> Like Strangleman and Darlington, Wettenhall made a clear connection between the strengthening of the private sector and the weakening of trade unions, claiming that, ‘weakening them [unions] is one of the reasons for privatizing’.<sup>14</sup> So, too, has David Peetz, Professor of Employment Relations at Griffith University, who argues that the shift of employment from the public to the private sector accounts for 22 per cent of the decline in union density that occurred between 1982 and 1990.<sup>15</sup> The assumption in all of these studies is that, while many employers seek to present unions as ‘anachronistic’ and ‘unnecessary’ in the modern workplace, weakening the effectiveness and influence of trade unions is detrimental to workers as it limits their capacity to negotiate fair wages and safe working conditions.

Australian Labour Market Statistics support an argument that the trend of union decline continues, with figures showing that while union density stood at 22.7 per cent of the national workforce in 2009, it varied from 46 per cent in the public sector to just 14 per cent in the private sector.<sup>16</sup> Figures for August 2012 indicate that union density in the public sector had dropped a further 3 per cent to 43 per cent,

whilst remaining steady at 14 per cent in the private sector.<sup>17</sup> It is logical to conclude from these statistics that the more the private sector takes over industry, the more union membership and density will dwindle. It is a far cry from the days of the ‘closed shop’, where both employers and employees accepted mandatory union membership, albeit sometimes grudgingly. In order to establish what facilitated this shift and how some of its outcomes may be detrimental to unions, the paper will now address each of the three factors mentioned above.

### **Changes to ALP policy**

Historically, from colonial times until the 1970s, Australia had a large public sector compared with other Western democracies.<sup>18</sup> Just to take one example for comparison, although the British Railways were developed and run by private companies from their commencement in the mid 1800s until 1945, Australian railways, with few exceptions, were always government owned, because only the colonial governments could raise the necessary investment to fund the extensive railway networks that served small, unprofitable populations.<sup>19</sup> Privatising State-owned factories and transport systems was not on the agenda of either side of politics until the 1980s, when swift changes occurred. Wettenhall dated the beginning of the ‘dramatic change’ to privatisation from the latter years of the Fraser Liberal/National Party Government (1975–1983). But the ALP also shifted in this direction. For 60 years, from 1921 until 1981, the nationalisation of industry was an important element of the ALP’s ‘socialist objective’; both were abandoned at the 1981 National Conference.<sup>20</sup> Inevitably, the privatisation of public assets in Australia was influenced by international events, especially the commitment by the Thatcher and Major Conservative Governments in Britain, during the 1980s and ‘90s, to privatise state

industries and public utilities, such as railways, telecommunications, electricity, gas and water – a strategy continued by New Labour, after Tony Blair’s 1997 election victory.<sup>21</sup>

The ideological shift signalled by the abandoning of Labor’s socialist objective intensified during the Hawke and Keating Labor administrations (1983-91 and 1991-96). Henceforth, influenced by international events and political expediency, both sides of politics embraced economic rationalism, apparently accepting that microeconomic reform was needed to improve the Australian economy.<sup>22</sup> At first, the Hawke Government was ambivalent about privatising assets, probably because some Cabinet members were strongly opposed to the idea. Soon after the ALP was elected to government in April 1983, the Federal Expenditure Review Committee met to discuss capital injections for Qantas and Australian Airlines. The Finance Minister, Senator Peter Walsh, believed that either the airlines should be allowed to increase their borrowings, but be required to pay interest at market rates, thus pressuring them to ‘maximise their performance’, or they should be sold. Hawke, however, ended the debate by stating flatly, ‘That is an option which is available to our political opponents, but is not available to us’, and the airlines received further government funding.<sup>23</sup> But in 1987, this policy was reversed with Hawke announcing plans to sell Australian Airlines, Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank, Telecom, Australia Post and the Overseas Telecommunications Commission. Economist Stephen King has argued that this reversal of policy arose from the government’s ‘requirement for fiscal rectitude’.<sup>24</sup> The stance adopted by both of Hawke’s Finance Ministers, Walsh and Willis, appears to support this conclusion.<sup>25</sup> But, although some Parliamentary Labor Party members, including Hawke, now saw privatisation as being determined more by ‘whether [a business efficiently] delivers



the goods and services required by the public' than by ideology,<sup>26</sup> they failed to persuade the union movement of the efficacy of privatisation – and with good reason.

Prior to winning the 1983 election, the ALP had negotiated the Prices and Incomes Accord (later known as 'the Accord') with the Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU]. In return for lifting the wages freeze imposed by the Fraser government, and increasing government spending on education and welfare, trade unions agreed to moderate their demands for wage increases, and thus minimise inflation. The Accord had a precedent in the Social Contract agreed between the Labour government of Jim Callaghan and the Trades Union Congress in Britain in the mid 1970s, but was more durable, lasting until the Labor government lost the 1996 election.<sup>27</sup> Despite its creators, Hawke and ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty, continuing to insist even today that it was the solution necessary for 'a bitter period' when unemployment and inflation both stood at around 10 per cent,<sup>28</sup> the Accord had its critics, initially limited to 'Left organisations outside the Labor and the Communist Parties' and 'a minority of right-wing commentators'. Since the mid 1980s, however, critics have included 'mainstream social democratic' thinkers such as Stilwell, Singleton and Ewer et al, who argued that while the idea was sound, the fault lay in the implementation.<sup>29</sup> Militant unions, such as the AMWU, which had originally supported the Accord, later saw it as serving the interests of capital, rather than unionists, and felt betrayed by its outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, in Western Australia, the switch to a 'new look' ALP was achieved after a leadership coup, which saw former railway worker Ron Davies ousted in favour of right winger Brian Burke, who subsequently led the Party to victory in the 1983 State election a month before Federal Labor's win. Ever since the sundering of the political and industrial arms of the WA Branch of the ALP and the

foundation of an independent Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia in 1963, the relationship between the Party and the unions had been fraught with tensions. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Party appeared to be distancing itself from the unions that had once provided the vast majority of its membership. Since the 1970s – as Australia's highly unionised manufacturing base began its decline – the perceived wisdom for bolstering the ALP's membership and maintaining a viable alternative government was to look for recruits in new places, such as the branches of unaffiliated, white-collar unions, or interest groups involving women, youth, immigrants and Indigenous Australians. Burke and his cabinet personified 'new look Labor' – young, middle-class, educated professionals.<sup>31</sup>

Burke adopted a 'presidential' style of leadership. His administration increased its executive powers by creating a new Department of Premier and Cabinet, which coordinated and monitored the implementation and review of Government policy, gave the Premier much greater control over Cabinet submissions, and streamlined the process of introducing and developing policy, while significantly reducing the control previously exercised by the Party's State Executive.<sup>32</sup> This meant that the new government was able to make many policy decisions without having to convince (or even consult) the State Executive.

