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**INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE NEW SOUTH  
WALES BUILDING INDUSTRY 1850 – 1891:  
CONFLICT, CO-OPERATION & RADICALISM.**

Declaration: I hereby declare this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or produced by another party in fulfilment, partial or otherwise, of any other degree or diploma at another university or institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text,

## **SYNOPSIS**

Australian government policy today aims to ‘deregulate’ industrial relations. A fractured system has ensued where uncontrolled market forces disrupt both business and unions. The building industry is particularly affected by uncertainty and industrial barbarism. Precisely one hundred years ago government policy was to create order, becoming directly involved in industrial regulation. This thesis aims to understand how building unions maintained their rates and conditions in the pre-arbitration era when there were no legislative minimums, and it seeks to place their labour relations within a political and ideological context.

The thesis criticises historical scholarship surrounding artisan unionism in Britain and Australia, in particular the role of building tradesmen. Positive relations between employers and employed in the industry are often described in pejorative terms with tradesmen labelled ‘aristocrats of labour’ – apolitical, middle class and lacking class-awareness. The thesis argues this view does not adequately describe the qualities of building operatives, or place their motives within a ‘deregulated’ industrial context.

To demonstrate nineteenth century building industry unionism in NSW had a broader nature, the thesis looks at British trade union radicalism. It examines both changes in structure and ideology caused by growing industrialisation and competitive organisation affecting building tradesmen known as general contracting, as well as continuity and differences in ideas of social change and progress. The thesis connects the ideology of British and colonial building unions in this regard.

It then turns to the lives, work and society of nineteenth century building workers in Sydney and the make-up of their organisations. The thesis seeks to understand the political and ideological aspects of Australian building unionism and the effects of general contracting and competition. Central to the discussion is the influence of the Co-operative movement, and the significance of the struggle for the eight-hour day to the labour movement. Both were progressive responses to unfettered market forces on the trade. It argues that the challenges faced by operatives in maintaining conditions led them to develop politically, creating ‘modern’ class representation and ideology.

The thesis ends with a chapter that examines the evidence before the 1891 NSW Royal Commission into Strikes showing the building industry to be characterised by conflict, co-operation, and radicalism. Unionists expressed progressive ideology and industrial militancy but maintained positive relationships with certain employers for whom they provided market security. The trade-off for efforts in this respect was recognition that union rules would be the primary form of industrial regulation. Their system, however, was ultimately unsustainable because of competitive pressures, and industrial militancy against builders outside the system flourished.

In conclusion, the thesis suggests that nineteenth century building workers improved and maintained industrial standards by militant unionism, and yet, at the same time, by forming co-operative relations with employers. In dealing with the corrosive effect of market deregulation that undermined control over their trade, operatives also built progressive organisations which forged working class unity and developed politically advanced ideologies of social change. Their ideas and practices were at times unsuccessful or contradictory, but building unionists were *not* inward-looking ‘labour aristocrats’.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Bradon Ellem for his optimism and encouragement throughout the project, and hope he may yet be *fully* convinced as to its argument. Thanks are due to Professor Greg Patmore who allowed me the opportunity to conduct the research, and who at all times has been generous and open. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Terry Irving who remarked upon the closeness in time between Eureka and the eight-hour campaign, and thank Dr John Shields of Sydney University who advised me to read more widely those works providing an alternative and positive view of pre-industrial trade unionism. Professor Ray Markey's suggestion to look closely at E.P. Thompson's 'Freeborn Englishman', was of enormous help in providing a radical context to early building unionists. My Aunt, Kathleen Collins, was of invaluable assistance in proof reading and removing or amending most modern grammatical atrocities; those remaining are due to my stubbornness or fatigue. I'd like also to apologise to my wife Sabine for allowing our home to fall apart while writing this thesis, a matter she accepted without much complaint and I thank her for her support.

I would also like to acknowledge the many characters in the building industry who encouraged and informed this work: Brian Seidler of the Master Builders Association whose interest in the project proves its basic tenet, and those 'shonky' builders - inside and outside the MBA - against whom I have often stood toe to toe, and who demonstrate that there is no lesson like a practical one. Andrew Ferguson, State Secretary of the CFMEU Building Division, was good enough to allow me time off work to complete the study. Russell and Donna Cunningham kindly sorted out computer problems, and Paul True, CFMEU Education Officer, was also very obliging. I trust not to have wandered far from his thoughtful suggestions.

Thesis drafts have enjoyed useful criticism, some pointed to the study's innate (though unintended) conservatism, others thought I erred too much towards giving nineteenth century building workers a radical perspective. Perhaps this history, in hoping to ennoble its subjects, is too accommodating of their foibles and makes too much of their actions. But, in a way, it is a history of human relations in an industrial, political and economic context more than it is a political history that seeks to stamp out a position in the well contested field of historical analysis. It is merely an acknowledgment of building unionists, trades and labour, now and in the past, working so hard to create a better and fairer world.

I hope this history is a useful contribution to their memory.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASC&J	Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
Bricklayers	Minutes of the Operative Bricklayers Society
Bricklayers NoM	Operative Bricklayers Society notice of motion book
Bricklayer Cottee	Operative Bricklayers Committee book
ITUC	Intercolonial Trade Union Congress
LWMA	London Working Men's Association
MBA	Master Builders Association, and minutes
Masons Ldg	Minute book of the Operative Stonemasons Society Sydney Lodge
Masons Cottee	Minute book of the Operative Stonemasons Standing Committees and after July 1865 the Central Committee
TLC	Sydney Trades and Labour Council and minute book
OBU	Operative Builders Union
Prog.	Minutes of the Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners
SHXL	Short-Hour Extension League
STA	Short Time Association
STC	Short Time Committee
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald

## INTRODUCTION

*'I also noted in my Report of the Hearings the disproportionate number of persons from Britain or Ireland who are in the inner circle of the New South Wales Branch...(of the Building Workers Industrial Union)...There is no doubt the ones I saw were highly militant individuals, who were proud of their militancy. Some of them were influential upon sites which were investigated, and their activities on those sites can only be described as deplorable. I cannot close my eyes to the fact that there is a strong class warfare element in British trade unionism which seems amply represented in the ranks of the New South Wales Branch of the BWIU.*

*...the strong Soviet – inspired communist leadership of the union over many years, and its consequent tradition, is undoubtedly a powerful continuing influence...*

*...there appears to be two BWIUs. The first are the officers of the Federal Office who speak at public forums, promote workplace reform and award restructuring, commit the union to no extra claims, to abolition of bodgy safety disputes and claims for lost time, and solemnly negotiate dispute settling procedures. The second simply continues to wage 19<sup>th</sup> century class warfare on building sites.'*<sup>1</sup>

### **The Purpose of this work**

I have begun my nineteenth century history with quotes from the 1991 Gyles Royal Commission into the New South Wales building industry, not because this is a comparative work, but because these sentiments sum up constant themes in the industry with which the study will deal: public perceptions of union organisation and militancy, the political philosophy of union leadership and the British and European traditions of class-based radicalism. Gyles' Commission grappled with the problem of union ideology, how both militancy and the observance of industrial rules exist together, and how building industry unionism in particular is founded on a radical past.

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<sup>1</sup>Final report of the Gyles Royal Commission into the NSW Building Industry 1991pp.22, 23. The BWIU was at that time the major building union in NSW. It was an amalgamation of most of the original trade and labour societies in the construction industry, primarily those examined in this study: The Operative Stonemasons, Operative Bricklayers, and the Progressive and Amalgamated Societies of Carpenters and Joiners. The BWIU has been superseded by a further merger of construction and related unions, forming part of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The building industry, by custom operating on a competitive subcontract basis, mostly in small teams, and always subject to irregularity of work, has been characterised by a high level of industrial disorder and disputation. This circumstance has been exacerbated in recent times with Australian government policy striving to deregulate industrial relations completely.

Where there once existed a fairly simple system of Federal and State mirror awards stipulating minimum rates and conditions, we now have operating on the same building sites in New South Wales the following: State and Federal construction awards that differ in many respects, State 'union' Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBA's), State site specific awards, Federal 'union' EBA's, Federal 'non-union' EBA's, and Australian Workplace Agreements. On certain projects, workers engaged under one arrangement may be paid two or three hundred dollars per week less than workers alongside them engaged under another, though they may perform the same job. More recent controversial laws effectively eliminate common rule awards and any form of collective endeavour altogether, and government agencies in the building industry like the Taskforce or the Australian Building and Construction Commission severely undermine trade union regulation. An industrial barbarism has ensued, and, as systems of collective bargaining break down, workers and employers are left to find their own way. Both unions and employer associations have lost membership and their authority.

Consequently the relationship between builders, contractors, the union, and its membership has changed in many surprising ways. Building unions are now often contacted by employers, rather than employees, urging intervention on their behalf, to 'encourage' builders or clients to engage them. They often demand the union 'deal with' a site if their tenders are rejected as too costly because they must pay higher wages due to their workers being financial union members. These employers insist that unions enforce a level playing field, round up every competitor they say undercuts them by dodging industrial standards. While a propensity to work with 'friendly' employers, and building co-operative relationships with them was certainly a feature of industrial relations culture during the award era, the pressure to find 'common cause' with *bona fide* employers has increased greatly. Unions previously acting to enforce legislative rather than agreed rates and entitlements, must now *seek*

agreement with compliant builders and contractors, and then enforce these standards throughout the industry and against a hostile non-union sector.

In a sense, Australian industrial relations has arrived back at its nineteenth century beginnings, and it is germane to consider how union officials operated before the 1890's, at a time when legislative wage minimums did not exist, and when *laissez faire* ideology dominated economic orthodoxy. The study of industrial regulation would perhaps not be as remarkable in other societies where industry has never been so highly controlled as in Australia. But the change occurring now invites a new approach to the study of labour history, not merely to document the form of regulation in the nineteenth century building industry (as does Alice Coolican<sup>2</sup>), but to examine its political context and implications.

The question central to this thesis is how nineteenth century workers managed to 'civilise' industry, and maintain standard pay rates and conditions in a deregulated industrial relations system. For example, how did building workers in the 1850s achieve and then keep the eight-hour day when economic forces would surely have undermined job control and organisation? T.A. Coghlan in his 1918 work *Labour and Industry in Australia* has an intriguing reference to a building industry board of conciliation established by unions and employers in NSW around 1882 which 'did excellent work in warding off strikes, a result due as much as anything to the good will which the members had for one another.'<sup>3</sup> If this is a true picture of sentiment in the late nineteenth century, then the development of common-rule awards, and conciliation and arbitration structures was perhaps as much a product of employer wishes as that of unions. Amid conflict and strikes, economic cycles of boom and bust, unemployment and terrible conditions of the late nineteenth century, there can be no doubt that both masters and men had a common desire to harmonise the industry. What could be so different today? If such consensus did exist, however, what does it say of the character - the political beliefs - of nineteenth century building tradesmen; what of the tradition of class antagonism referred to by Gyles? This thesis sets out to answer these questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Coolican, A.V. *A History of Industrial Relations in the Building Trades, 1870-1814*. Doctoral Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Coghlan, TA *Labour and Industry in Australia Vol. IV* Oxford 1918 Macmillan 1969 pp. 2098-99.

## **A Note on Political and Ideological Terms**

The aim of the thesis is not to focus on the ideas of scholars and their debate over terms and meaning. Thus reliance on secondary sources and later histories are avoided where possible. It chooses instead to deal with the ideas of the operative builders, and as best as possible rely on their own words to tell their story, and to show how their ideology - loose and contradictory as it is – formed as a direct response to capitalism.

Accordingly, if, as in 1871, Carpenters called for a newspaper to represent the working classes, or in other cases referred to the working classes, this is accepted on face value as an example of class awareness and a desire to challenge the power structures in society. Where we see building unionists frequently donating funds to worker organisations outside their trade, or protesting alongside them, the thesis views this as further evidence of class consciousness. When, from the 1850s to the 1890s, the operative builders railed against the evils of competition and spoke passionately in favour of co-operative forms of production, it is taken as a rejection of capitalist ideology. When in 1874 Bricklayers agree to a levy of one penny per member for the representation of the working classes in parliament, the resolution is held as proof of their political maturity. And when Stonemasons or Carpenters use the term ‘progress’ and ‘advance’, then the thesis accepts that they saw society in evolution and believed their role was to ensure that it developed in the interests of working people.

Likewise, the thesis will not attempt to categorise or over analyse building operatives’ thinking, or judge where their beliefs sat in the spectrum of socially progressive ideology. It will merely try to show that social, political and economic debate was alive among nineteenth century operative builders, and notwithstanding the fact they sometimes arrived at different conclusions, and despite them sometimes drawing upon different working class traditions, it was through the efforts of these tradesmen, in concert with fellow unionists, that the Australian labour movement was formed.

