

Australia

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Volume 50, 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt50pre06>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Patmore, G. (2002). Australia. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 50, 255–260.

Article abstract

Australian labour history remains a vigorous area of intellectual activity. Labour History, the journal of the Australian society, is celebrating its 40th anniversary and publishes a considerable number of articles. Other important sources of Australian labour history such as books, national conference proceedings, and branch publications highlight the links between academic labour historians and the broader community. One important contribution of Labour/Le Travail to Australian labour historiography was the Australian/Canadian comparative labour history project, which gave Australians the confidence to organise national conferences and develop the comparative dimension of labour history.

Australia

Greg Patmore

WHILE WE ARE CELEBRATING the 50th issue of *Labour/Le Travail* (*L/LT*), 2002 is an important year for Australia's *Labour History* (*LH*) for two reasons. First, it is 40 years since the first number of the journal was produced at the Australian National University in January 1961. The journal continues many of the traditions established by its early pioneers. As Bob Gollan, the first president of the Society, later noted: "The Labour History Society was a kind of popular front, politically and intellectually."¹ The Society and journal reflect a cross-section of views from the Australian labour movement and draw on a range of academic disciplines including history, political science, economic history, and industrial relations. Second, from the November 2002 issue subscribers to the journal will have online access to *LH* as well as continuing to receive a hard copy. The journal will be part of a stable of historical journals that form the History Co-operative, which is administered by the University of Illinois Press. These journals include the *American Historical Review* and *L/LT*.

Australian labour history remains a vigorous area of intellectual endeavour. Institutional labour histories remain important and reflect the continued significance of the labour movement in Australian society. While trade-union density has fallen from 40.5 per cent in 1990 to 24.7 per cent in 2000, the Labor Party holds government in all the six states and two territories. There have been recent significant histories of the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation, with its pioneering "green bans" in support of environmental issues, and the Communist Party of Australia. Autobiographical and biographical studies of Labor Party and trade union leaders also remain an important part of book publication in Australian labour history.² The union movement continues its willingness to fund books on

¹R. Gollan, "Australian Labour History," in G.S. Kealey and G. Patmore, eds., *Canadian and Australian Labour History: Towards a Comparative Perspective* (Brisbane 1990), 8.

²M. Burgman and V. Burgman, *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation* (Sydney 1998); D. Day, *Chifley* (Sydney

trade union histories.³ These studies focus on union institutional development and politics and fill important gaps in our knowledge. Generally, institutional Australian labour historians, however, remain reluctant to explore directly theoretical debates concerning labour institutions — government, structure, and growth. The issue of organizing, which is a major priority for an Australian trade union movement at the moment, is marginal to charting the chronological development of the institution. Sometimes these problems reflect the constraints associated with writing official histories. It has to be recognized that many are written in a context of limited time and financial resources, with a client institution expecting the historian to cover a major portion of Australian history. Many Australian labour historians have also absorbed the New Left/Social History critique — focussing on gender, race, the workplace, and the state. For example, Mary Anne Jebb's excellent study of the relationship between Aboriginal pastoral workers and their European employers in the Kimberley region of Western Australia combines Aboriginal history and labour history.⁴ Such scholars are willing to explore cultural history and have shown a growing interest in the study of locality or community.⁵

The Society, with the assistance of the National Council for the Centenary of Federation and Pluto Press, recently published an edited collection that examined the impact of federation on the Australian labour movement and working life. The book reflects the broad agenda of Australian labour history. There are essays on the labour movement, capital, and the state. Chapters also focus on gender, race, and labour culture. The essay on labour culture examines how the opponents to federation, which generally included the labour movement, used satire and cartoons to present their case. There are sections that contain essays on particular locations, including a rural town and an industrial/mining town, and people including a female factory inspector and C.C. Kingston, a radical liberal Premier of South Australia.⁶

One important role that *L/LT* played in the development of Australian labour history was the Australian-Canadian Comparative Labour History project. This

2001); M. Dodkin, *Brothers: Eight Leaders of the Labor Council of New South Wales* (Sydney 2001); S. Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney 1998); and T. McDonald and A. McDonald, *Intimate Union: Sharing A Revolutionary Life* (Sydney 1998).

³See for example M. Beasley, *The Missos: A History of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union* (Sydney 1996); M. Beasley, *Wharfies: The History of the Waterside Workers' Federation* (Sydney 1996); M. Hearn and H. Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of Australian Workers Union, 1886-1994* (Cambridge 1996); and J. Kellett, *A Fighting Union: A History of the Queensland Branch of the Transport Workers' Union, 1907-2000* (Brisbane 2001).

⁴M.A. Jebb, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: A History of White Bosses and Aboriginal Pastoral Workers* (Perth 2002).

⁵See thematic sections of *Labour History* issues 78 and 79.