The government also established an active role for the State in economic planning. This was not a return to the 'nationalisation of industry' platform that Federal Labor had abandoned at its 1981 National Conference, rather it was seen as a new cooperative arrangement between government and the private sector. During the mineral boom, under non-Labor administrations, much of the State's wealth had gone to investors in the eastern states or overseas. In seeking to stop this 'drain', the State Government not was merely echoing what had been an old refrain in Western

Australia; it entered new territory by implementing policies for generating wealth within the public sector. To this end, the Burke administration set up such bodies as the WA Development Corporation, which purchased companies from major entrepreneurs – for example, Alan Bond, head of Bond Corporation – but (somewhat curiously) included those same corporation heads as Directors of the new state corporations.<sup>33</sup> The Government's appointment of entrepreneurs from the private sector to manage its assets was controversial, and would have devastating consequences for the ALP in Western Australia.<sup>34</sup> The Burke government's policies marked a new direction that boded ill for supporters of government-owned industries, and those who believed that it was a government's function to provide facilities for its people.

The Government and the Trades and Labor Council [TLCWA] signed an Accord-style agreement, formalised as the *Western Australian Labor Tripartite Consultative Council Act, 1983*, the three partners being government, industry and unions – although the TLCWA Executive was never enthusiastic and later claimed that, while the union movement had cooperated, the government had neither formally endorsed nor honoured the Tripartite Agreement.<sup>35</sup> Conditions of the agreement included re-writing the *Industrial Arbitration Act* and establishing an Occupational Health and Safety Commission. Like the Accord, the Tripartite Consultative Council was criticised for silencing union opposition, and for not being 'consultative'. The government's refusal to consult was in evidence when, without involving the relevant unions, it retrenched 323 civil servants, closed the Public Works Department Architectural Division, cut wages and salaries and restructured or sold off a number of state assets – ostensibly to meet a \$274 million shortfall left by the previous administration. These actions provoked a wave of industrial conflict that resulted in

WA averaging 420 workdays lost per 1,000 workers, compared with a national average of 234 per 1,000.<sup>36</sup> By 1984, the *Civil Service Journal* was accusing the State Labor Government of launching a ‘vicious and unrelenting onslaught’ against its members.<sup>37</sup> Thus WA public servants – a sector of the workforce where union density was, and remains, comparatively high – experienced from a Labor administration the kind of mass axing that Federal public servants later underwent in the early days of the Howard administration.

Shortly after the Burke administration won its second term in 1986, the TLCWA Executive signalled an end to the Tripartite Agreement by passing a resolution expressing its ‘abhorrence’ and rejecting a decision by government to ‘reduce the working conditions of wage and salary earners’.<sup>38</sup> One historian, Rose Graham, accused the Burke government of ‘harrass[ing], threaten[ing] and fin[ing] militant unions’ whilst favouring ‘compliant’ unions.<sup>39</sup> By late 1985, many unions saw the privatisation of the public sector and the deregulation of the labour market as central to the State government’s agenda. This belief sparked a series of anti-privatisation campaigns of the latter 1980s, begun by individual unions but soon led by the TLCWA.

The first Anti-privatisation Campaign aimed to educate business owners, employers and employees about the impact of privatising the public sector and deregulating the labour market. David Heald, a University of Glasgow economist, hired as a consultant by the ACTU to research privatisation and the erosion of the public sector, visited WA and spoke to the TLC. He found some ‘disturbing parallels between the United Kingdom in 1976 and Australia in 1986’, yet concluded, that the labour movement could learn from British mistakes. In his judgement, the ALP was in a much stronger position than the British Labour Party to resist the encroachment

of New Right economics, because Australian trade unions were more disciplined and had brokered a far more effective Accord than the Social Contract between the Labour Party and British unions, which culminated in a ‘wages explosion’ in 1976. He assumed that lessons must have been learned from seven years of Thatcher Government policies, which had caused ‘massive unemployment’ and ‘territorial, social and racial divisions’. Perhaps Heald’s most serious miscalculation, however, was that John Howard, then Leader of the Liberal Party in Opposition, ‘appears to lack the personal stature necessary to project himself as an alternative Prime Minister’.<sup>40</sup> Heald appears also to have underestimated the impact of the policy shift within the ALP.

Despite moving away from its traditional support base and policies, the ALP was struggling to find satisfactory alternatives. In 1992, while on a visit to Perth, Federal ALP President Barry Jones had stated bluntly that unless the Party recruited a new generation of supporters, ‘the ALP as we know it will go out of existence’.<sup>41</sup> The problem was exacerbated by the devastating 1996 Federal election loss in which not only swinging voters and the non-unionised deserted Labor, but also its ‘heartland’ – the blue-collar, unionised voters. Following the defeat, in a revealing ABC *Four Corners* documentary, former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans declared that, ‘everything Labor stands for is now open for discussion’.<sup>42</sup>

But Labor remained reluctant to admit that this ideological shift had already occurred with the wholesale of adoption of policies and programs that the Party would once have eschewed. For example, while former Treasurer Ralph Willis later admitted that privatisation was ‘predominantly for budgetary enhancement’ and partially to overcome difficulties, such as low productivity, he judged Hawke’s economic achievements as ‘extraordinary’, resulting in the economy being ‘much

stronger and more productive'. Without the government's 'structural reforms' (including privatisation), Willis concluded, the Australian economy would 'still be stuck in the old uncompetitive, industrially combative, low-productivity, protectionist model' and 'the trade unions would be sharing a much smaller pie than the new globalised model can deliver'.<sup>43</sup>

While there may, indeed, be some justification for his argument that the Australian government's large scale abandonment of the public sector, leaving many unions to face a hostile, privatised environment, was the only viable course of action in hard economic times, it is interesting to note Steven High's opinion regarding similar situations in the USA and Canada. High posits the theory that unionisation has remained much stronger in Canada, despite 'massive job losses' because of combined government and union action that saved many of Canada's manufacturing industries from closing. He also argues that Canadian unions were in a much stronger position than their American counterparts because in the early 1980s they had succeeded in forcing governments to legislate 'mandatory advance notice of mass layoffs, severance pay, preferential hiring rights, pension reinsurance, and job placement', but also because they were able to cast factory closures as a struggle of 'Canadian workers' against 'American bosses' as many factories were owned by US companies.<sup>44</sup> Of most interest here, however, is High's contention that the government's intervention to prevent major steel and paper mills closing, together with 'a long history of state intervention in [the] economy' saved many jobs and also assisted in maintaining a strong union presence – unlike in the US.<sup>45</sup> As this paper goes to press, a debate is occurring here about whether it is the Australian government's responsibility to subsidise the local car industry in order to save thousands of jobs in Victoria and South Australia.<sup>46</sup>