## **The Area and Structure of the Study**

The structure of this thesis is as follows. The first chapter deals with British and Australian historical literature of nineteenth century labour relations. This historiography reveals a traditional theme which, rather than applauding how artisan unionists battled to ensure fellow members were protected against the exploitation of a *laissez faire* economy, instead almost universally interprets their actions as insular, apolitical and imbued with middle class values. Australian historiography, moreover, with rare exceptions, barely considers the history of early urban artisan unionism as worthy of detailed analysis and confines itself to the discussion of labour history from, and immediately before, the 1890s.

Disappointed with the framework of much of this literature which has arguably led to a general disengagement with the history of artisan unionism in Australia between the 1850s and the 1890s, chapter three looks at the tradition of British radical politics that informed early Australian building tradesmen. It follows a rich vein of progressive working class activism that in certain respects contradicts many conclusions made in the historical literature.

The extent to which this character of radical unionism was transferred to the Australian colonies is the subject of chapter four. In this chapter the working lives of building operatives in Sydney are discussed, as well as the structure of their trade societies. It reveals that nineteenth century building unions had developed a broad working class agenda and formed working class institutions. In short, the overwhelming conclusion is that radical British working class politics and union culture had been carried to Australia, and remained linked to it through ongoing literature, immigration, and communication.

Chapter five returns to the problem of how unions operated in deregulated environment by examining the struggle for the eight-hour day. It explains that the short hours movement was a measure to regulate industry, but it was more than this. It argues that the eight-hour day was a radical response to capitalism and had a social and political nature. Shorter working hours had deep roots in British working class ideology. Yet although this study demonstrates how the eight-hour day was accepted

by many employers as a standard of industry, and became accepted by the community as a standard of civilisation, it also shows that the eight-hour concession was never fully achieved because of the corrosive effect of market forces. It was the eight-hour struggle throughout the decades which transformed class politics in Australia. It ignited a passion for broad union organisation, and it later ignited a passion for parliamentary activity.

The final chapter examines industrial relations in the building industry in the late 1880s, the period immediately before the States' direct involvement in the regulation of labour – the arbitration system currently being bulldozed. This chapter focuses exclusively on evidence given by building industry tradesmen to the 1891 Royal Commission into Strikes and finds, not unexpectedly, an industrial relations system characterised by both conflict and very high levels of co-operation between workers and employers. Moreover, it finds that building unionists expressed a variety of progressive ideas, and at times an extreme radical class consciousness.

The study is narrowed to the foundation and structural trades in the building industry, concentrating on three unions, the Operative Bricklayers, Stonemasons, and Society of Progressive Carpenters and Joiners. Reference is also made to the United Labourers and Sydney Trades and Labour Council. The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners is examined to a lesser extent than unions more indigenous to New South Wales because of its late arrival to the colony from the United Kingdom and lack of primary sources.

## **The Conclusions**

Ultimately, conflict, co-operation and radicalism sat together as a response to the competitive form of productive organisation brought on by the capitalist revolution which took job control away from operative builders as was traditionally exercised through trade organisations, and exposed both masters and men to the vagaries of market forces. Capitalism broke down tradesmen's status and their work community. It appropriated their wealth and gave it to the idle. Capitalism disenfranchised workers and fed into an already radical working class tradition for rights, freedom and equality. Unionists on one hand expressed class-consciousness, progressive activism,

and industrial militancy. On the other they embraced very positive relationships with certain builders, resting on principles of respect and industrial harmony. It is this duality of purpose, the tension between 'civilising' industry and changing society in a profound way that forms the dynamic of both modern and nineteenth century industrial relations.

## CHAPTER TWO, LITERATURE REVIEW

*'If we consider only [Trade Unionism's] fundamental object – the deliberate regulation of the conditions of employment in such a way as to ward off from the manual-working producers the evil effects of industrial competition – there is clearly no incompatibility between this and any kind of government. Regulations of this type have existed, as a matter of fact, under emperors and presidents, aristocracies and democracies. The spread of the Industrial Revolution and the enormous development of international trade have everywhere brought the evils of unregulated competition into sensational prominence.'*<sup>4</sup>

In the face of aggressive global markets and deregulated industrial relations systems, this message from Beatrice and Sidney Webb's *Industrial Democracy*, has as much relevance today as a century ago. They argued that unions had a right to exist, to protect their members, to contribute to national economies, and for the regulation of wages.<sup>5</sup>

This study does not, however, presume that trade unionism now or in the nineteenth century is concerned only with the entrenchment of rules across a particular trade or industry. This history of the building industry in the eighteenth hundreds shows that unionism means much more. It was a social movement with a radical character. Nevertheless it shows trade union politics, action, and culture, whether progressive or reactive, has at its core the necessary problem of dealing with the deleterious effects of disruptive and destructive market forces of an unregulated capitalist economy.

What follows are outlines of the works of influential writers who have shaped understanding of trade union politics and history. Beginning with the Webbs and the early Marxists, we move to ideas of classic Marxian historians, and then review their impact on the scholarship of the Australian labour movement. Finally, the ideas of more recent labour historians are covered, though not extensively.

For some, the story of nineteenth century craft unionism has been one of great disappointment to progressive working class politics. To others, early union activists

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<sup>4</sup> Webb, S. & B. *Industrial Democracy* 1897, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1911 Longmans, Green and Co. London p807.

<sup>5</sup> In fact they see trade unionism meaning no more than 'the enforcement of common rules on a whole trade.' *Ibid* xxxi.

are heroes, subjugating and civilising capitalism. Almost always, however, even when put in a generally positive context, artisans of the nineteenth century, most of all union leadership, are regarded as the ‘Aristocrats of Labour’. They are depicted as insular, only resisting the ill effects of unfettered market forces upon their own trade, rather than its effects on the working class as a whole.

The above generality, however, needs explanation. The purpose of this study, as stated, is to understand the dynamics of industrial relations in the nineteenth century building industry, to show how conflict, co-operation with employers, and radical ideas co-existed. A major challenge therefore is to overcome the commonly held view that these workers were insular and elitist - ‘aristocrats of labour’ whose ambitions were merely to protect their trade and standing in society. The following passages are placed as representative of the way in which the ideas such as labour aristocracy have been constructed and are normally used in labour history scholarship.

This study argues that this common perception of artisan unionism in Australia is flawed. It is certainly true that trade union leaders fought hard and by all means to ensure the survival of their particular Societies and to maintain standards of living for their members, but this is not necessarily evidence of them lacking class-consciousness or of them being conservative. Rather, the realities of nineteenth century industry constrained union power, often allowing them the means to deal only with problems within their own trades. In fact, this thesis will show that the struggle that individual unions faced in controlling growing market forces was the impetus for them to find strength in class unity. The neglect in considering the physical, logistical and intellectual difficulties confronting union organisation in the nineteenth century has let history disregard the efforts of unionists such as those who led workers in the early building trades.

## **Foundations: the Webbs, Engels and Lenin**

### **Beatrice and Sidney Webb**

The Webbs are universally referred to in the study of the labour movement in Britain and Australia, and their primary work, *Industrial Democracy*, created the foundation

for twentieth century industrial relations scholarship.<sup>6</sup> In this work trade unionism is not so much motivated by just cause; it is based on self-interest like any other enterprise. Further, trade unions are as necessary to the functioning of a sound modern industrial democracy as any other grouping.

Their overall thesis is that *laissez faire* capitalism of the Industrial Revolution entirely altered the way workers organised and controlled their industries. Traditional methods of industrial regulation were outmoded, ineffectual, or merely overturned at the beginning of the eighteenth century through legislative measures like the repeal of ancient Elizabethan Acts governing apprenticeships.<sup>7</sup> In the tumult of industrial growth and market expansion, workers sought to enforce their rights in accordance with tried and true ways, making appeals to the courts and the houses of Parliament, and showing their frustrations through street demonstrations. But with the 'adoption, by Parliament and the law courts of the doctrine of *laissez faire* all this machinery fell into abeyance.'<sup>8</sup> In this void of socially and legally recognised methods of industrial regulation, unions developed radical, militant, and covert means to rein in the competitive forces disrupting established working conditions and rates of pay.

Through the early eighteenth century, workers with their 'sullen strikes' and 'veiled violence', built the machinery to allow collective bargaining. 'Debarred alike from overt Collective Bargaining and from Legal Enactment, the Trade Unions of the first quarter of the century fell back on the Method of Mutual Insurance, largely tempered by the use of secret coercion.', they write<sup>9</sup> In *Industrial Democracy*, the Webbs, exploring methods unions used to regulate industry conclude, '[i]n a certain sense it would not be difficult to regard all the activities of Trade Unionism as forms of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*. Particular concern is raised as to the unjust laws that hamper and penalise organised labour, and very high regard is given to antipodean systems of conciliation and arbitration, especially those prevailing in Victoria and New Zealand. See the introduction to the 1902 edition pxxxvi ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p452ff

<sup>8</sup> In this respect they write: 'We see Trade Unions forming committees to put the law in force; maintaining solicitors to fight their cases in the Law courts; expending large sums in preparing tables of rates, to be enforced by the magistrates; marshalling evidence before Quarter Sessions in support of these lists; appearing by council at the bar of the House of Commons and before the House of Lords committees in quest of new legislation, or in opposition to bills of the employers; and finally organising all the machinery of political agitation, with its showers of petitions, imposing demonstrations in the streets, parliamentary lobbying, and occasionally, where the members happened, as freemen, to possess the franchise, the swaying of elections.' *Ibid* p248.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p 249.

Mutual Insurance.’<sup>10</sup> Further they believe ‘Mutual Insurance must be regarded, not as the end or object, but as one of the Methods of Trade Unionism.’ To the Webbs, union benefits should not be taken to be issues of altruism as such, for their use is far more practical. They note examples where craft unions as diverse as the flint glass makers, Woolcombers, and Sheffield Spring Knife Grinders Protective Society who may claim that unemployment relief is in fact to ‘keep up the price’, or avoid having to comply with ‘the unreasonable demands of our employers’, or so they would not have to seek parish relief ‘or take situations on terms injurious to the trade’<sup>11</sup>:

As understood and administered by all Trade Unions, the Out of Work benefit is not valued exclusively, or even mainly, for its protection of the individuals against casualties. In the mind of the thoughtful or experienced Trade Unionist its most important function is to protect the Standard Rate of wages and other normal conditions of employment from being ‘eaten away’, in bad times, by the competition of members driven by necessity to accept the employer’s terms.<sup>12</sup>

Union rule making, restrictive practices, experiments with arbitration and appeals to parliamentary and legislative forces to impose common rule, are all seen by the Webbs as the expression of a practical desire to limit excesses of market fluctuation and of individualism implicit in a *laissez faire* economy. Indeed the discussion of union rules, campaigns to entrench industry standards - hours, rates or conditions - and the development of parliamentary activity, form the basis of our study of the building trades in nineteenth century.

However, by looking at union motivation only at this level, something is lost. It is the frustration and failure of maintaining common rules, the shortcomings of rule making, limitations in the democratic processes and frequent poverty and powerlessness that led the working class to radicalism. This radicalism was not content merely to regulate industry, but aimed to remove the base on which *laissez faire* rested. This thesis will show that union activists hoped somehow, or in some way, to build a society beyond destructive competition. Building workers, required to follow the job, were perhaps prone more than most, to the casualisation and fracturing of their worksites, and were in the forefront of this progressive movement.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*. This argument and examples are found p162ff.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* p165.

The Webbs were Fabian Socialists and wrote with a broad political agenda and an objective to change society in a slow and measured way. They regarded British unionism after 1870 to have developed in a positive way, from the excitable groups that organised to campaign and strike, to permanent level-headed bureaucracies; and with rank and file strike leaders turning into professional ‘brain working’ union leaders.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, they regard a trade union leader of the latter nineteenth century like any other businessman of the era. A ‘complete intellectual acceptance of the laws of Supply and Demand’, they say, has affected trade unionism as it has commercial life:

it throws up, as leaders, much the same type of character, in the one case as the other. Those who know the Trade Union world will have no difficulty in recognising, in certain of its sections, both in corporate policy and in the characters of individual leaders, the same self-complacency at their own success in the fight, and the same contempt for those who have failed; above all the same conception of the social order, based on the axiom that ‘to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.’ To the idealist who sees in Trade Unionism a great class upheaval of the oppressed against the oppressors, it comes as a shock to recognise, in the trade union official of this type...merely another embodiment of the ‘spirit of the bagman.’<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the Webbs do acknowledge broad ramifications of the short-hour claim, producing ‘something like communistic feeling among British workmen’:

The aristocratic shipwright, pattern maker, or cotton spinner, who would resent the idea that the unskilled labourer or the woman worker had any moral claim to as high a Standard Rate as himself, readily accepts, when it comes to a question of hours the doctrine of complete equality.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For example they write: ‘Those who believe that pure democracy implies the direct decision, by the mass of the people, from every question as it arises will find this ideal realised without check or limit in the history of the larger Trade Unions between 1834 and 1870.’ But the Webbs saw virtue in checks and limits on unions prone to the influence of ‘unnecessary distractions’. They say: ‘The disadvantages of a free resort to the Referendum soon became obvious to thoughtful Trade Unionists. It stands to the credit of the majority of the members that wild and absurd propositions were almost uniformly rejected’. *Ibid* pp 22 & 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p 581, 586ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p.352.