⁶M. Hearn and G. Patmore, eds., *Working the Nation: Working Life and Federation, 1890-1914* (Sydney 2001).

brought together teams of Australian and Canadian labour historians and highlighted the value of comparative labour history. Teams looked at a range of issues including trade unions, native peoples, immigration, and culture. The project led to the special joint issue of *L/LT* and *LH* in November 1996. Labour historians in Australia and the United Kingdom are organising a project on the same model with a conference in Manchester scheduled for July 2003 and a follow-up proposed edited book. In the November 1998 issue of *LH* there were a series of articles that looked at the links between Australia and Ireland that arose from the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland. *Labour History* since 1998 has published articles on the history of labour movements in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Vietnam, and South Korea.

Labour History thus remains the main academic journal for the publication of labour history in Australia. Other Australian journals that publish labour history include *Australian Historical Studies*, based at the University of Melbourne, and *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, which like *LH*, is based in the discipline of Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney.

The May 2002 issue highlights the diversity of research that is published in *LH*. There are two articles examining the employment of Aboriginal labour in 19th-century Australia and one article exploring convict resistance in the 1840s. Judith Smart details the political mobilization of youth by the Labor Party in Victoria in the late 1920s. Huntley Wright considers the impact of the Japanese invasion of the Australian territory of Papua New Guinea on Australian Labor Party colonial policy. Andrew Moore and John McLaren contemplate the politics of Cold War Australia. In 1952 there was major controversy over the funding of left-wing writers from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Moore highlights the role of M.H. Ellis, anti-communist journalist and historian, who conducted a political campaign against writers such as Marjorie Barnard and James Normington Rawling. John McLaren examines the 1959 Australian and New Zealand International Congress for Peace and Disarmament, held in Melbourne, which was the first major event of the Left after the splits in the Labor Party and the Communist Party in the 1950s. There is also a symposium based on a paper by Elizabeth Faeu, which examines developments in US labour historiography and includes commentaries by four Australian labour historians.

A major development in recent years has been the inclusion of thematic sections in the journal on a regular basis. These thematic sections consist of six to eight refereed articles with an overview article and more recently a postscript. There was a thematic section on "Occupational Health and Safety" in the November 1997 issue, "Australian Labour Intellectuals" in the November 1999 issue, "Labour History and Local History" in the May 2000 issue, "Labour History and Culture" in November 2000, and "Voluntary Labour" in the November 2001 issue. We are currently preparing a thematic section on The "Labour Movement Mobilising and Organising" in the November 2002 issue. The idea for the forthcoming thematic came from a senior officer of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Australia's

peak national union council. It will include an introduction by Greg Combet, the Secretary of the ACTU, and seven contributions from Australia and the US. The role of the ACTU in the thematic section highlights the continued interest of the Australian labour movement in labour history and the links between the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and the labour movement. There will be a thematic section on Labour Heritage in November 2003 and there is a proposal before the editorial board for a thematic section on labour biography for November 2004.

Labour History has encouraged thematic sections to consolidate innovative research, promote debate and encourage further contributions on particular themes. Thematic sections promote co-operation and team research among labour historians. The "Labour Movement and Organising" thematic section highlights where this approach has moved. There was a call for papers through the journal and other networks. The call attracted a wide variety of scholars particularly early career researchers. A symposium was held for contributors in November to help them develop their papers before submission to referees. Of the ten papers submitted to the project five have made it through the refereeing process.

The journal continues to attract a wide range of unsolicited manuscripts. While there is a high rejection rate, the journal encourages a large percentage of the authors of rejected contributions to revise their manuscripts and submit them for another round of refereeing. The journal also tries to ensure the fairest refereeing system possible by bringing in an arbitrator when there is a strong disagreement among referees.

What are the issues that Australian labour historians pursue that are not part of thematic sections within the journal? For the period 1997-2001 the trend away from the traditional fare of *LH*, which is labour leaders, labour parties, labour ideologies, unions, strikes and industrial disputes, has continued. While in the 1960s, 79 per cent of all articles focussed on this, by the 1980s only 39 per cent of articles covered these issues. For the period under review the figure had slumped to seventeen per cent. Similarly social history articles not relating to work that deal with issues such as health, death, and marriage have declined from eight per cent to three per cent since the 1980s. Articles on women have remained virtually unchanged since the 1980s — fourteen per cent. Articles on Aboriginal history have increased from two to five per cent since the 1980s. Similarly articles on racism have increased from five to eight per cent since the 1980s.⁷ The growth in articles on Aboriginal history and racism reflect the impact of issues such as Reconciliation with native peoples in Australia and concerns about the attacks on multiculturalism by groups such as One Nation. There has been a growing interest in recent years in occupational health and safety (six per cent), volunteer labour (three per cent) and local la-