### **The breakdown of union culture**

British studies of a range of industries have found that privatisation is often preceded by a dramatic reduction of the workforce by forced or voluntary redundancies, and the concurrent loss of trade union influence. The new privatised industry then is able to institute poorer conditions and lower wages. Of most relevance to this paper is Darlington's previously-mentioned study of the mass redundancies that occurred prior to the privatisation of British Rail in the late 1990s.<sup>47</sup> A similar 'clearing out' of ageing workers who subscribed to the 'redundant' union culture occurred in some WA industries in preparation for privatisation. In the years before privatisation, between 1980 and the beginning of 1993, under both Labor and Liberal governments, Westrail more than halved its staff from 10,000 to 4,800, thus drastically affecting a number of the unions representing rail employees, including the AMWU, the WALEDF&CU and the Australian Railways Union [ARU].

It is worth noting that three years before the election of the Howard government – described by Muir and Peetz as 'the most aggressively anti-union government in a century'<sup>48</sup> – the Liberal-National Coalition government of Richard Court had come to power in WA. Apart from closing major publicly owned facilities including the Government Railway Workshops at Midland, and the Robb Jetty Meat Works, and cutting staff at Bank West, the State Government Insurance Commission and the State Electricity Commission, the Government legislated a series of 'industrial reforms' to weaken the industrial relations system, which served as a model for the Howard Government's industrial relations policy from 1996.<sup>49</sup> During the 1990s, according to Bailey et al, union density in the public sector in WA fell faster than in any other Australian state. The first six years of the Liberal-National administration

(1993-1999), the State Teachers' Union reported 'a 15 per cent drop in membership' while the CPSU/CSA membership 'declined by 40 per cent'. Only the Australian Nursing Federation showed a reverse of that trend, with membership increasing by 3 per cent.<sup>50</sup>

In the process of closing the Midland Government Railway Workshops in March 1994, Westrail (formerly the WA Government Railways), shed a further 1,100 jobs over two years.<sup>51</sup> But even prior to this, between 1991 and 1994, approximately 1,250 WALEDF&CU members took voluntary redundancy, reducing the union's membership to 814. By 1998, it numbered 360.<sup>52</sup> Further railway job losses came after State Transport Minister Eric Charlton's 1995 announcement of the introduction of the 'Right Track' program to modernise Westrail. Although he said that there would be 'no sackings', Charlton revealed that there would be a further 1,345 jobs lost over three years, as a result of outsourcing services that had previously been carried out by Westrail, such as locomotive and track maintenance and telecommunications – a move that was expected to create only 700 jobs in the private sector.<sup>53</sup> In summary, three issues are significant here: that Westrail had shed three quarters of its workforce between 1980 and 1995, that the government envisaged that fewer than half of the last 1,345 jobs to be lost would be filled in shifting services to the private sector, and that these jobs were likely to be non-unionised.

Technological change, too, has impacted significantly upon the nature of blue-collar work. Evidence suggests that where the introduction of technology has led to a de-skilling of the workforce, a decline in demand for training, and increased employee dissatisfaction often results, creating greater worker mobility between jobs, and a subsequent breaking down of the type of strong workplace identity that once reinforced loyalty to one's trade union. Nowhere is this more evident than in the



railways, as exemplified by Tim Strangleman's story of a British train driver, which, he tells us, is 'a metaphor for what has occurred in the UK rail industry over the last two decades'.<sup>54</sup>

In the early 1960s, Clive Groome began work cleaning steam engines ... in south London for the then nationalised British Railways. Dirty but important work, being a cleaner acted as an introduction to the world of railway employment. Groome gradually climbed his way up the promotional ladder, rooted in a seniority system, as countless generations of railway servants had before him, to the point where he became a driver... During the 1980s, he left the industry because of his increasing disquiet at the levels of monotony, which he believed were dangerous, and *the ever greater management interference in the job of a driver*.<sup>55</sup>

Australian footplate staff had the same career structure as their British counterparts. Although there was no apprenticeship equivalent to that served by other skilled trades people, such as boilermakers, fitters and turners, drivers all began their careers as either an engine cleaner or a call boy.<sup>56</sup> Cleaners were promoted to firemen and eventually to the first of five classes of locomotive driver. With the advent of diesel and electric engines, the fireman became the driver's assistant. In 1983, the WALEDF&CU threatened to call a demarcation dispute when the Railways Department attempted to promote other railway staff, such as guards, to driver positions.<sup>57</sup> But all that has changed. Evidence from interviews that this author undertook in 2012-13 with older enginemen either retired or on the verge of retirement, suggests that union membership is now much less common among metropolitan train crews in Perth, and the promotion structure has been destroyed. Drivers often come from other walks of life, including police officers and prison or

security guards, who were not ‘brought up’ in the ‘railway culture’ as were lads who joined the railways at sixteen. Trained as engine drivers in a few weeks and possibly regarding this as just the next job rather than a permanent position, they do not see a need to join the union, and are reluctant to pay the union dues. An aggressive culture of anti-unionism exhibited by private rail owners also intimidates some potential unionists. In particular, American companies such as Genessee & Wyoming Australia [GWA], have displayed hostility towards unions, with one driver claiming that the company set out to destroy the RTBU.<sup>58</sup> So far, it has not succeeded, with union membership achieving the right to continued union representation early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>59</sup>

A union culture is evident among ore train drivers, however. The only unionised section of the mine site workforce, Rio Tinto drivers – who are almost all CFMEU members under a collective agreement — work under extremely difficult conditions. They have little advance knowledge of what each shift will entail, whether they will be driving in the yard or undertaking long journeys, or how long their shifts will be. They are constantly recorded and monitored. Yet even in this environment, a railway culture has begun to flourish. Drivers speak of ‘feeling the train’ and ‘not tormenting the train’. This knowledge, gained from experience of driving on particular tracks, is what they are now expected to feed into a computerised system so that the trains can be automated; Rio Tinto will no longer require drivers on their mainline ore trains. The automated system will be controlled from an office in Perth, 1,500 kilometres from the mine site. In order to achieve this, the company requires its current drivers to do themselves out of a job by teaching the track to an automated system that is scheduled to replace them in 2014.<sup>60</sup> Ironically, although they may not realise it, Rio Tinto is hijacking a time-honoured practice of locomotive

engine drivers, in which a new driver would travel with an experienced driver to ‘learn the road’. Indeed, the union insisted on this practice prior to a driver operating an unfamiliar stretch of line. Rio Tinto’s CEO says ‘mining is about data’ – by inference, it is nothing about people.<sup>61</sup>

Interference and breaking down of jobs into repetitive, easily controlled and quantified tasks, and tasks that do not require much skill are modern corporate management tactics with an origin on the assembly lines of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a strategy that was attempted by management, and strongly resisted by the unionised work force at the Government Railway Workshops in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in due course, the Workshops was deemed to be ‘inefficient’ and closed. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the advent of privatisation, which has brought corporate management styles to industry, is concurrent with the decline of union and employee power, the dwindling of union membership, job losses, de-skilling and decreased training opportunities.