But the Webb's explanation for this, again, is not totally altruism. It 'is simple' they write: the same economic influence makes it impossible for the different classes of worker to work different hours.

We see, then, that with this limited appreciation of the social function of trade unions arising from industrialisation, the Webbs regard nineteenth century trade unionists mainly as economic actors, grouping for their own protection and mutual self-interest. By way of contrast, this study will attempt to give flesh to the early Australian trade unions, showing that they were more than this. Trade unionists had politics and ideals and as they began to understand the remorseless conflict implicit in capitalism, they argued for a change to society at the very basis of its culture.

### **Frederick Engels**

Frederick Engels, more critical than the Webbs, when looking at the plight of the oppressed since the 1840's, shook his head at the progress that the bourgeoisie made in the 'art of hiding the distress of the working class.'<sup>16</sup> And among those sapping strength from the radical British working class that he and Marx once regarded as holding so much revolutionary potential, was the aspiring labour aristocracy of craft unionists. The idea that tradesmen combined to serve foremost their own particular interests, rather than of the working class generally, predated Engels.<sup>17</sup> But it is the Marxian endorsement of the idea of craft elitism that appears to have set the paradigm from which much progressive labour historiography stems.

In his 1892 preface to *The Conditions of the Working class in England*, Engels describes how society had changed from the time of his early observations in 1844 to the 1890s. Engels writes that those early forms of capitalism which rested on the

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<sup>16</sup> Engels, F. 1892 Preface to English translation of *The Condition of the Working class in England 1844*. From *Marx & Engels Selected works* vol 2 Foreign Languages Publishing House Moscow 1949.

<sup>17</sup> For example the radical William Thompson, in 1827, lamented the '*aristocracy of trades*' (italics his) 'possessing no superior utility, skill, or good disposition, with no more pretensions to superior merit than any other aristocracies, but frequently partaking of the vices of all aristocracies, full of unsocial antipathies to those less remunerated than themselves, and spending in short-lived gratifications productive of preponderant evil, that superior, but still pitiful, remuneration out of the products of their labour, which the chance of circumstances enables them to procure above the mass of their brethren.' Quoted GDH. Cole & AW Filson *British Working Class Movements: Selected Documents 1789-1875* Macmillan 1965 London, p 202.

'petty thefts of the workpeople' by minor industrialists had been replaced by major industry which created a much more vast form of exploitation. The problem was now '*in the capitalistic system itself.*'<sup>18</sup> British capitalists were happy to adopt all sorts of industrial and social regulation sought by the radical working class movement such as anti-truck laws and the ten-hour legislation, because to do so assisted them in wiping out their smaller rivals. He writes:

The largest manufacturers, former leaders of the war against the working class, were now the foremost to preach peace and harmony...The fact is that all these concessions to justice and philanthropy were nothing else but means to accelerate the concentration of capital in the hands of the few... and to crush all the quicker and all the safer their smaller competitors, who could not make both ends meet without such prerequisites.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the accommodation by capital of the progressive ideals of working class radicals, Engels remarks that the old Trade Union movement had become tame, and citing building workers in particular notes:

That their condition has remarkably improved since 1848 there can be no doubt, and the best proof of this is in the fact that for more than fifteen years not only have their employers been with them, but they with their employers, upon exceedingly good terms. *They form an aristocracy among the working class*; they have succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final. They are the model working-men...and they are very nice people indeed nowadays to deal with, for any capitalist in particular and for the whole capitalist class in general.<sup>20</sup>

As counterpoint to this view of craft unions is Engels' hope in the new unions. In a passage encapsulating the common model for scholarship thereafter Engels poses:

far more important than this momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism, and even more than the actual progress Socialism has made in England...is the revival of the East End of London. That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpid despair, has returned to life, and has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism,' that is to say the organisation of the great mass of 'unskilled' workers...essentially different in character...The new unions were founded at a time when the faith in the eternity of the wages system was severely shaken; their founders and

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<sup>18</sup> Engels *op. Cit.* p370.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* p 369,370.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* p376. Italics mine.

promoters were Socialists either consciously or by feeling; the masses, whose adhesion gave them strength, were rough, neglected, looked down upon by the working class aristocracy; but they had this immense advantage, that *their minds were virgin soil*, entirely free from the inherited 'respectable' bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated 'old' Unionists. And thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud 'old' Unions.<sup>21</sup>

Engels established ideas that wend into the heart of this study: new versus old, craft versus the non-skilled. Those concerned with the historiography of the labour movement will recognise that a great deal of progressive analysis is anchored in one way or another on these points.

This study does not presume to argue against Marxism's contribution to history, as others have done, but it does seek to temper these views somewhat, and find between cracks in the monolithic façade created by Engels, a diversity of ideology, motivation and activity among trade unionists of the era, new or old - labourer or artisan.

As it stands this version of the Marxian model has become a filter, leaving behind the story of tradesmen who were dedicated to the working class struggle. No room is made for the massive debates which occurred between and within craft unions on the issues of politics and radicalism. This thesis agrees that there existed collaboration between unionised labour and employers. But it argues such methods were paramount in ensuring union rules and pay standards were enforced across an industry and will be shown as a compact of necessity, perfectly understood by progressive tradesmen as the best way to put bread on the table.

## **V.I. Lenin**

Lenin is the third figure in our discussion of how parameters were set for the character of nineteenth century trade unionists. Lenin was perhaps more influential to scholarship than Engels. He was, after all, a successful revolutionary leader and his authority was surpreme in Marxist scholarship. In *What is to be Done?* (1902), Lenin

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p378,9.

recognises that trade unions may possess a political dimension.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, while in this work Lenin provides a sympathetic view of the early unions and their leaders, they fall far short of having that element required to transform society:

For the trade union secretary of any, say British Trade Union, always helps the workers to conduct the economic struggle, helps to expose factory abuses, explains the injustices of the laws and of measures which hamper the freedom to strike and the freedom to picket...explains the partiality of arbitration court judges who belong to the bourgeois classes, etc, etc... In a word, every trade union secretary conducts and helps to conduct 'the economic struggle against the employers and the government.' [However] 'It cannot be too strongly insisted that *this is not yet* Social-Democracy. The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be a trade union secretary, but *a tribune of the people*, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny.'<sup>23</sup>

To Lenin, nineteenth century unions lacked a political class-consciousness. This could be brought 'to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers.'<sup>24</sup> Without such guidance workers are drawn into 'trade union politics' and not 'social democratic politics'. Lenin writes: 'Trade-unionist politics of the working class are precisely *bourgeois politics* of the working class.'<sup>25</sup> And further,

The spontaneous working class movement by itself is able to create (and inevitably creates) only trade-unionism, and working class trade-unionist politics are precisely working class bourgeois politics. The fact that the working class participates in the political struggle, and even in political revolution, does not in itself make its politics Social-Democratic politics.<sup>26</sup>

Thus an artisan trade unionist must be regarded as forming a pillar of bourgeois democracy, forward thinking though he may be.

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<sup>22</sup> Lenin, V.I. *What is to be Done?* Cited from Selected Works vol 1. Part 1. Foreign Languages Publishing House Moscow, 1950. Lenin writes, 'Trade Unionism does not exclude 'politics' altogether, as some imagine. Trade unions have always conducted some political, (but not Social-Democratic) agitation and struggle.' Footnote p 234.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* pp 288, 289. Lenin sets to prove his case comparing of Trade Unionist Robert Knight of the British Society of Boilermakers and revolutionary Wilhelm Liebknecht, 'Robert Knight attached more significance to the 'forward march of the drab, everyday struggle'', p. 290.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* p 287.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* p 292.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* p305.

By the time of his later work, *Imperialism*<sup>27</sup>, Lenin adopted a view that British trade unionism had become elite and detached from the ‘broad masses of the proletariat’:

It must be observed that in Great Britain the tendency of imperialism to divide the workers, to strengthen opportunism among them and to cause temporary decay in the working class movement, revealed itself much earlier than the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries; for two important distinguishing features of imperialism were already observed in Great Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, viz., vast colonial possessions and a monopolist position in the world market.<sup>28</sup>

Lenin’s critique of the bourgeois nature of trade unions is formidable. It can, however, be understood in the context of the failure of the advanced British economy to progress to socialism. Unhappily, in its wake, it leaves little room for sympathetic analysis of efforts of the early craft unions whose primary focus was, by necessity, on the caustic effects of capitalism on their industry, or on exploring the nuances of debate within trade societies, or on the consideration of those whose ideas stood in opposition to conservative policies. His continuing influence on British labour history we will see well represented in the following section.

## **Developments in British Labour History**

### **G. D. H. Cole**

G. D. H. Cole’s *British Working Class Politics 1832-1914*<sup>29</sup> and his many other works provide an excellent overview of the radical working class movement in the United Kingdom and ensure his continued influence on scholarship. When reading Cole’s work one is struck by the enormous struggle that the working class faced in achieving basic democratic rights. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, workers were vote-less, pauperised, unorganised, fined, gaoled and transported. That in a little over fifty years trade unions gained industrial and indeed social recognition is remarkable. That these unions campaigned successfully for the extension of the franchise was even more so. That they were able to co-ordinate representation in

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<sup>27</sup> Lenin, V.I *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* 1917. Cited from Selected Works in two volumes vol one part two Foreign Languages Publishing House. Moscow 1950.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* pp544, 545,546.

<sup>29</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *British Working Class Politics 1832-1914* George Routledge & Sons Ltd London 1946.

parliament would have seemed impossible.<sup>30</sup> But regardless of the effort and sacrifice of working class leaders in driving the movement forward - the Tailors, Builders, Metalworkers, tradesmen all of them – one feels their endeavours in the final instance are recognised only as second best. As with Engels, the true progressive spirit of the working class is to be found in the new unions of the 1880's. For Cole, like Engels and Lenin, promotes the idea of an elite labour aristocracy:

The British workers, escaping from the Hungry Forties into a somewhat kinder world, were not interested in socialism or revolution. For as long as British Capitalism could maintain its prosperity, and throw the workers an increasing number of crumbs from the rich mans' table, the Demon of revolution had been put safely to sleep. There was much dire poverty still at the bottom of the social scale; and it seems clear that the skilled workers - the aristocracy of labour - were improving their conditions much more rapidly than the unskilled urban workers or the toilers in the fields.<sup>31</sup>

He further claims that before the 1880s:

The trade Unions, on which the political movement of the workers had to rely for much of its strength, represented largely the skilled craftsmen; and these were by no means the quite propertyless and rightless proletarians of simplified class-war theory. Their members had their little 'stakes in the country': they had something besides their chains to lose, though it were but a little, and there was a gulf between them and the unskilled masses whom the Trade Unions had hardly touched.<sup>32</sup>

Cole's story of new unionism and ascent of the labour movement foreshadows Australian scholarship in several ways. Similar to the great maritime strike, the 1889 British dock strike came from 'new unionism' which also caused the parliamentary organisation of the working class. 'It needed the industrial uprising of less skilled workers - symbolised in the Dock strike of 1889 - to call into being a movement for a Labour Party.'<sup>33</sup>

It is the ideological component of trade unionism that signifies to Cole the difference between the two periods of working class organisation. The earlier movement, from

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<sup>30</sup> This history is dealt with in more depth in chapter three.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* p 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* p9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* p126ff.

the end of Chartism to the 1880's, radical though it may have been, was not led by revolutionaries, or socialists or Marxists. He writes:

Though the International Working Men's Association had existed [in London since 1864 with] Marx as its leader; and though the outstanding figures in British Trade Unionism, such as Robert Applegarth, George Odger, and George Howell, were prominently associated with the I.W.M.A...; though there were old Owenites...and old Chartists...among the active leaders of the working class opinion - there was in Great Britain not even the shadow of a Socialist movement, or of any movement with a thought-out plan for changing the basis of the social system. There were, no doubt, individuals with revolutionary and with Socialist ideas. But there was no Socialist movement.<sup>34</sup>

Cole follows the Marxian model of social progress and, focusing on the advancing economic maturity of the working class, allows an impression – though certainly this is not his aim - that activities of early trade union radicals and militants are of a lesser value. There exists however a vast difference between lack of revolutionary spirit and/or mature economic understanding, and the support for the capitalist social order. Ultimately Cole's achievement is to clearly show the success of the early unions in advancing democracy, the rights of the working class and in promoting ideas of co-operative society and community. Confronted by harsh industries, working long hours and battling the excesses of market capitalism, this achievement, as later chapters will demonstrate, was very great indeed.