⁷S. Garton, "What Have We Done? Labour History, Social History, Cultural History," in T. Irving, ed., *Challenges to Labour History* (Sydney 1994).

bour history (six per cent). These categorisations provide useful insights into labour organisation but are very loose. Local labour history provides insights into the organisation of workers into trade unions and political parties. As David Montgomery has noted for the US, “more often than not the climax of community histories has been the mobilization of workers for struggle, usually through unions.”⁸

There is virtually no article backlog for *LH*. One reason for this is the growth in the size of the journal. The May 1991 issue of the journal consisted of 166 pages and 6 articles. The May 2001 issue consisted of 266 pages and 10 articles. The May 2001 issue also contained a variety of other contributions such as a historical debate, biographical notes, and book reviews. The other reason is the high rejection rate. This may highlight a greater need for experienced writers in the field of labour history to encourage younger scholars. It may also be a reflection of the greater emphasis in Australian universities to “publish or perish” to meet increasingly onerous performance standards, which means that work is sometimes submitted prematurely.

There are other outlets for publication associated with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. One is a legacy of our involvement with *L/LT*. The successful Australian-Canadian Labour History Conference in Sydney in 1988, which was the first co-operative venture between the Canadian Committee on Labour History and the Australian Society for Study of Labour History, set a precedent for the Australian Society to hold biennial conferences. The first of these was in Melbourne in 1991 and more recently Canberra in April 2001. The next conference will be in Brisbane in September 2003. The branch of the Society in the particular locality runs the conferences with logistical and financial support provided by the federal society.

The conference organisers have recently begun to publish the papers. To meet conference funding requirements and federal government research performance criteria for academics, a substantial proportion of conference papers are refereed and included in a publication. The publication produced from the Wollongong Conference in October 1999 contained 55 papers and abstracts. While there has been a decline in traditional fare such as trade unions and labour parties in the pages of *LH*, almost half of conference papers related to these issues. The number of papers relating to women (eleven per cent), and aboriginal history (two per cent) was lower than comparable rates for *LH*, while the papers on racism (nine per cent) were roughly equivalent. The only other significant area at the conference was local labour history (five per cent).⁹

Similar trends can be seen at the Canberra conference held at the Australian National University in April last year, where a phenomenal 97 papers were pre-

⁸D. Montgomery, “The Limits of Union-Centred History: Responses to Howard Kimeldorf,” *Labour History*, 32 (1991), 112.

⁹R. Hood and R. Markey, eds., *Labour & Community: Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History* (Wollongong 1999).

sented. Once again, almost half the papers (48 per cent) related to traditional issues such as the Labor Party, with the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party celebrating its centenary, the Communist Party, and trade unions. There were papers relating to women (nine per cent), aboriginal history (two per cent), and racism (eight per cent). The only other significant area was a range of papers on the role of the state (eight per cent) dealing with issues such as compulsory arbitration.¹⁰

Why is there a greater interest in the traditional fare of Australian labour history at the Society conferences rather than *LH*? As noted before the branches of the Society organize the conferences. The branches tend to be run by non-academics and have close links to local labour movement and labour activists. While the journal attracts professional academics seeking the kudos of a refereed article in a university based publication, the conferences have a wider range of participants drawn from academics and non-academics. Unions and community groups provide sponsorship further broadening the base of the conferences. The conferences strengthen the study of labour history in Australia by ensuring a wider audience beyond the university.

Several branches produce their own publications that also broaden the appeal of labour history. In 1982 there was only one branch in Melbourne and now there are seven. Their memberships vary from between 20 and 160. The Sydney branch publication, *Hummer*, particularly focuses on articles on labour activists, sometimes autobiographical. Authors include secondary school teachers such Rowan Cahill and Tony Laffan. Laffan, for example, has done pioneering work in the Hunter Valley on the impact of Christian socialists and friendly societies on the mainstream labour movement.¹¹ Other branches with regular publications are Illawarra, Melbourne, and Perth. The branches also run their own conferences bringing together academics and activists.

Overall there has been a growth in the level of labour history publications in Australia through *LH*, books, conference proceedings, and branch publications. While there are differences between the focus of *LH* and the other publication vehicles, all enrich labour history in Australia and provide it with a broader appeal beyond the universities. *Labour/Le Travail* has contributed to this positive climate through collaboration with *LH* in the successful Australian-Canadian Comparative Labour History project, which gave us the confidence to organise national conferences and develop the comparative dimension of Australian labour historiography.

¹⁰P. Griffiths and R. Webb, eds., *Work, Organisation, Struggle: Papers from the Seventh National Labour History Conference held at the Australian National University, Canberra, April 19-21, 2001* (Canberra 2001).

¹¹T. Laffan, "Christian Socialism in Newcastle, 1890-1916," *Hummer*, 3 (2001), 16-23.