### **The Impact of Privatisation on Training opportunities**

The closure of the Railway Workshops had a substantial negative impact upon the Western Australian economy, with heavy engineering contracts going interstate or overseas, and many training opportunities for industrial apprentices disappearing.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, a major provider of trained skilled trades people who had been the backbone of the AMWU and its predecessor unions, such as the Amalgamated Engineers, ceased to exist. Other public facilities that offered apprenticeship training, such as the State Electricity Commission, were also dismantled and privatised. Apprenticeship training became reliant upon the private employer’s capacity or inclination to offer it. From the 1990s, only the largest private businesses had the

capacity to offer more than a few apprenticeships, and many, in the opinion of union officials, were not interested in doing so. Another aspect of apprenticeship training was that it brought boys into contact with men who were, for the most part, committed unionists. Former East Perth Power Station employee Neil Byrne recalled as a young apprentice listening to the tradesmen discussing the pros and cons of the 1952 metal workers' strike at the Government Railway Workshops. Although the Power Station employees were not on strike, there was considerable debate among the workers about the rights and wrongs of the situation. The members of two militant unions operating at the Power Station, the Amalgamated Engineers and the Boilermakers (both predecessors of the AMWU) made a token gesture of staying away from work one day in each pay cycle in solidarity with their Workshops comrades. Apprentices would sometimes attend the meetings and hear arguments for and against maintaining the strike. 'And the tradesmen would say, "but you don't want to join the union until you are out of your apprenticeship", which in my view now, was wrong'.<sup>63</sup> While not all workers were as committed to the union as Byrne, who later became an AMWU official, most did not question the need to join once they completed their apprenticeship.

The current, on-going shortage of skilled Australian workers and the stop-gap measures being applied, such as 457 visas, indicate that neither State nor Federal governments are prioritising training, and that private enterprises either lack the capacity or the incentives to train workers. Those who do offer any formal training are unlikely to provide their employees with full trade training, which is increasingly seen by employers as being the responsibility of the employee, not themselves.<sup>64</sup> Shorter traineeships have become an attractive and affordable option to many employers and employees.

According to a 2001 study by Kapuscinski, major aspects of the changes in the Australian training system in the decade 1986-97 included the considerable increase in young people commencing traineeships, to a point where they exceeded apprenticeships for the first time in firm-based training. In that period, the percentage of trainees had risen from less than one per cent to 46 per cent of 'total firm-based trainee stocks'.<sup>65</sup> These findings – together with others from the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research and Evaluation Program [NCVER] showing that, between 2001 and 2005, the number of hours of employer-sponsored training had fallen by 15 per cent for permanent and 27 per cent for casual employees<sup>66</sup> – indicate a trend of shortened, specific and limited skills training on the individual factory floor, and a decreased employer contribution to the overall cost. Possibly, this trend indicates a demand by private employers for limited, but specialised, training for their employees.

The burgeoning of traineeships in recent decades has provided a much greater range of choice in available training, but also some confusion about what constituted a traineeship and what an apprenticeship, and the differences between them. Kapuscinski defined apprenticeships as a (normally) four-year, structured form of indentured training, whereby apprentices are taught according to a pre-determined format or plan, are subject to monitoring by their employer, and upon completion become qualified tradespersons in a recognised trade. Traineeships, on the other hand, 'are specialised contracts of training ...[lasting about] 12 months'.

They:

... combine work and formal training in a mix dependent on [the] trainee's educational attainment and trade competence and allow employers to train

people *according to current industry requirements* so that upon completion trainees receive recognised qualifications.<sup>67</sup>

Two studies undertaken in the latter 1990s (by Dockery *et. al* and May, respectively) undertook to answer questions about the cost of training apprentices and the effectiveness of the new methods of assessment. Dockery *et. al.*, using 59 case studies of Australian firms employing apprentices, found that, while many employers demonstrated ‘altruistic motives’<sup>68</sup> in accepting and training apprentices, thereby incurring a considerable expense to the firm, the outlay on training could be considerably less in larger firms where ‘economies of scale’ operated, or where an apprentice was trained in work of a ‘lower skill content or less variety’ or there was a lower level of supervision.<sup>69</sup> John Mossenton, an official with the AMWU, corroborated these findings in a conversation with the author,<sup>70</sup> in which he stated that only the largest private firms were able or willing to offer apprenticeship training of the scope provided in the past in Western Australia by State-owned facilities, such as the Government Railway Workshops or the State Electricity Commission.<sup>71</sup>

Dockery *et al* also considered the matter of incentive, asking, ‘Why do profit maximising firms continue to provide apprenticeship training?’ Furthermore, ‘What other benefits do they receive from investing in apprenticeship training and how are these accrued by the firm?’ The researchers were unable to answer this question satisfactorily, but suggested that in the future, firms might not be so willing to foot the training bill and might instead ‘push for the public to bear more of the costs of apprenticeship training’.<sup>72</sup> They also observed that the positive findings of the study regarding the willingness of employers to pay and train apprentices, the lack of support for any reduction in apprentices’ wages, and, in particular, the apparently altruistic motives of employers who trained apprentices and did not retain them in

the firm were to some extent biased by the absence in their study of any business which did not train apprentices.<sup>73</sup>

Dockery, *et al.* commended the proposed New Apprenticeships System (NAS), as it was designed to reduce the cost burden to employers and introduce ‘greater flexibility’ into the training structure.<sup>74</sup> Yet when Roger May examined the New Apprenticeship Training and Assessment System (NATAS) and the Module system operating in Western Australia in his 1999 doctoral thesis, he found problems with the ways that apprentices’ competencies were assessed by the new training schemes. May concluded that there were discrepancies in both schemes between ‘broad competency standards’ offered in TAFE courses and the ‘specific standards of individual organisations’, and that this variation caused confusion. It was a perception of some managers, at least, that the problem arose partly from the conflicting aims of education and industry. May found that:

Industry was concerned with the rapid acquisition of skills and knowledge where time equated with money... [whilst] the education culture was [to impart] a broad knowledge base to the student where time involved was less critical.<sup>75</sup>