### **Eric Hobsbawm**

The great Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm has had a huge influence on British labour historiography. Writing of the age of capital, 1848-75, he admits being unable to 'conceal a certain distaste, perhaps a certain contempt' for the period. Though acclaimed for its progress, science, technology and liberalism, he finds it uninspiring, with few examples of colourful and romantic heroism like Garibaldi, 'with his red shirt and flowing locks'.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, his view of trade unionists of that era is not positive.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p 42 43.

<sup>35</sup> Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* Meridian NY 1984 pp xix, xx, xxi.

In the following analysis of his popular essays, ‘The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain’ and ‘Trends in the British Labour Movement’,<sup>36</sup> we see clearly that his ideas expand upon themes set by the early Marxists, particularly Lenin. As the first essay title would suggest, Hobsbawm deals with the phenomenon of ‘labour aristocracy’, class collaboration, and the perceived differences in the nature of the ‘new’ as opposed to ‘old’ craft unions. Hobsbawm suggests that in the eighteenth hundreds there had always been a blurring of the lines between employer and craftsman. He notes that official records made no distinction between masters and tradesmen until 1851.<sup>37</sup> Further, he says that ‘[t]he phrase ‘aristocracy of labour’ seems to have been used from the middle of the nineteenth century at least to describe certain distinctive upper strata of the working class, better paid, better treated and generally regarded as more ‘respectable’ and politically moderate than the mass of the proletariat.’<sup>38</sup> Hobsbawm suggests six criteria for defining the labour aristocracy:

*First*, the level and regularity of a worker’s earnings; *second* his prospects for social security; *third*, his conditions of work, including the way he was treated by foremen and masters; *fourth*, his relations with the social strata above him and below him; *fifth*, his general conditions of living; *lastly* his prospects of future advancement and those of his children. Of these the first is incomparably the most important, and also the only one about which we have anything like comprehensive information, however inadequate.<sup>39</sup>

Later Hobsbawm adds a new stratum into the debate - ‘super aristocracy’. He uncovers this group by looking at comparative income levels of the working class, noting the stark contrast between the pay of certain trades and the poorer workers. He alleges also that the class of ‘super aristocrats’ can be seen to transfer from traditional trades to industries associated with the growing manufacturing economy, and he clearly links these ‘aristocrats’ to the unionised sectors of industry.

In this essay, then, the most important factor to Hobsbawm in establishing the existence of the labour aristocrat is by his income. Accordingly he draws upon numerous tables of comparative incomes of working class groups. Most modern

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<sup>36</sup> From Hobsbawm, E. *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1968.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* p276.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* p272.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid* p273.

scholarship would perhaps not now be convinced of the utility in classifying labour aristocracy or even ‘super-aristocracy’ primarily by methods of remuneration. But the general structure outlined by Hobsbawm is implicit in many traditional studies.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest, that Hobsbawm totally ignores ‘social’ factors that point to a labour aristocracy. For example Hobsbawm identifies, as one indication, the subcontract systems that develop within modern industrial systems of production. He sees that these imperatives often led to a relationship known as ‘co-exploitation’, where tradesmen ran teams of semi-skilled and non-skilled labourers. He argues, further, that this system somehow arose because there was already a labour aristocracy in existence keen to laud their superiority over their less important brethren.<sup>40</sup>

Hobsbawm’s 1949 essay, ‘Trends in the British Labour Movement’, updated in 1963, develops his theme of craft elitism, adding to it in several respects. Like the Webbs, he argues that craft unionism around the 1860s and 1870s became a quasi-business,<sup>41</sup> and like Engels he argues that unions identified and co-operated with employers, and with the capitalist system. Indeed they battled hard for their privileged situation:

if it fought against the rest of the working class for its special position, it also fought against the boss (until recognition, at any rate), for the right to a share of his profits – a small and stable share. In the course of this fight it established not merely a series of devices and institutions...common property of the movement since – Trades Councils, the Trade Union Congress, the efficient way of running union business, the strategy and tactics of short-term campaigning – but a whole system of the ethics of militancy. The labour aristocrat might wear a top-hat and think on business matters exactly like his employer, but when the pickets were out against the boss, he knew what to do...[while] a union man, he behaved like a union man.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* ‘we consider co-exploitation as something which reinforced the position of an existing labour aristocracy rather than as something which in itself enabled it to come into existence. Probably its main result was to stress the feeling of qualitative superiority which its members had over the ‘plebeians’ and the intermediate workers’, pp 298, 299.

<sup>41</sup> He writes ‘With the official recognition of trade unionism, and...the Great Depression in the 70’s conscious and deliberate class-collaboration came into the open. [Now] systems of quasi-business unionism were built up in the major export trades...to be held up to the general admiration [by] the Webb[s]: The reasonable employer and the reasonable trade unionist worker; the fair capitalist and the fair worker, the big hearted bourgeois, friend of the workers and the narrow-bourgeois-minded proletarian condition one another, and are both corollaries of one and the same relationship, whose foundation was the economic position of Britain from the middle of the nineteenth century’. *Ibid* p230.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* p323.

Hobsbawm further identifies a change occurring in the nature of craft unionism, tied nicely to sweeping changes to the labour movement and coinciding with the introduction of 'new unionism' in the late 1880s. He notes that just as favourable technological and economic reasons ensured a privileged position for tradesmen, it was the full development of monopoly capitalism that sparked them into radicalism and socialism. Tradesmen no longer controlled the supply of essential skills to British industry and so joined the ranks of the proletariat, and in the face of such a dramatic fall from grace they became stalwarts of the progressive labour movement.<sup>43</sup>

This study, however, questions Hobsbawm's idea that tradesmen fought for and held a 'special position' in capitalist society, as though they saw themselves above the working class. Hobsbawm indeed presents a few anecdotes where individual tradesmen express sentiments of elitism and superiority. But this is not the same thing as saying that ideas of superiority and exclusivity, rather than the idea of industrial regulation through trade protection, was at the base of their industrial system. Further, Hobsbawm's 'aristocracy of labour' remains a rather nebulous and un-quantifiable classification. Hobsbawm admits, '[i]t is not easy to sum up...the size of the labour aristocracy. Did its relative size increase or decrease? We do not really know enough to say. At a guess, it was probably no larger in the 1860's and the 1870's than the favoured strata had been before 1850.'<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, Hobsbawm's two essays leave several issues unanswered. Firstly, all tradesmen from all industries are seen to hold common elitist values, as do tradesmen within a particular industry - there is no discussion of the differences in policies that existed among early trade societies, as will be demonstrated in later chapters. Secondly, when Hobsbawm talks of tradesmen, by inference, he speaks of their union - this thesis will show, however, that many tradesmen were not members of unions

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<sup>43</sup> He believes that just as his unique position in the industrial order led the artisan and his union to conservatism, the loss of this position through changes in the productive processes threw him from his pedestal. Accordingly, upon the development of monopoly capitalism and introduction of new techniques de-skilling trades work, craft unions radicalised. 'Step by step the labour aristocrat found himself forced into the ranks of the working class; and on the whole he moved to the left. Hence his readiness after 1900, to ally himself with socialists in the Labour Party; to break with the Liberal Party which he had supported passionately; finally even to support a socialist programme.' *Ibid.* p325.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* p 290.

and many of these workers failed to adopt the policies prescribed by trade societies. Should we conclude that the non or anti-unionists were the progressive element of the working class?

Ultimately, Hobsbawm's idea of 'labour aristocracy', which has been so influential as a starting point for scholarship, has several deficiencies, the greatest of which is its reliance on income scales rather than relationships between groups of workers and between tradesmen and capitalism. Even where one accepts that groups of tradesmen were indeed the aristocrats of labour, and certainly one cannot deny that great numbers of workers indeed adopted elitism, there is no place in Hobsbawm's scheme for the many artisans – unionists - who, despite their position, chose to act with altruism and feeling towards those of their class as much as to those of their trade.

Hobsbawm's work here is typical of scholarship discussed thus far, neglects to appreciate limitations on union leaders to achieve change. After all unionists had not only to deal with great issues of policy and social progress, but also the more 'temporal' and immediate concerns of their membership. It is the history of struggle to control industry that most concerns our next writer.

### **Richard Price**

In the introduction to his study of the Building Trades in the United Kingdom, Price challenges the way historians have overlooked the rank and file in the working class struggle. He dismisses the 'stale and repetitive debates' surrounding the rise of the labour party, and of leadership and organisations. Industrial conflict is missing in the story of the labour movement.<sup>45</sup>

Price's is an admirable desire is to resurrect the rank and file activism and work experiences in the story of the labour movement. For Price, industrial relations is 'a struggle for power...constant clashes, collisions and compromises between two

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<sup>45</sup> Price, R. *Masters, Unions and Men: Work control in building and the rise of labour 1830-1914* Cambridge University Press. 1980 pp1-3

opposed systems of authority which at their most basic level recur at the workplace in the form of a struggle for control over the productive process.<sup>46</sup>

Allowing insight into the world of industrial relations at the shop floor is invaluable to understanding the dynamic of unionism, and this thesis aims to focus on the everyday concerns of building workers to enforce their standards. However, unlike Price's work, it will not finish at that point. It also holds that the story of unionism is as much about leadership as it is about the ideas of the rank and file, and for that matter, the relationship between them. This story is also about the ideas of unionists and how they thought to move society beyond the misery of conflict, and to explain the constant claim of nineteenth century building operatives, that their actions were primarily to avoid strikes, 'clashes and collisions'.

It will be shown in later chapters that the organising role of the union leadership in this era and its relationship to the rank and file was far less negative and far closer than Price portrays. Further, the history the building industry in Sydney in the late 1800s, though telling a story of rank and file struggle and compromise over the productive process, also tells one of active unionists who formed leadership groups, that developed class-consciousness in the modern sense, and initiated class activism. The savagery of the industrial relations system drove them to political activism and to seek political representation to strengthen control over work and society.

### **Australian Labour History**

This section demonstrates that many fundamental precepts established by British writers have been adopted by Australian historians, but whereas many British scholars recognise the radicalism of artisan unionism before the 1870s, many in Australia dismiss artisan history altogether. A primary difference in Australian literature is the role of the 'bush worker', which can be viewed as a modification of the 'new union' argument, sitting within a nationalist context.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid* p9

## Robin Gollan

In *Radical and Working Class Politics*<sup>47</sup> Gollan shows Australian society in the 1800s was not immune from the world-wide debate on democracy and socialism. He sees that an outpouring of radical sentiment occurred from very early times. For example, in describing the well-known struggles between fossickers and authorities during the gold rush he claims: 'All the strains of political thought that made 1848 the year of revolutions were present on the goldfields.'<sup>48</sup> Gollan also takes account of the influence of utilitarian thinkers such as Bentham in the 1830's, 40's and 50's on middle class Australia as well as Chartism on colonial workers.<sup>49</sup> This link to radical European ideology and its effect on the development of Australian politics and industrial relations is often undeveloped in the work of many other scholars.

Gollan identifies Australian democratic radicalism having its genesis in the rural worker, in this case the gold digger:

The temper of the diggers was radical not only because of the political opinions that many of them had brought with them from the Old World, but also because of the conditions of the new. Their attitudes were only occasionally reflected in political action, because the miner's was a hard life, whether digging for fortune or only for bread.<sup>50</sup>

This burgeoning radicalism that Gollan sees so evident in the gold miner, and presumably thereafter in rural bush workers generally, is not noted among the urban craft workers.<sup>51</sup> It is at the expense of, or in contrast to, the urban craft unions that

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<sup>47</sup> Gollan, R. *Radical and Working Class Politics: a study of eastern Australia 1850–1910* Melbourne University press 1976.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid* p24.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p13,14 'The extensive migration into Australia in the forties and the flood of the fifties sprang from a Britain in which Chartism was the mass protest of the working and lower middle classes against the intolerable conditions of early industrialism. Naturally, there was no Chartist movement in Australia, for industrialisation was still a thing of the future. But Chartism had an influence. Some of the men who established trade unions had their political baptism in the Chartist movement.', p15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p21.

<sup>51</sup> Australian academia of Gollan's era locates political awakening in the bush, for example Russell Ward *Australian Legend*. Part of the tradition argues a link between the bush nationalism and radicalism. Gollan writes: 'The reaction to the new imperialism was a vehement expression of national feeling. This new radicalism found a sympathetic audience amongst working-men already moving in the direction pointed by the new ideas and by middle class radicals seized by the possibility of establishing an Australian utopia. The reaction against imperialism and the belief in the possibility of creating the good society came together in a composite of ideas and attitudes that we may call radical nationalism.' *Ibid* p18,19.

Gollan further emphasises the progressive role of the rural and the non or semi-skilled worker, notably after 1880. He says:

between 1880 and 1885 unionism extended to many of the unskilled workers in Melbourne and fewer of them in Sydney. After 1885, further urban occupations employing unskilled men were organised. But in terms of their influence on the whole union movement, the most important new body of workers organised at this time were the bush workers...The conception of special interests which deterred craft unionists from more than tentative steps towards unity of the movement as a whole did not exist for the workers who were now being brought within the union fold. For them, competition could only come from the unorganised, and strength would derive from the size and completeness of the union. So almost from the beginning, the new unions aimed to achieve a comprehensiveness undreamed of by their predecessors<sup>52</sup>

Keeping with tradition he writes that ‘the fundamental reason for the new unionism was the fact that the working class was becoming conscious of itself as a class.’<sup>53</sup> The new organisations were not like the old, all workers need to be in unions and ‘[b]arriers of trade and skill and political boundaries should not obstruct the widest co-operation.’<sup>54</sup>

Gollan contrasts the British and Australian political and economic contexts and sees differences in union development. Regarding them as almost as springing from different worlds, rather than from the same towns and traditions of Britain, the Australian unions, he believes, developed as ‘non-political institutions’ and arose from opportunity rather than desperate circumstance and intolerable working conditions, as was the case in Europe and Britain. Labour shortages rather than struggle won concessions for Australian workers.<sup>55</sup> Only later were Australian unions forced to develop a political nature.<sup>56</sup>

Further, referring to the growth in the sixties of the London Trades Council and the British trade union and parliamentary congresses he argues such activities and

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p102.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid* p104.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* 110,111.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* p69,70.

<sup>56</sup> He writes, ‘Workers as citizens, by and large, supported the radical cause. As unionists they sought to achieve other, non-political, ends, but in the process found it increasingly necessary to employ political means.’ *Ibid* p69, 70.

achievements had no equivalent in Australia:

The general political issues for the unionists [in Australia] were also different, since representative democratic institutions had already been won. Workers exercised their votes, and, as we have seen, under radical middle class leadership, particularly in Victoria, they were a considerable factor in the politics of the sixties and seventies. Thus in the sixties and seventies, the pressures on organised workers towards political action by unions were much less than in the old country.<sup>57</sup>

In keeping with this view, it is argued, Gollan under-plays the importance of Angus Cameron's election to parliament in New South Wales in 1874 as a trade union initiative, suggesting only that they sponsored him as an individual.<sup>58</sup> This thesis argues Cameron's election was a significant effort by the labour movement and totally in keeping with precedent in the United Kingdom, though certainly this agitation for reform was less urgent in the smaller colonial society. Gollan believes that neither Cameron nor the TLC saw his position as a delegate for the council, but this study will demonstrate he was clearly put forward as their representative and was not intended to be independent of them.

Gollan does in fact recognise many positive aspects of the political activities of craft organisations, but arguably he chooses to qualify their value. What could easily be considered examples of progressive working class politics one feels, are interpreted by Gollan to be of lesser significance. The establishment of central trade councils in NSW and Victoria and the building of Trades Hall in Melbourne in the 1860s<sup>59</sup> (and one could also suggest the Sydney Trades and Labour Council building in 1870's), the eight hour leagues, the picnic demonstrations etc, appear to be suggested by Gollan as an expression of a '*community of interest*' among unions, which is somewhat less than a clear evidence of class action in play.<sup>60</sup> Gollan appears similarly unmoved when discussing the first inter-colonial trade union congress in 1879.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* p73,74.

<sup>58</sup> 'In 1874 the Sydney Council sponsored the candidature of Angus Cameron, a carpenter, for the Legislative Assembly. Neither he nor they thought of this support as constituting him a delegate of the trade unions in Parliament. The prevailing view...[was that he]...was a representative of the people, making an independent and personal decision on all questions...', *Ibid* p81.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid* p80, 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid* p75 italics mine. He writes 'The eight-hour day...was a link between organisations which in other respects were separatist, sectional and jealous of their independence. The celebration of the eight-hour day was merely the most vivid expression of this community of interest.'

Gollan's discussion of these matters overall implies that these actions are only tentative steps by the union movement towards acting as a class.<sup>61</sup>

Though he considered the eight-hour day, or short hour movement, as very important, Gollan appears to believe that it was of less consequence as a radical idea and was more a social more a social and ethical issue - a theme of the 'conservative English unionism of the third quarter of a century'.<sup>62</sup> While this thesis agrees with him in that the Australian short-hour movement can be considered in terms of leisure and a moral and intellectual crusade – it argues that its objective to rein in the excesses of market capitalism on working lives, was vigorous and far from conservative. Moreover, it was a claim indistinguishable from a radical worker's idea of political economy. Further, though this study agrees with Gollan that the eight-hour movement progressed working class unity and was 'an important step on the road to a trade-union political policy', organisation and the 'regeneration' of the working class,<sup>63</sup> it questions whether this generation of working class interests fell upon an unformed and uninformed mass. We see that the radical working class movement in Australia had a long and radical past in the United Kingdom, with distinct though sometimes contradictory policies, and a certain way of operating. In other words, it is suggested that the radical working class existed already, and while the industrialisation of Australia indeed modified its structure, as is identified by Gollan, it did not create it.

A significant aspect of Gollan's work is recognition that moderation in industrial relations can be consistent with militancy and a radical ideology, a fundamental point at the heart of this study. Noting more strikes occurred in the pastoral industry between 1886 and 1889 than all industries combined, and referring to W.G. Spence in *Australia's Awakening*, he writes, '[i]t was a militant unionism that sought agreement

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<sup>61</sup> For example he writes 'Whilst it cannot be assumed that of itself the convocation of this and succeeding conferences was an indication of the unanimous acceptance of the desirability of closer relations between unions, the enthusiasm does demonstrate that there was a growing consciousness of a need for some representative gathering, at which the matters of more general interest to trade unionists could be thrashed out and policy adopted.' P 93.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* p 71. Further, 'For the leaders of unionism, the eight hours meant leisure and moral and intellectual improvement.' P 73.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid* p71-73.

by peaceful methods, but if they failed it was prepared and sometimes anxious to fight.’<sup>64</sup> Gollan notes Spence did not necessarily see employers *per se* as ‘the enemy’:

Conflict between workers and employers was attributed to misunderstanding, and the union seen as a means of preventing it...W.G. Spence always insisted that he was prepared to help the employers organise because he believed that in that way the conditions of labour for the whole country could be settled around the conference table.<sup>65</sup>

There are very many positive attributes to Gollan's work and ultimately this study would quibble mostly in terms of emphases. Gollan acknowledges radical influences in politics from as early as the 1850s, and recognises the enormous sense of feeling among working class émigrés that Australia was a new world and that all manner of change was possible. Nevertheless Gollan continues with a traditional theme of old versus new unionism, albeit in a bush setting, and of true class-consciousness and political awareness arising in the late 1880s, all of which is contrary to this study.

### **Bede Nairn**

Perhaps the most extreme rejection of working class radicalism comes from Bede Nairn whose history of the labour movement is the civilising of capitalism, rather than their hope for its demise. In *Civilising Capitalism*,<sup>66</sup> trade unionism ‘was intent on upholding a balanced society in order to maintain what they regarded as the normal rights of the working class...The alternative of an unnecessary and unwinnable social revolution did not occur to it...Capitalism could be civilised by variations on the themes the [Sydney Trades and Labour] Council had used to keep it in check.’<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid* 104.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid* p127. Further, as noted by Gollan, even the influential William Lane ‘was convinced that the majority of employers would see the justice of the demand for radical social and economic readjustment. He believed that only the ruthless employer would resist the just claims of trade unionists, and it was against him that strike action would be directed...[Lane wrote]... ‘we are all socialists only some of us don’t know it’...in the middle of the maritime strike he could still write that there is ‘many a heart-sick employer, feeling humanity stirring within him, will come to join either openly or secretly in the fight to overthrow the wages system, to idealise labour, to conquer Want and Hate and Greed and Vice, to establish peace on earth and goodwill among men.’ P 126 Similar ‘moderate’ views of social reform and class antagonisms would, if adopted by artisans, certainly have been seen as examples of their lack of class-consciousness.

<sup>66</sup> Nairn, B. *Civilising Capitalism: the beginnings of the Australian Labour Party* Melbourne Uni Press 1989.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* p7.

Some who wished for a new social system, ‘including some trade unionists’, Nairn writes, ‘had the best intentions’ but most were ‘socialist elitists’ blinded and frustrated to the deep humane values of colonial society. The Labor Party was prepared to accept what it regarded as the best of socialism, but it rejected...a socialist state.’<sup>68</sup>

The terms ‘civilise’ and ‘civilisation’ will be used several times throughout this study and require comment. The thesis rejects the idea that nineteenth century building workers sought to ‘civilise’ capitalism in the sense that they accepted market forces as fundamentally correct, necessary or desirable. They did not aspire to a *bourgeois* existence of profit and class domination. Some we shall see sought total social transformation, but for the majority, their views were shaped by Robert Owen and the co-operative movement, whose influence on the labour movement is not currently given much prominence.<sup>69</sup> Their civilised and perfect world had little place for conflict or competition. Tradesmen believed in co-operation and social egalitarianism.

### **Ken Buckley**

Ken Buckley, one of the few Australian historians dealing with artisan unionism of the period covered by this study, shows how an old British union took root on the Australian shore, before a distinctive and self-determining body grew.<sup>70</sup> It follows the history of strikes and strategies that won concessions enjoyed by Australian workers today. Buckley emphasises the Webb’s view of craft unionism tending as an ‘aristocracy of labour’ maintaining their organisations ‘with the fastidiousness of an insurance company’. Buckley notes that a member was required to be a tradesman of at least five years training, be in good health, and must be able to be a funding source for the collective, not a drain.<sup>71</sup> ‘In the light of the bias against recruits who might

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Recent work in the area of the co-operative movement in Australia has been done by Patmore and Balnave, see bibliography.

<sup>70</sup> *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852-1920*. Dept of Economic History ANU 1970.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid* p30. Here Buckley quotes S&B Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, p323.

prove ‘unprofitable’, he writes, it is small wonder that the A.S.E. [Amalgamated Society of Engineers] was a distinctly narrow craft body’.<sup>72</sup>

Consistent with this, he explains, trades societies lacked class awareness, acted only in the interests of their trade, and shunned politics:

There was much camaraderie but little consciousness of belonging to a broad working class amongst members of the Society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. On the contrary they looked upon themselves as the elite of wage-earners, and a member of the Commonwealth Parliament, speaking to a social gathering of the A.S.E...referred to the engineers as ‘the aristocracy of labour’.

Buckley quotes Union leader Tom Mann who described them as respectable, dignified, cautious and level headed.<sup>73</sup>

Any assistance lent to the organisation of unskilled labour is accompanied by pity, ‘that very pity was the reflex of the craftsman’s feelings of superiority over the labourer’. Like many others, Buckley seems to imply that an active and progressive working class politics developed only later with the ‘new’, semi-skilled and unskilled associations around 1890, strengthening after the great industrial defeat.<sup>74</sup>

In the face of this however, Buckley provides evidence of dynamism, aspiration and class awareness in the ranks of the ASE. The Engineers did work with other unions in the eight-hour committees, and were also acknowledged founding members of the Trades and Labour Council of Sydney. Moreover, despite noting the reluctance of some branches to discuss politics in their meetings, he goes on to record the election of A.S.E. men to parliament from as early as 1860.<sup>75</sup>

Certainly, one can agree that the form of unionism after the 1890s developed many new aspects. Further, it is acknowledged that Buckley is writing about one of the great British Amalgamated societies whose bureaucratic and more moderate outlook is often contrasted with the more active smaller local unions of earlier British

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *ibid* p97-98.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid* p99, p103-4, p141.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* 99-102.

unionism, as will be discussed next chapter. Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand why the great achievements of the pre 1890s period raised by Buckley, which are absolutely consistent with the aims of Chartism and British working class radicalism, are overlooked or interpreted in such a negative way.

### **Ray Markey**

In his work on the rise and character of the Labor Party in New South Wales<sup>76</sup>, Ray Markey accepts the concept of ‘Labour Aristocracy’ to describe urban craft unions in the late eighteen hundreds, But he does so with some qualification. Markey reiterates Hobsbawm’s six criteria: high regular earnings, prospects of social security, relatively good conditions with employer respect and a high degree of job control, close relations with the lower middle class and a clear distinction from unskilled labourers, higher living standards than the rest of the workforce and, finally, good prospects for social advancement.<sup>77</sup> On these points, he argues, there was a ‘colonial labour aristocracy, concentrated especially in the building and metal trades.’ However, he concludes, ‘insofar as they relate to material conditions, most of these points listed may be applied to the skilled urban workforce as a whole.’<sup>78</sup>

Markey’s view of new and old unionism’ differs from the early Marxists. We have seen above that Engels discerned an enormous gap between the ‘great mass of unskilled workers’ representing the new unions, and the ‘respectable’ ‘bourgeois’ old unionists whom they were ‘taking in tow’. Markey, however, poses the question whether Australian craft union strategy and tactics really diverged from those practised by the upsurge of ‘new’ union organisation and militancy in the 1880’s.<sup>79</sup> Benefit policies were, for example, developed by the ASU/AWU and wharfies along the lines of the old craft unions. He argues that some, like the miners, rail-workers and engine drivers strictly controlled the entrance of labour to their workplaces. Further, in relation to the question of the alleged militancy, said to be intrinsic to new unions, he cites the conservative nature of the ASU/AWU where it dampened the

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<sup>76</sup> Markey, R. *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880–1900*. NSW University Press 1988.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid* p45.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid* p147.

militancy of the ‘hothead’ general rural labourers who may disrupt agreements. He goes on to state: ‘It is certainly difficult to substantiate a claim that the ‘new unions’ were clearly more militant than the crafts.’<sup>80</sup> In fact he says that while the AWU often struck to gain employer recognition, urban craft unions were also not reluctant to resort to strikes that were often of short duration as they had better control over their industry.