Consequently, he advocated the need for greater consultation between the education provider and the individual employer, and in particular, adequate training for shop floor assessors who were expected to test the competencies of apprentices to a national standard.<sup>76</sup>

Another problem has been the attrition rate of apprentices. Statistics produced by the WA Government’s Department of Training and Workforce Development show that, from 2010 to 2012, only about half of the people commencing apprenticeships completed them.<sup>77</sup> Doubtless, there are many reasons why apprentices or trainees fail

to complete their courses. These may include finding that the course did not suit their needs, inability to meet fees, or the demands of the employer. The high dropout rate appears to indicate that, as a means of fulfilling industry's requirements for skilled employees, the current system is much less viable than the more regimented apprenticeship system of yesteryear, but that discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Economists have expressed varied opinions about the advantages of privatisation. As early as the mid-'90s, King warned that for privatisation to enjoy 'long term success' in Australia, 'the pressure for competitive reform must be maintained'. Otherwise, 'we are likely to see a privatisation agenda run increasingly for short term revenue and political gains'.<sup>78</sup> Wettenhall argued that the advantages that privatisation brought to some sections of the community equally disadvantaged others,<sup>79</sup> and McKenzie asserted that the main reason for privatisation, promoting investment in the economy, was not realised – at least not to the extent anticipated.<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere it has been claimed that, while 'privatisation is rarely popular with electorates', overall the outcomes had been generally satisfactory and there were 'no credible Australian voices in favour of any re-nationalisations'.<sup>81</sup> Apart from Wettenhall, however, none of these sources examined the impact of privatisation on unions.

Not surprisingly, trade union officials are among the harshest critics of privatisation. In 2009, the RTBU condemned the process both in Australia and abroad. In Queensland, the union was fighting attempts to sell off parts of Queensland Rail. National Secretary Phil Kessey believed that 'privatisation of rail operations and assets invariably leads to bad long-term economic outcomes for tax



payers' because 'time and again we see private rail operators walking away from their responsibilities to properly run and maintain railways'.<sup>82</sup> A report on activities around Australia showed that in three states, and nationally, the Union was struggling to protect jobs and maintain conditions against private rail companies, while in Tasmania, the state was about to resume control of the rail network following Pacific National's withdrawal. Similarly, the journal reported, in 2008 the New Zealand Labour government bought back rail and ferry services that had been sold to private consortium Tranz Rail in 1993, and then sold on the Australian company Toll Holdings. The purchase cost New Zealand taxpayers \$665 million.<sup>83</sup> Kessey commented that 'this is another risk governments take when selling off infrastructure'.<sup>84</sup>

An unattributed feature article in the same issue of *Australian Rail Tram and Bus Worker* listed a series of failures by private rail companies across Australia including WA's private freight operation WestNet demanding \$50 million from the State government to keep grain lines open. The article also commented on the situation in Britain, where government-owned British Rail was split into over 100 companies covering telecommunications, infrastructure and rolling stock, at the cost of safety and service, to the extent that:

British rail has become the most expensive in Europe while attracting record taxpayer subsidies. Customer service and the manufacture of rolling stock have declined, while fares have increased ....A series of serious accidents in the post-privatisation period killed 48 and injured 820 people, drastically undermining confidence in rail safety.<sup>85</sup>

Although ABS figures for May 2010 showed a slight reverse of this trend across Australia, with WA union density rising to 17 per cent, research by *Sydney*

*Morning Herald* editor Mark Davis, published in September 2010, indicated varying results regarding union capacity to recruit new members. While the membership of some unions increased, others continued to decline. Davis found that some blue-collar unions, in particular the AMWU, lost members not only during the AWA-period, but between the 2007 change of government and the end of 2009. As mentioned earlier, the AMWU's federal membership fell from 135,000 in 2005 to around 100,000 at the end of 2012.<sup>86</sup> In WA, the union's membership fell from 8,463 in mid 2005 to 7,371 in mid 2012.<sup>87</sup> The Federal body of the RTBU has reversed the decline in its membership since 2009 – but only after numbers had plummeted from 50,000 nationwide in 1993 to 35,000 at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>88</sup> But in WA, where there are only a few hundred members, between 2004 and 2011 membership continued to decline from 659 to 211.<sup>89</sup> Thus, although some unions have been able to halt and even reverse the decline in their membership as a result of more favourable industrial laws, others have not yet been able to do so.

In the case of the AMWU, a significant factor is the number of manufacturing jobs that have gone overseas in the past decade. In a 2006 address to the National Press Club, Heather Ridout, the CEO of Australian Industry Group, stated that 30,000 jobs were lost in the manufacturing industry in 2005. She said that 15 per cent of Australia's manufacturing industry was overseas based and that was predicted to rise to 25 per cent in the next three years<sup>90</sup> – a period that coincided with the change of federal government. In March 2013, with this trend showing no sign of decreasing, AMWU national secretary Paul Bastian called for companies such as Telstra, which benefit from millions of dollars of public money and government contracts, to be compelled to employ Australian workers instead of going offshore in order to boost their profits by employing overseas workers under poor wages and conditions.<sup>91</sup> So

far, there appears to be no stemming of the offshore flow of manufacturing jobs, and the AMWU faces the ongoing prospect of losing members, despite an pro-active program of amalgamations that has seen it absorb workers in ship building, food and confectionery, printing, technical and vehicle building as well as metal working and engineering trades.<sup>92</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined two Western Australian unions – the AMWU and the RTBU/WALEDF&CU – to examine the impact of privatisation on union membership and density. It has argued that the privatisation of the work force has been a significant factor in reducing union membership and union density, and has been used as means of weakening union power. In order to test this argument, three factors were examined: the impact of changing ALP policy, the decline of union culture and reduced training opportunities. Although the selling off of the public sector and the expansion of private enterprise was facilitated by both Liberal and Labor governments, it was a particularly marked change of policy for the ALP, heralded by rescinding the socialist objective in the 1981 Federal conference. The privatisation policy of the late 1980s resulted in the trade union movement deserting the ALP en masse at the ballot box in 1996 as a form of protest, and possibly never returning to the extent that was taken for granted in the past. But the sundering of the industrial union base from the ALP has been a two-way process. In trying to escape the tired old media adage that the Party is ‘run by union bosses’ and appeal to a more diverse electorate, the ‘new’ ALP has distanced itself from trade unions, to the extent of blaming Federal and WA electoral defeats in 2013 on the public rejecting the perceived trade union connection.

The evidence presented also indicates that privatisation in the two WA unions was preceded by massive job losses and a resulting decline in union membership and density, but also a loss of union culture. This was particularly marked in the railways, once known for a very strong identity. The closure of large public facilities such as the Government Railway Workshops and the State Electricity Commission also resulted in reduced training opportunities for trades people. Formerly, a trades apprenticeship was not merely an entry to a trade but also to the relevant union. This connection has been broken by semi-training as well as high job mobility.