Yet, though Markey challenges the way in which historians have assumed significant differences between the old and new unionism in Australia, his exploration of the Australian labour movement remains somewhat consistent with the Marxian ‘old versus new’ paradigm. Markey, in dealing with the issue of class, believes that pre 1880 unionists saw themselves as distinct from but not always in opposition to employers. Their actions he argues, however militant, do not denote class-consciousness, ‘even if it involves the articulation of class conflict.’ Likewise a sectional basis of unionism produces sectional consciousness. He identifies a more broad class-consciousness arising in the 1880s workforce and with it increased union membership.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, Markey later portrays craft unions, in particular the Stonemasons, as developing a bitter class-consciousness as their elite position became threatened in the 1880s.<sup>82</sup>

Defining class-consciousness is a difficult problem and is one that this study certainly cannot claim to progress far. This thesis accepts Markey’s point that industrialisation in the last decades of the nineteenth century resulted in strong class awareness and activities. As argued in the section on Gollan above, however, it suggests that industrialisation did not create class, merely the form it took and the way that it dealt with problems. If they were sectarian or acted independently, it was perhaps because they had to – it was a fundamental aspect of a deregulated industrial relations system. Further, this study will present many examples where building tradesmen from the 1850s displayed a high level of class awareness and it will show that well before the 1880s that unions were perfectly used to working together, lending each other fraternal support, and pursuing working class goals such as parliamentary

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid* p147-9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid* p136.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid* p152.

representation and the eight-hour day.<sup>83</sup> It will also show that building tradesmen in the late 1880s were as capable of expressing reactionary sentiments, as they were capable of expressing progressive ideas in the 1850s. Lastly, this history argues that their class-consciousness did not necessarily present itself as a matter of conflict, or discord with all employers. As noted, they were by and large co-operators, though they accepted militancy was necessary.

With respect to the six criteria put by Markey, the study makes the following points. It accepts that the building trade, being more arduous than most and to a certain extent able to be restricted for reasons of skill and brawn was, both before and indeed after 1880, comprised of a distinct and relatively exclusive body of workers. Further, that the parameters of work organisation dictated that the unions be restricted to their particular craft, especially before the mechanised industrial era. While doubtless, the artisan's position, relative to the most downtrodden of workers, was tolerable, we shall see that life in the building trades was far from easy or intrinsically respectable or able to set workers on a path leading to a comfortable old age or somehow keep them solvent in times of crisis. Any reading of historical material reveals that tradesmen in the building industry, while paid well when working on union rates were often un or under-employed and required to tramp the streets for work.<sup>84</sup> Again this research found no examples to show that relative advantages enjoyed by skilled tradesmen translated to feelings of superiority or elitism or lack of class - consciousness. On the contrary, there are examples in all of the scholarship reviewed - both British and Australian - of tradesmen working hard to build unity in the workforce, among both labouring and skilled groups.

### **Bruce Scates**

Bruce Scates' recent work, *A New Australia*, which locates non-Marxist radical discourse within working class politics, goes a little way to help restore the character

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<sup>83</sup> The issue of the class nature of the eight-hour day is discussed throughout this study, particularly chapter three where Owen and Marx's position on the issue is discussed.

<sup>84</sup> See for example the memoirs of G.P. Jones *The Road I Came*. Building Limited Sydney May 1915. pp 81-83, and throughout the text.

of early trade unionism.<sup>85</sup> He evokes the forgotten hopes of early working class radicals and discontents outside the Marxist traditions:

For half a century, the study of nineteenth century radicalism has focussed almost exclusively on labour politics: single tax, socialist and anarchist groups appear as small and ineffectual factions, insignificant ‘tributaries’ of mainstream political life...Australian single tax, socialist and anarchist societies comprised a counter hegemonic movement in late colonial society. They questioned not just the unequal distribution of property but also more generally the unequal distribution of power between rich and poor, men and women and even...[a few]... black and white<sup>86</sup>

Scates remarks that it ‘is extraordinary that so large, so influential and (as the *Bulletin* so wryly put it) so exceedingly noisy a body could so long be neglected by labour historians.’<sup>87</sup>

Scates’ view regarding the diversity of ideas in colonial Australia ought not be seen as too surprising. Like Gollan he points out that Australian political life in the late nineteenth century benefited from the ferment of European radicalism flowing steadily into the colony. While most other labour historians generally give mandatory genuflection to the European background of Australian radicalism, before hastily moving to describe the ‘unique’ achievements and contribution of local unions to western society, Scates gives the issue far more adequate emphasis, as he does to the vast amount of radical literature from Europe that was absorbed by workers in the colony.<sup>88</sup>

However, while Scates’ contribution broadens the way we can look at nineteenth century radicalism and its place in urban working class culture, and is therefore welcome, he maintains fundamental preconceptions that challenge our understanding of the tradesman. This can be demonstrated by examining three aspects of his analysis. First Scates repeats uncritically the ‘labour aristocracy’ thesis. True he does

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<sup>85</sup> Scates, B. *A New Australia: Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic* Cambridge University Press 1997.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid* p6,7.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid* p8,9.

<sup>88</sup> For example he writes: ‘From Russell Ward to Steve Alomes, historians have attributed Australian radicalism to the fervent nationalism of the 1890’s and a new generation of native born. In fact very few of the colonies’ leading radicals were Australian by birth. The ASL...[Socialist league]...had ‘and international character about it’: German, Austrian, French and Italian Socialists...the ‘English school of socialism ‘ was well represented’ *Ibid* p23 for literature see chapter two, ‘The Politics of Reading’.

support a broader appreciation of what could be regarded as radical ideology, but in doing so, the artisan proletariat remains very much in the mould set for him by Engels and the early Marxists - this radicalism is described as middle class. We see this for example when Scates discusses the influence of the radical American writer Henry George in Australia:

Very few Georgists earned a living at a trade. Those who did believed they belonged to an aristocracy of labour – engineers like D.M. Charleston, or J.S. Higgs, or stonemasons like John Grant and William Elmsley.

Stonemason John Grant - who is of particular importance to this study- for no other reason than being a tradesman, is somehow regarded as a borderline worker. He is assumed to belong to ‘an aristocracy of labour’ – at the ‘borders of working class life.’ Referring to British historian, Stanley Peirson, Grant’s position is to Scates ‘the indeterminate social strata’ between self employment and wage labourer.’<sup>89</sup> As shall be explored in detail below, Grant and the Stonemasons’ society were greatly influenced by Henry George. But in no way was he their only influence. Nor can the Masons, and Grant in particular, be described as anything other than working class.

Second, like Markey, Scates believes that, ‘the ‘new unionism’ as well as the old is in need of serious revaluation’, and that ‘[r]ecent studies suggest that the new unions were neither more ‘political’ nor more ‘militant’ than the old.’<sup>90</sup> Despite his critique of how historians have contrasted the new and old unions, however, he nonetheless accepts the traditional argument that tradesmen became radical only due to the change in fortunes in the 1880’s. Earlier craft societies, once elitist, were now progressive.

Scates writes:

the age of the labour aristocrat was over. By the beginning of the 1890’s, the introduction of new technology and changes to the productive process eroded the very skills on which their [the ‘old’ trade unions] status depended. In an

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid* p17

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid* p77, 78. Scates makes an important reference to the ASU and Spence: ‘W.G.Spence, the shearer’s celebrated leader, deplored the talk of ‘class war’ common in socialist circles. All the ‘people’. Be they rural labourer, small land holder, urban worker or disaffected intelligentsia, must rise up against the money power and the monopolist.’

era of rapid change and conflict, craft unionists questioned many of the social arrangements of colonial society.<sup>91</sup>

Further to this point he notes that technology was affecting the trades and that the work of bricklayers and stonemasons were starting at this time to be impinged upon by the introduction of concrete.<sup>92</sup> Scates also suggests that radicalism among tradesmen grew due to the economic insecurity of the 1880s and especially among the old and infirm of the 1890's.<sup>93</sup>

However, it is debatable how great an issue technological change was to building tradesmen. The fact was not raised in the unions' evidence to the Royal Commission into Strikes. Nor is reference to technology raised as a significant issue (if at all) in the minutes of the Stonemason, Bricklayer or Carpenter Societies during the eighties and early nineties. Moreover, if, as is a reasonable assumption, poor economic conditions and industrialisation were prerequisite for the radicalisation of tradesmen and their unions, why does Scates not note that it had occurred earlier? This study will give examples of many periods from the 1850's, where building tradesmen suffered a troubled economy and unemployment, especially compared with the late 1880's. We should also ask: if the early building tradesmen formed a comfortable elite, why were they prominent in the radical movements in the United Kingdom, why did they begin parliamentary agitation in Australia in the 1870s, and why did they pioneer the short-hour movement?

Thirdly, Scates compares the eight-hour celebrations unfavourably with May Day marches:

May Day's appeal went far beyond nostalgia. In Australia it represented an alternative ritual to the traditional 8 hours day celebration. Since the 1860's, Australia's craftsmen had gathered in their Sunday best to mark the achievement of an eight-hour working day. It was a celebration enjoyed by only a small proportion of the colonial workforce. Until the 1880's unskilled workers were expressly excluded from the procession.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid* p77

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid* p139

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid* p138

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid* p33. The prejudice against the 'labour aristocrat' manifests in various ways. With Scates it includes the occasional references to tradesmen who owned and wore a suit, and could be found to promenade in their Sunday best. Scates makes many a reference to the clothing of the craftsmen.

Further, citing radical J.A. Andrews, he writes, 'May Day by contrast, was the 'festival of the proletariat'. If the 8 hour day enshrined the exclusiveness of craft unionism, May Day represented the solidarity of labour'.<sup>95</sup>

The issue of the eight-hour celebrations are of particular significance to this study and the thesis argues that Scates wrongly interprets their function. While clearly different to May Day celebrations, the eight-hour day parades, banners and picnics were not at all exclusive. They were intended to convince the entire community that eight-hours was the standard of a free and enlightened civilisation, and give it authority in an unregulated industrial regime. Moreover, the demonstrations were open to all trades and labour and, as this study will demonstrate, organisers went to great length to attract other workers to it. The eight-hour marches were a matter of working class discipline. It was expected that workers would not merely participate in them, they must first form unions in their own industries and adopt the fundamental working class rule - eight-hours for rest, work and improvement - and help spread the standard to all workers.

### **The historiography of the nineteenth century Australian building unions**

This study travels much of the ground covered by Coolican, whose doctoral dissertation is on the Sydney building industry from 1871 to the Great War.<sup>96</sup> There is general agreement between this and her study in recognising the changing form of industrial regulation due to the growth of the colonial economy in the 1870s and 80s and the form of management due to the advent of what is termed General Contracting. The 1870s and 80s was the period of the rise of the Master Builders who, under increasing competitive pressure came to challenge union authority; and with this, the form of industrial regulation changed from union rulemaking to collective bargaining. But whereas Coolican presents her history in an apolitical way, this thesis looks at the ideology of the formative building unions, and how this ideology related to the problem of industrial regulation. Coolican's study examines

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* Scates goes on to contrast Labour Day and May Day. Unfortunately this important aspect of Scates' argument is not well backed up. His text refers only to his undergraduate thesis 'Faddists...etc' and not to primary sources.

<sup>96</sup> Coolican *op. Cit.*

building techniques and growth figures in building and has done her work collating information on membership numbers and union density, and has been of value to this thesis.