While some might regard such changes as a progressive step – breaking out of a elitist (and often sexist) mould and granting more and wider opportunities to female and older trainees, evidence suggests that privatising public instrumentalities has not always yielded the anticipated benefits of efficiency, prosperity and productivity. In reality, privatisation has resulted in the breaking up of public facilities into separate, privately owned and sometimes competing companies whose aim is profit and who generally do not offer a service (such as training young workers) once it becomes unprofitable to do so. WestNet's demands for the state government to subsidise them to transport grain from country districts is just one example of this hard-nosed attitude. Ironically, the breaking up of public instrumentalities into multiple private companies, far from creating greater efficiency and productivity, has at times resulted in the opposite effect, as indicated by the previously-mentioned fate of British Rail, and outcomes in this part of the world. But despite private rail systems failing in New Zealand and Tasmania, obliging and state and national governments to buy back transport systems that, with hindsight, should never have been sold in the first place, there seems little prospect of the Australian Federal Government (whether Liberal or Labor) reversing the privatisation process. Both Union and ABS figures indicate that

union density may be increasing slightly in the private as well as the public sector since 2007, although there are some discrepancies.<sup>93</sup> While there have been positive signs for unions following the abandoning of Work Choices post 2007, the recent change of Federal government may herald another period in which unions and their members are under siege.<sup>94</sup>

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In preparing this paper, the author viewed the websites of the Western Australian branches of the: Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union [AMWU] – <http://www.amwu.org.au/>; the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union [CFMEU] – [www.cfmeuwa.com](http://www.cfmeuwa.com); the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industrial Union of Workers [RTBU] – [www.rtbuwa.asn.au](http://www.rtbuwa.asn.au), and the Maritime Union of Australia [MUA] – [www.mua.org.au](http://www.mua.org.au).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Davis, M. (2010), 'Unions face fight on a new front', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/unions-face-fight-on-a-new-front-20100922-15mex.html>, [accessed 4 April 2013].

<sup>3</sup> *Review of the Western Australian Industrial Relations System*, 2008, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6310.0 Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership, Australia, August 2012, Summary of Findings: Trade Union Membership (Table 11) <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6310.0Main%20Features2August%202012?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6310.0&issue=August%202012&num=&view=>

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 'Unions face fight on new front'.

<sup>6</sup> 'Union Affiliations 2006 to 2011 State Executive and State Conference'. The author thanks the AMWU (WA) Research Officer, David Scaife, for providing these figures.

<sup>7</sup> 'Union density' is defined as being the number currently enrolled as members as a proportion of all those employees potentially eligible to be members. See <http://www.polity.co.uk/cbs3/PDF/Glos.pdf> accessed 28 October 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Ellem, B. and Franks, P. (2008), 'Trade Union Structure and Politics in Australia and New Zealand', *Labour History*, no. 95, November, p. 60. Peetz' work is cited by Michael Crosby (2005), *Power at Work: Rebuilding the Australian Union Movement*, The Federation Press, p. 26. For details of the bitter and long-running Robe River dispute between WA Unions and the US Company, Peko Wallsend, see: Oliver, B. (2003), *Unity is Strength. A history of the Australian Labor Party and the Trades and Labor Council in Western Australia, 1899–1999*, API Network, Bentley, pp.348 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Strangleman, T. (2004), *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatisation and Culture change in the UK Rail Industry*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 123-4.

<sup>10</sup> Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line?* p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Griffiths, R. (2005), *Driven by Ideals? A history of ASLEF*, ASLEF, London, p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> Darlington, R. (2009), 'Leadership and union militancy: The case of the RMT' in *Capital and Class*, Issue 99, Autumn, 17. The union's membership dropped from 105,000 to 55,000 in this seven-year period.

<sup>13</sup> Wettenhall, R. (n.d.) 'Privatisation in Australia: How Much and What Impacts?' in *Asian Review of Public Administration*, p. 152, [unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/.../eropa/unpan001420.pdf](http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/.../eropa/unpan001420.pdf), [accessed 9 November 2012].

<sup>14</sup> Wettenhall, 'Privatisation in Australia', p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*, p.70.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'State and Sector' in 6105.0 – *Australian Labour Market Statistics, July 2010*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/> accessed 21 October 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Trade Union Membership' in 6310.0 – *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership, Australia, August 2012*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/> accessed 21 October 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Wettenhall, 'Privatisation in Australia', p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> The turn of the 20th century and the interwar period saw sporadic debates in Britain about the efficiency of government-owned railway systems, with the Australian and Canadian

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railway systems being held up as models. See, for example, letter from W. Wilson of the Railway Nationalisation League in *Locomotive Enginemen's and Firmens' Journal*, vol. 12, January 1899, no. 1, pp. 2-3; *The Labour Magazine*, vol. VII, 1928-29, no. 12 (April 1929), pp. 562-5, on success on nationalisation as exemplified by Australian and Canadian railways.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, pp. 293-4.

<sup>21</sup> Chadwick, A. and Heffernan, R. (2003) 'Introduction: The New Labour Phenomenon' in Chadwick, A. and Heffernan, R., eds (2003) *The New Labour Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> King, S. (2003) 'Why privatization? A review of the Australian experience', <[www.core-research.com.au/Papers/King-Privatisation-2003.pdf](http://www.core-research.com.au/Papers/King-Privatisation-2003.pdf)> [accessed 6 November 2012].

<sup>23</sup> Walsh, P. (1995), *Confessions of a Failed Finance Minister*, Random House, Sydney, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> King, 'Why privatization?' p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Walsh, *Confessions of a Failed Finance Minister*, p. 107; Willis, 'The economy', pp. 153-6.

<sup>26</sup> Walsh, *Confessions of a Failed Finance Minister*, p. 107. According to Walsh, Hawke had changed his position 'almost 180 degrees'.

<sup>27</sup> Willis, R. (2003), 'The economy. A perspective from the inside' in S. Ryan and T. Bramston, eds., *The Hawke Government. A critical retrospective*, Pluto Press, North Melbourne, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> See *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2013, '30 years on: Accord deal a "bitter time" says Kelty', <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/30-years-on-accord-deal-a-bitter-time-says-kelty-20130531-2nfes.html> and *The Australian*, 'Accord saved us from "white trash fate": Bob Hawke', <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/accord-saved-us-from-white-trash-fate-bob-hawke/story-fn59niix-1226654429791> both accessed 4 November 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Bramble, T., 'Thirteen wasted years? Labor in power (1983-96) and its Accord with the unions', <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/accord.htm> accessed 5 November 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Crosby, *Power at Work*, 46-48, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, chapters 12 and 13.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, pp. 297-8, 304-305.

<sup>33</sup> Some of the chief players in this alliance were Laurie Connell, who brokered many of the business deals; John Roberts of Multiplex, and Dallas Dempster, who successfully tendered to build the Burswood Island Casino. See Graham, R. (1996), 'The Consensus Legacy: the Burke Government and the Trade Union Movement: 1983-1987' in *Papers in Labour History* No. 17, ed. P. Bertola, December, p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> At the end of the 1980s, when the full extent of the government's poor judgement in its financial dealings, resulting in major losses of public money, became known, a scandal erupted that resulted in a Royal Commission into so-called 'WA Inc.' in the early 1990s. Apart from my own study of 'WA Inc' in *Unity is Strength*, especially pp. 326-8, there are numerous published and unpublished works on this period of WA history including: A. Peachment, ed.(1995), *Westminster Inc. A survey of three states in the 1980s*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1995, and A. Sayers (2000), 'Western Australia: picking up the pieces' in *The Machine: Labor confronts the future*, ed. J. Warhurst and A. Parkin, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, pp. 152-68.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Trades and Labor Council of WA, State Library of WA, Accession no. 3516A, file 37, 24 June 1986.

<sup>36</sup> David Black (1984), 'Political Chronicles - Western Australia' in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1984), p. 433. Also Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, pp. 332-334.

<sup>37</sup> *Civil Service Journal*, cited by M. Rock (1990), 'Executive Government and Public Administration in Western Australia during the 1970s and 1980s', Curtin University BA Honours Thesis, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes of the Trades and Labor Council of WA, State Library of WA, Accession no. 3516A, file 37, 24 June 1986.

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- <sup>39</sup> Graham, R.A. (1994), 'The Burke Government and the Labour Movement: Labour Transformed, 1983-1988', BA Honours Thesis, Curtin University, p. 43; also Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, pp. 332-3.
- <sup>40</sup> Oliver, B. (2013), "'A total anathema to Labor?' The privatisation debate in Western Australia in the 1980s', in Rainnie, A. and Todd, P. eds (2013), *Work, employment and employment relations in an uneven patchwork world, Proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> AIRAANZ Conference, Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, 6-8 February*, pp. 180-191.
- <sup>41</sup> *Labor Voice*, vol. 14, no. 3, September-October 1992, p. 4.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Hard Labour', *Four Corners*, ABC, 24 February 1997.
- <sup>43</sup> Willis, 'The economy', p. 153.
- <sup>44</sup> High., S & Lewis, D. (2007), *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, Cornell University Press, p. 4.
- <sup>45</sup> High & Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>46</sup> See, for example, Kim Carr, 'The Liberals' mindset on manufacturing will have a catastrophic impact on jobs', *The Age*, 5 November 2013, <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/party-politics-driving-our-car-industry-over-a-cliff-20131104-2wwux.html> accessed 5 November 2013.
- <sup>47</sup> See, for example, Darlington, 'Leadership and union militancy', 16 ff; Taylor, P. and Cooper, C. (2008), "'It was absolute hell": Inside the private prison', *Capital and Class*, no 96, Autumn. The latter is a strong criticism of one particular private prison in Scotland, where there were numerous issues concerning pay, conditions and safety.
- <sup>48</sup> Muir, K and Peetz, D. (2010), 'Not Dead Yet: The Australian Union Movement and the Defeat of a Government', *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, April, p. 216.
- <sup>49</sup> See Bailey, J. et al, (2000), 'Public Sector Labour Relations in Western Australia – an Overview', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 59(4), pp 100-108, December for a description of the content of the First, Second and Third Waves legislation, which established a dual system of workplace agreements and awards/enterprise agreements; removed award safety net legislation, and introduced restrictions on union activities (including access to workplaces; political donations; compulsory, state-controlled secret ballots, and penalties for unions attempting to escape the legislation by seeking to transfer to federal jurisdiction).
- <sup>50</sup> Bailey, et. al. 103-4.
- <sup>51</sup> *West Australian*, 23 December 1993.
- <sup>52</sup> WA Locomotive Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners' Union Papers, State Library of WA, Private Archives President's Address, Accession no. 7527A, item 260: '1994- 1997 Papers re 17<sup>th</sup> Triennial conference', 17<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference 9-11 August 1994. During this period, the Union was involved in a series on-again, off-again amalgamation discussions with the RTBU. The reduction in membership between 1994 and 1998 was partly caused by members who wanted to amalgamate simply changing union, but this is unlikely to have accounted for the membership being more than halved.
- <sup>53</sup> WA Locomotive Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners' Union Papers, State Library of WA Accession no. 7527A/192 'Union Matters', media statement by the Minister for Transport, Eric Charlton, 9 May 1995.
- <sup>54</sup> Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line*, p. 2.
- <sup>55</sup> Cited by Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line*, p. 1
- <sup>56</sup> In the days before wristwatches were in wide use, call boys would walk or cycle to the homes of staff on early shift and wake them by tapping on the window with a pole. See WA Locomotive Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners' Union Papers, State Library of WA, Accession no. 6256A, file 723, *Appointments of shed staff* 1913-1965.
- <sup>57</sup> WALEDF&CU Secretary to Secretary, Westrail, 5 May 1983 in Locomotive Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners' Union Papers, State Library of WA, Accession No. 7527A/81, p. 1, emphasis in the original.
- <sup>58</sup> Author's interviews with train drivers on 30 November 2012 and 11 February 2013. GWA's website, accessed 4 April 2013, claims to own nearly 5,000 kms of track in South Australia and the Northern Territory, and run operations in every mainland state. It has over



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400 employees, 95 locomotives and 950 wagons. Australia is said to be GW's 'largest and fastest growing region'. See:

<[http://www.gwrr.com/operations/railroads/australia/genesee\\_wyoming\\_australia](http://www.gwrr.com/operations/railroads/australia/genesee_wyoming_australia)>

<sup>59</sup> See, 'RTBU in the 1990s', RTBU National Office web site, <http://www.rtbu-nat.asn.au/241.html> accessed 4 November 2013. Unfortunately, the information on this page is undated, but it appears to refer to c. 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Ellem, B. (2013), 'Automation, Rio Tinto and the Train-drivers', 27<sup>th</sup> AIRAANZ Conference, Fremantle, WA, 7 February 2013. Quoted with kind permission of the author.

<sup>61</sup> Cited by Ellem, 'Automation, Rio Tinto and the Train-drivers'.

<sup>62</sup> For an account of the Workshops' closure, see Elliott, L. (2006), '“Derailed”: The closure of the Midland Workshops' in Bertola, P. and Oliver, B. (eds), *The Workshops. A history of the Midland Government Railway Workshops*, UWA Press, Nedlands, pp. 235–58.