John Niland's postgraduate study of the New South Wales short-hour movement from 1855 to 1875 focuses in part on the building trades, and where so, almost exclusively on the Operative Stonemasons.<sup>97</sup> To Niland the eight-hour campaign was an 'iconoclastic resolve of a few stonemasons in 1855'. Rejecting the Webb's view, outlined above, that the measure was regulatory (at least until after 1875), he remarks on the fact that in 1855 the NSW building industry did not suffer from excess competitive pressure requiring stonemasons to struggle over job control. The motivation of the short-hour movement, he believes, was largely social, 'a vehicle for the workingman's escape from undesirable conditions', though he does also acknowledge the most powerful desire was for knowledge and education 'and through this, the opportunity to exercise some control over their social, political and economic destiny.'<sup>98</sup>

Niland also notes certain industrial ramifications of the general short hour movement to Australian unionism, the Mason's eight-hour campaign in particular. Like Gollan and others, he draws on the fact that the movement played an important part in formation of central bodies like the eight-hour leagues and the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council. Necessitating financial aid between unions locally and interstate, he says the movement built greater class awareness 'from what had been, in the industrial context, essentially a craft consciousness'. Niland also believes the movement had an effect on 'some sections of labour' moving towards arbitrated settlements long before the 1890s conflict. He recognises that in its later stages, the short-hour movement 'drove home the need for legislative intervention' into industrial relations.<sup>99</sup>

Regarding working class politics Niland, citing Commons in 'Labour Movements' *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, confines trade union activity to either opposing

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<sup>97</sup> Niland, J. *The Movement for a Shorter Working Day in New South Wales, 1855-1875*, M.Comm Thesis, UNSW, 1966.

<sup>98</sup> Niland *ibid* see p1, 221, 244ff.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid* p250, 254, 255.

capitalism or bargaining with it and concludes that the labour movement in 1855 was of the second 'genus'.

Seldom did speakers from the working class ranks advocate the overthrow of capitalism with a communist or syndicalist system... [though commentators saw the shorter-day tantamount to this]...Actually, the closest to displacement was the co-operative movement, and this was promoted as an arrangement to co-exist with capitalism.<sup>100</sup>

Though political ideas such like these appear occasionally throughout Niland's work, he chooses not to expand on them, or explain them fully. As such his discussion on the Chartist influence on Australian labour movement is very limited. Further, he does not take advantage of the broader radical working class history, particularly the British heritage of the short-hour movement, which he only notes in brief – Robert Owens's suggestion in 1817 for an 8-hour day, the 'abortive' London building strike of 1853 (he probably means 1859), and vague reference to a move by British workers to recover what they had lost four or five centuries earlier.<sup>101</sup>

But it is impossible to understand the short hour movement or the character of nineteenth century unionism without detailed reference to British unionism. The short-hour campaign in the Sydney building trade was not initiated by a few 'iconoclastic' masons, it was a demand with a long history, and subject to many campaigns. An eight-hour day by way of strike was the idea of the 'Society for National Regeneration' established by Doherty, Fielden, Cobbett and Owen in 1833. British miners also pressed to work the eight hours in 1844. The masons of Liverpool put a claim on for 9-hours in 1846.<sup>102</sup> In 1853 London masons precipitated a claim that was acted upon around the globe and which led to the Great London building strike in 1859, a matter featured in chapter three.

Ultimately, to Niland, the pursuit of education and improvement and morality is a middle class value.<sup>103</sup> In this way it ties into a view that the working class is not, or

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid* p41.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid* pp231,2.

<sup>102</sup> See Cole, & Filson *op. Cit.* p282, 283. Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working class*, Penguin 1974, p911, Webbs *op. Cit.* p339-40.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid* p217

ought not be, interested in education and improvement, and that morality and longing for fulfilment is somehow a *bourgeois* concern.

Notwithstanding the above, Niland's thesis certainly raises the main ideological issues behind the short hour campaign and provides a good source of press reports that assists in setting out a chronological history of the eight-hour movement, and is of value in this regard.

### **In Conclusion**

A great difficulty arises in reassessing the character of the nineteenth century craft unionist. Historiography gives him little room to rest. If he is not standing in a dirty shirt, active solely in revolutionary ferment, he is a reactionary or a class collaborationist. A problem this study encounters then is how to explain or understand the motivation of those who led the Masons, Bricklayers and Carpenters of the eighteenth hundreds.

This review of labour history scholarship reveals the prejudice that is held against these tradesmen both in the United Kingdom and consequently, Australia. Rather than acknowledge an obvious radical and compassionate motivation, history has at best credited them with a burgeoning class-consciousness and at worst an almost criminal selfishness. Our artisans, who appear almost universally disparaged as Aristocrats of Labour, are to the Webbs mere regulators. To Marxists they are traitors to the cause.

It is of course legitimate to argue that the views of authors cited herein are often more nuanced than this review portrays them to be, and that their comments on terms such as labour aristocracy ought not be reduced in such a simple manner. But, it is argued, though many of the writers above are exceptional scholars and theorists, the fact remains that these simple interpretations have become the bedrock of the common understanding of early Australian trade unionism. It is for this reason that the views are presented in this way and then challenged. Ultimately this thesis is not about Engels, Lenin, Hobsbawm, Gollan and other thinkers, or their ideas on ideology or progress and whether their analysis of labour relations is right or wrong - that is another sort of study. This thesis is about workers who battled capitalism at the shop

floor and how this experience informed their ideology. The preceding discussion and presentation of extracts from the works of our authors are used merely to understand how this veil was placed on these nineteenth century building workers in Australia who, it is argued, rejected the status quo, and through whose efforts Australian society progressed.

Finally, it is not argued that all building tradesmen were radicalised or became motivated to build a progressive union movement, and it is not that all unions at all times have or will have progressive political policies; but, as the following study will show, the building workers of nineteenth century Sydney, subject perhaps more than most to unfettered capitalist forces, sought to strike a balance between aggressive militancy, industrial order, and a fundamental and radical change to society.

### CHAPTER THREE, BRITISH ANTECEDENTS

Australian labour history and that of the British are too often blind to each other.<sup>104</sup> Outside the work of the Webbs there is scarce a reference in British texts to the activities and achievements of the Australian labour movement. On the other hand, many Australian works note but then skip quickly past the fact that the British experience is fundamental to the politics of both labour and capital in Australia. It is from the mauling of British class antagonisms that the Australian system was to succeed, perhaps surpassing the old country in recognition of union rights as well as worker benefits such as the eight-hour day.

To adequately summarise the history of the labour movement of Britain during the eighteen hundreds is too challenging for this study, and the chapter can rightly be criticised for overlooking certain details and truncating the analysis and discussion of important people and events. The aim here, however, is not to produce a comprehensive comparative analysis of two countries, but to provide context to our study. It is meant to complement the Literature Review and to serve as a setting to the history of the nineteenth century building tradesmen of Sydney, and consequently raises only those aspect that give later chapters depth.

The building tradesmen of late nineteenth century Sydney were not by proportion born and trained in the colony but arrived, in the main, from the United Kingdom. Building union leadership was renewed continually from Britain. It will be shown from the evidence to the Royal Commission on Strikes that even as late as the 1880's the leadership of the Carpenter, Stonemason and Bricklayer Societies were all new arrivals to the colony. It would therefore be difficult to explain or understand beliefs of successive Australian labour policy makers without some reference to both deep seated and current trends in radical ideas and perceptions of industrial relations that were held by the British working class and in particular the building workers.

We will comment first upon the industrial/political character of the British working-class from 1800 up until the 1860s and recall how artisans agitated for democratic

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<sup>104</sup> An important exception being the recent special issue of *Labour History* no 88 May 2005.

rights and played a formative role in Chartism, and will consider the angry response of building operatives to the loss of traditional privileges as a free market ideology took away their control of industry and their security. In this light we will discuss briefly the ideas of Owen and the co-operative movement, the creation of the Operative Builders' Union in the early 'thirties, and the short-hour struggle which issued from these sources - culminating in the great London building strike and lockout of 1859. These ideological and organisational matters underpin the Australian movement.

The chapter will secondly deal with the period after 1860 at which time, as identified by Raymond Postgate, the 'rare and vague' records of early unionism turn to abundance.<sup>105</sup> Historians regard this period primarily as one of consolidation and bureaucratisation for the British building unions. The consolidation of the Australian union movement will also be seen in later chapters

This study recognises that the search for industrial stability and organisational solidity rests within a political context and the chapter therefore concludes with an overview of working class ideology. In this it relies on E.P. Thompson's view of class and class activism as portrayed in *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>106</sup> Thompson demonstrates that radical working class tradition is made up of various notions that are sometimes disparate and sometimes linked – attention to democratic processes, egalitarianism, and deference to Monarchy; Chartism, political reform, and disdain for State and Parliamentary power; liberal reform, freedom, unionism and regulation.

While accepting that differences exist between the two periods, this thesis argues that all these radical ideas manifested in some degree throughout the nineteenth century and are found in the rhetoric of the thirties and in the debates of the sixties and seventies. Further, it holds that both periods in the development of British working class organisation find parallels with the Australian labour movement. Notwithstanding the force of conservative ideas that ebb and flow through all unions, our study maintains that, at their core, operative builders in Britain and Australian

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<sup>105</sup> Postgate, R.W. *The Builders' History* Labour Publishing Co.1923.

<sup>106</sup> Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class* Penguin 1974.

formed part of a growing and international movement of the progressive working class - conscious of their opposition to capitalism.

Both periods can be understood as reaction to growing industrialisation, the imperatives of what is known as general contracting, which shifted power away from groups of tradesmen who traditionally regulated their affairs through Societies - and 'for the good of the trade' - to a system where master builders organised work through entrepreneurial and competitive means. Where general contracting made workers mere units of production, trade unionists built community; where it stressed competition, tradesmen called for co-operation; where it unfettered the market, they gathered at night to draw-up and enforce rules; and where it took away rights, workers insisted on democracy. This battle, in one form or another, remains the dynamic of industrial relations in the building industry - across the globe and across time.

### **1800-1860: Radical Politics, and Radical Unionism**

#### *Parliament and politics*

In his study of British working class politics the great labour historian G.D.H. Cole notes a fact that ought be better reinforced to modern democratic society: in 1831, the year before the first Reform Act, less than one in thirty people were able to vote. The 1832 Act increased this amount to around one in twenty. The next extension in suffrage was 1867 where the numbers eligible to vote were a mere one in eleven and by 1884 one in six.<sup>107</sup> The British worker over this period was starved, brutalised, perhaps imprisoned, sometimes deported, and, being disenfranchised, ultimately unable to do anything about it. The struggle for democracy was a Trade Union struggle. The role of the artisans in the struggle for democratic rights is well documented by classic scholarship – from the contribution of the corresponding societies at the turn of the nineteenth century, as illustrated by Thompson, to later

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<sup>107</sup> Cole, G.D.H. *British Working Class Politics 1832-1914* Geo. Routledge and Sons Ltd 1946 pp 4,5,6.

political activism and parliamentary candidacy as recorded in great detail in the various works of Cole.<sup>108</sup>

Notwithstanding that there were many within the labour movement who opposed political involvement in any form, we can locate early manifestos like the following circular from 6 March 1831 calling for a London Metropolitan Trades' Union and for fellow workmen to help themselves:

the first great evil that stands in the way of bettering our condition, is, that we, the working people of England, are UNREPRESENTED! Totally destitute of political influence in the Great Council of the Nation! ...Shall we go on petitioning- vainly petitioning- like pusillanimous beggars – for some trifling relief, - instead of every man being for himself exclusively, let us, in future be ALL for EACH, and EACH for ALL...<sup>109</sup>

Contained in this plea are working class values that we shall see recur throughout the century: pride and self-worth, political rights and unionism.<sup>110</sup>

### ***The Operative Builder's Union, 1831-1834***

While power to affect social and economic policy through political means remained far beyond the scope of the British working class throughout the early nineteenth century, traditional control over industry also slipped the grasp of artisans as revolutionary work processes threw custom aside. New modes of production had come later to the building trades but like other tradesmen, by the early eighteenth hundreds Masons, Carpenters, Bricklayers, and indeed all building operatives were forced to take stock of their poor fortune within the new regime. *Laissez Faire* had removed the prerogatives of the trade. Wage fixing principles were no longer accepted and regulatory systems such as mandatory apprenticeships, hitherto protected by Acts from the Elizabethan period, were overlooked by courts of law. Petitioning held no sway in parliament and collective action was prohibited.

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<sup>108</sup> Thompson, E.P. *Working Class*, opcit and Cole *Working class Politics* *ibid* and as cited in bibliography.

<sup>109</sup> The circular further seeks to resolve social and industrial distress, arguing to reduce the hours of labour, enhance its value and increase domestic comforts. From *British Working Class Movements Select Documents 1789-1875* Cole G.D.H. and Filson A.W. Macmillan 1965 p246

<sup>110</sup> For an exposition of radical groups, free press, Lovett and the LWMA, the origins and provisions of the Charter see Thompson *op. Cit.* and Cole and Filson *ibid* p 345 ff

The Combination Acts notwithstanding, broad and united working class action for protection and social change existed from early in the century. Gast's 'Philanthropic Hercules' for example formalised existing federations of London's trade societies around 1818 and was said to be a parliament of working men.<sup>111</sup> These groups, however, struggled under the harsh anti-unions laws and even after the Combination Acts had been repealed, effective union organisation remained tentative.<sup>112</sup>

Early unionism was not only about industrial protection; it had a radical nature. Ideas of education and progress, anti-clericalism, regulation and co-operatives coalesced with the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union that rose and fell in the 1830s. Less known than the GNCTU is the Operative Builders Union (OBU) which formed around 1831 in the north of England, federating at regional and national levels small local unions of Stonemasons, Bricklayers, Carpenters, Painters, Plumbers and Glaziers, Slaters and Plasterers. With the OBU, the building tradesmen looked to a form of organisation that at its heart had, not a desire for discord, but aspiration to rise above conflict and competition of the new economic order. Capitalism would be overthrown by its antithesis - Co-operation.