<sup>63</sup> Neil Byrne, interviewed by Denise Pringle, 15 May 2006, transcript, pp. 23-4.

<sup>64</sup> Oliver, B. (2007), '“They can't take a trade off you” – varying perceptions of job security over 50 years at the Midland Government Railway Workshops' in Kimber, J. and Love, P. (eds), *The Time of Their Lives. The Eight Hour Day and Working Life*, Australian Society of the Study of Labour History, Melbourne, pp. 165-8.

<sup>65</sup> Kapuscinski, C.A. (2001), *Apprentices & Trainees 1968–1999: Apprentices and traineeships in Australia in the last three decades: an empirical overview of the evidence*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, , p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Richardson, S. & Liu, P. (n.d.), 'Changing forms of employment and their implications for the development of skills, NCVET overview 3.1, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1721.html> [accessed 5 March 2007].

<sup>67</sup> Kapuscinski, *Apprentices & Trainees*, p. 3, emphasis mine.

<sup>68</sup> Dockery, A.M., Koshy, P., Stromback, T. and Ying, W. (1997), 'The Cost of Training Apprentices in Australian Firms', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, vol. 23, no. 4, December, pp. 255-74. Dockery, *et al.* point out (p. 267) that firms which preferred to train their own personnel and, in particular, those who trained apprentices with the expectation that they would not be retained in the firm at the end of their indentures but should gain a wider range of experiences elsewhere, 'confirm[ed] evidence of altruistic motives by some employers in the provision of apprentice training'.

<sup>69</sup> Dockery, *et al.*, p. 265.

<sup>70</sup> John Mossenton, AMWU official, telephone conversation with the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>71</sup> SECWA subsequently became Western Power. In 2006, Western Power was split into four 'specialist firms', only one of which retained the Western Power name and remained in State Government ownership. <http://www.sciencewanet.au/> accessed 1 March 2007. The Government Railway Workshops closed in 1994, with most of their functions going to private firms with branches in WA (for example, A. Goninan & Co), or based in the Eastern States. See Elliott, 'Derailed', in Bertola & Oliver, *Thw Workshops*, pp. 249-50.

<sup>72</sup> Dockery, *et al.*, 'The Cost of Training Apprentices' p. 270.

<sup>73</sup> Dockery, *et al.*, 'The Cost of Training Apprentices', p. 269.

<sup>74</sup> Dockery, *et al.*, 'The Cost of Training Apprentices', pp. 270-1.

<sup>75</sup> May, R.N., (1999) 'An Exposition of the Apprentice Assessment Systems in Western Australia', Ph. D. Thesis, Curtin University, p. 268.

<sup>76</sup> May, 'Apprentice Assessment Systems', pp. 252 ff.

<sup>77</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Training and Workforce Development, Commencements and Completions by region (employer site) and trade category, Apprenticeships 12 months to 31 December 2010 and 2012, respectively.

<http://www.trainingwa.wa.gov.au/apprenticentre/detcms/navigation/vet-practitioners/statistics/?oid=Category-id-318049> [accessed 10 April 2013]. While 10,353 apprentices commenced training in 2010, only 6,613 (or just over half) completed. In 2012, 9,611 commenced and only 4,612 (or less than half) completed

<sup>78</sup> King, 'Competition and Privatisation', p. 16.

<sup>79</sup> Wettenhall, 'Privatisation in Australia', p. 145

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- <sup>80</sup> McKenzie, M. (2005?) 'Is privatization good investment for Australia?' pp. 1-25, [www.ecosoc.org.au/files/File/TAS/ACE07/.../McKenzieM.pdf](http://www.ecosoc.org.au/files/File/TAS/ACE07/.../McKenzieM.pdf), [accessed 9 November 2012].
- <sup>81</sup> Anon (n.d.), Report: 'Privatisation in Australia', n.p. [unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/.../unpan005244.pdf](http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/.../unpan005244.pdf) [accessed 9 May 2013].
- <sup>82</sup> Phillip Kessey, cited in 'Off the Rails', *Australian Rail Tram and Bus Worker*, Winter 2009, p. 10.
- <sup>83</sup> Anon, (2009), 'Kiwi rail sell off a painful mistake', *Australian Rail Tram and Bus Worker*, Winter, p. 10.
- <sup>84</sup> Editorial, *Australian Rail Tram and Bus Worker*, Winter 2009, p. 4.
- <sup>85</sup> Anon (2009), 'Safety Overboard in Britain's messy rail experiment', *Australian Rail Tram and Bus Worker*, Winter, p. 10.
- <sup>86</sup> Davis, 'Unions face fight on new front'.
- <sup>87</sup> Union Affiliations 2006 to 2011 State Executive and State Conference', provided by the AMWU, WA Branch. According to a report by Beatrice Thomas and Andrew Probyn, *West Australian*, 6-7 April, 2013, 50, the AMWU's affiliated membership in WA is now 7,659 – a rise of almost 300 members from the figures provided by the Union.
- <sup>88</sup> Davis, 'Unions face fight on new front'. See also 'The RTBU in the 1990s', RTBU website: <http://www.rtbu-nat.asn.au/241.html> accessed 4 November 2013.
- <sup>89</sup> 'Union Affiliations 2006 to 2011 State Executive and State Conference'.
- <sup>90</sup> '30,000 manufacturing jobs going overseas and more to follow', *Workplace Info. News & Info for Australian HR/IR Professionals*, 21 April, 2006, <http://www.workplaceinfo.com.au/termination/redundancy/30-000-manufacturing-jobs-going-overseas-and-more-to-follow-says-aig> [accessed 16 May 2013].
- <sup>91</sup> 'Union rage as jobs go offshore' *The Age/National Times*, 1 March, 2013, <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/union-rage-as-jobs-go-offshore-20130228-2f98u.html> [accessed 16 May 2013].
- <sup>92</sup> Oliver, B., 'One Big Metal Union? The impact of Union Amalgamation in Western Australia' in Andrew Reeves and Andrew Dettmer, eds, *Organise Educate Control. The AMWU in Australia, 1852-2012*, Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, pp 58–70.
- <sup>93</sup> For example, in contrast to the figures quoted the beginning of this paper which suggested that WA trade union membership was only 14% of the workforce in August 2012, (See footnote x), another Table: cat no. 4102.0 Australian Social Trends, indicates that unionists represented 16.2 of the WA workforce in 2011. See: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4102.0> accessed 4 November 2013.
- <sup>94</sup> The author wishes to thanks the two anonymous peer reviewers whose constructive comments were helpful in recasting the paper.