The OBU's ambitions were sky-high and one can understand Postgate's glowing view that this organisation was 'without question the finest episode in building trade history'.<sup>113</sup> Although retaining their own societies and rules, through the OBU, building tradesmen united against a common threat to their industry and economy - the introduction of the system of general contracting.<sup>114</sup> General contracting was a new form of productive organisation which led directly to a breakdown in the way workers traditionally regulated their trades. Under the old system a client or architect approached master tradesmen to organise labour for the carrying out of a contract, one for each separate trade. This allowed industrial control through trade societies

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<sup>111</sup> Prothero, I. *Artisans & Politics in early nineteenth century London: John Gast and his times.* Dawson and Son 1979 101,2

<sup>112</sup> For a useful discussion of how in the early decades of the nineteenth century belief in free market principles led to the repeal of wage fixing, the Elizabethan Acts and the ineffectiveness of memorials see Prothero *ibid*, eg p 51ff

<sup>113</sup> Postgate *op. Cit.* p 55. Postgate remarks that the Guild's Programme was syndicalist and held many affinities with Sovietism. P 59

<sup>114</sup> Discussion of this and relevant primary documents are in Cole and Filson *op. Cit.* p 266 ff.

and custom. The new system had a middleman or major contractor step in to organise both trades and labour for the job. The introduction of a main or general contracting entity allowed for direct employment of labour and for competition among the artisans. We see in this structure the very industrial dynamic that exists between building workers and capital to this day. The fight between union regulation and industrial disorder, battles against sweating, excessive hours, pyramid subcontracting and all the other facets of exploitation and reactive union militancy all have their origins in general contracting.

The OBU aimed to create a Guild system and in 1833 is said to have represented 40,000 men, a huge figure, which, according to Postgate, was ten times above the number union officials hoped at the time to enrol and forty times the average membership of previous unions.<sup>115</sup> Supported by the smaller masters, the OBU campaigned strongly against the introduction of general contracting by a series of successful strikes around the industrial towns of the North. More than this, under the influence of Robert Owen - fresh from failures abroad and on a campaign around the country persuading trade unions on the subject of labour exchanges - it became imbued with socialist outlook and revolutionary purpose. Owen adopted the OBU as the kernel to his grand system of trade unionism and social reformation, but it was a radical move that did not and could not exclude the small working masters. It was premised on a hatred of idleness, a belief that all should work and that all should share equally in the benefits of the new order.<sup>116</sup>

In September of 1833 five hundred delegates met in a 'Builder's Parliament', and determined to initiate co-operative building schemes. The operatives would control industry, with the OBU taking on the role of builder, and the skilled masters working as a type of executive employee within the union. It is worthwhile highlighting sections of their programme that articulate the depth of the operative builder's humiliation as capitalist power deprived them of wealth and esteem. It shows, too, a proud defiance and an aspiration to succeed without malice. As craftsmen their world would be fashioned by them alone, and in brotherhood. Addressed to 'fellow subjects

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<sup>115</sup> Postgate *op. Cit*, p58.

<sup>116</sup> See also Prothero *op. Cit*. p86 on artisan affinity to small masters.

throughout the British Dominions' the Programme reads:

#### FRIENDLY DECLARATION

'Our eyes have been opened...we and all the industrious classes, have been made the victims of the most lamentable and grievous errors by those who have directed the producing powers of the country. That in consequence we have been kept in ignorance when we might have been made intelligent – reduced to poverty when we might have been made to super-abound in riches – divided in our sentiments, feelings and interests when we might have been united in each of them – degraded to the lowest scale in language, habits, conditions and public estimation, making us despised and oppressed by all, when we might have been placed in a situation to be highly esteemed, and respected by every other portion of the human race...

'...we without any hostile feelings to the Government or any class of persons...[conclude] ... that no party can or will relieve us from the tremendous evils which we suffer and still greater that are coming upon us, until we... 'take our own affairs into our own hands'....[W]e have formed ... a National Building Guild of Brothers, to enable us to erect buildings of every description in England, Scotland and Ireland...[and would]... form arrangements to enable all other classes of Producers of Real Wealth to unite with us to obtain equal advantages for themselves, their children and their children's children to the end of time.

Theirs was a fantastic vision. It sought to overcome the misery of conflict and hunger wrought by the capitalist mode of production. They would erect superior buildings and they would look after workers in old age, sickness or infirmity. They would support their wives and their children who would live continuously surrounded by 'virtuous external circumstances', and no worker would be 'oppressed by labour beyond their powers of body or mind.' Their programme speaks of education and of the end to 'individual and national contests, jealousies and wars', and an end to competition between 'Master and Master and Man and Man'.<sup>117</sup> Accordingly they also called to their oppressors, asking them to join them in co-operation. Via *The Pioneer* of September 14<sup>th</sup> 1833 they write 'To the Master Builders of England':

Will you not be surprised when we announce to you, that the union has only one object...the protection of every interest in the state and your interest in common with the rest; and that your interests will be, upon the laws of the union, more safe and permanently secured...We invite you to consider

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<sup>117</sup> Cole Filson documents p267, 268. The entirety of this manifesto, one of the few remaining documents of the OBU can be found as an annexure in Postgate *op. Cit.*

yourselves as members of one great family...and to do away with the rivalry which has hitherto produced so much discord.<sup>118</sup>

No one took up the offer. The building of the Guildhall in Birmingham was abandoned incomplete. In a political sense the OBU represented an ideal too far in advance of the working class.<sup>119</sup> In an industrial sense it represented an effort to maintain systems of co-operation out of step with market pressures and the fortune of entrepreneurial capitalism. Retaliation by the larger masters, spurred to common cause by the operative's agitation, led in 1833 to the demand for 'the document'<sup>120</sup> making non-membership or resignation from the union a condition of employment. It reads: 'We the undersigned...do hereby declare that we are not in anyway connected with the General Union of the Building Trades and that we do not and will not contribute to the support of such members of the said union as are or may be out of work in consequence of belonging to such union.'

Ultimately the union was crushed under weight of romanticism, inexperience and the relentless drive of capital. General contracting became the mode of production for the building trades.

### ***Robert Owen and the Co-operative movement***

As noted, Robert Owen paid particular regard to the builders' initiatives. However, while many were wary of drifting too far from the building trade and towards 'general Unionism of the productive classes', Owen inspired many operatives to the greater goals of social change. It is worth commenting upon Owen's ideas briefly as they never quite leave the minds of the British and Australian artisan class, or indeed progressive agents today.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid* pp268 269.

<sup>119</sup> Postgate refers to negative under-currents among operative builders sweeping against both Owen and progressive unionism. Even during at the height of expectations, trade unionists in the building industry known as 'the Exclusives' sought to break down general unionism, and they remained to take the reins of smaller societies after the fall of the great organisations. This counter pressure p99ff *op. Cit.*. He noted the 'exclusives' were referred to in the journal *Pioneer*, 84 & 111 as the 'Pukes' - '...a sickening idea [that] will remind us that we are looking upon something that is filthy'.

<sup>120</sup> Filson *Ibid* p 270.

Owen's fundamental idea - that human character is formed by the circumstance of environment - collided with nineteenth century orthodoxy, and pointed to a radical review of the effects of industrialisation upon society. He saw that the viciousness and deprivation of nineteenth century capitalism was the cause of ignorance, misery and unhappiness, for the rich and poor alike. Eliminate oppressive work organisation, allow time for leisure and learning, promote co-operation and not conflict, eradicate the influence of religions, and, not only would lives be improved and character transformed, but industry would be productive and its fruits shared equally. It was a philosophy that also held political action in contempt, seeking to uproot the problem of capitalist competition and exploitation not by parliamentary means, but by simply organising better how wealth can be created and distributed. He sought to create practical solutions to injustice, and so his 'hands-on' approach was square upon the working class movement and the practical trade unionists.

Owen's own words to the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1833 announced a clear attack on the fundamentals of modern capitalism:

The members of this Union have discovered that competition in the sale of their productions is the chief and immediate cause of their poverty and degradation, and that they can never overcome either as long as they shall conduct their affairs individually, and in opposition to each other.

They are, therefore, about to form national companies of production; ...but each trade and manufacture to be united to all the others by a general bond of interest by which they will exchange their productions with each other upon a principle of equitable exchange of labour for a fair equal value of labour<sup>121</sup>

Owen's appeal to the trade union movement is obvious. What he told them was that they were equal and that their labour had value, and that the power was within them to mend their awful circumstance. He gave them a simple uplifting solution – unite in brotherhood and not in hate.

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<sup>121</sup> Cole and Filson *op. Cit.* p 271.

### *The Short-Time Movement*

Fundamental to the Owenites was the question of time at work, or away from it – how leisure time could release workers to improve their lives and reach full intellectual potential. The co-operativist journal *The Crisis* June 30 1832 writes, ‘it is proposed, to make TIME *the standard or the measure of wealth*’ They argued the intrinsic value of an article is the labour or time necessary to produce or obtain it – and, in order to have that value correctly represented, ‘a circulating medium ought to be employed for the exchange of these productions; which will represent accurately the labour or time required to produce them’<sup>122</sup> The politics of time was fundamental to British unionism. No less was it the organising principle of the Australian labour movement, in particular the building tradesmen.<sup>123</sup>

Notwithstanding Marx’s misgivings of Owen’s ‘utopian vision’ of co-operative production, he too recognised Time to be central to working class affairs in modern industry and integral to working class struggle. Marx had identified ‘[t]he passion of capital for an unlimited and reckless extension of the working-day.’ And he regarded therefore ‘[t]he creation of a normal working-day [to be] the product of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class’.<sup>124</sup>

For Marx the introduction of the ten hours legislation showed how social regulation initiated by the workers can defeat middle class *laissez faire* ideology. He told the International Working Men’s Association in 1864:

After a thirty year’s struggle, fought with most admirable perseverance, the English working classes...succeeded in carrying the Ten Hours Bill. The immense physical, moral and intellectual benefits hence accruing to factory operatives...are now acknowledged on both sides...But besides its practical import, there was something else to exalt the marvellous success of this working men’s measure...Dr Ure, Professor Senior, and other sages of that

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<sup>122</sup> *The Crisis* *ibid* pp264, 265.

<sup>123</sup> Webb and Cox note the origins of the eight hours movement have been in England since the repeal of the combination laws in 1824. They note too Owen’s claim (in *The Crisis* in 1834) to have proposed this notion in 1817. Webb and Cox claim that the agitation for the nine hours day had at its heart ‘real goal’ the eight-hour day. Note the strike and lockout in the metal trades in 1851/2 that led to the ASE, p15,16,17.

<sup>124</sup> *Capital* Vol 1 pp282 283 ‘The working day.’

stamp [from] the middle class had predicted, and to their hearts content proved, that any legal restriction to the hours of labour must sound the death knell of British industry, which, vampyre like, could but live by sucking blood, and children's blood, too...This struggle about the legal restriction of the hours of labour raged the more fiercely since, apart from frightened avarice, it told indeed upon the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class. Hence the Ten Hour's Bill...was the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.' <sup>125</sup>

The genial Robert Owen would have applauded.

### ***The 1859 London Building industry dispute***

The short-hour campaign in the London building trades coincided with the eight-hour movement in Australia. The need for building workers to maintain control over their industry and rein in work hours was ever-present in the booming economy of Britain, manifesting in continual minor unrest. Major building strikes and lockouts occurred in 1846 and in 1859 following strong agitation for a 9-hour day. Price argues that the core issue of the '46 and '59 struggles was managerial freedom opposed to worker control, not shorter hours *per se*. He believes the 'ideological perspectives of Owenism and Chartism [had been] replaced and absorbed into a variant of the dominant culture', leaving the strikes with only a narrow industrial perspective, like the introduction of machinery into workshops. Further he regards the hours debate as a very successful public relations exercise by the men to garner the support of the middle class. <sup>126</sup>

While agreeing with his premise that disputation was a reaction to the imperatives of general contracting and was one of industrial control, there is no reason to question the veracity of the tradesmen's claim that the issue of time was also primary to the unrest. To tradesmen, the struggle for time - to advance intellectually, to take their share of the social wealth they were creating - was indistinguishable from the economic and industrial struggles for equity and democracy at work. Moreover, in the

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<sup>125</sup> Marx, K. Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association. October 1864. From Tucker, R.C. *The Marx- Engels Reader* W.W. Norton and Co. NY 1972, p379.

<sup>126</sup> Price *op. Cit.* see p39ff.

following chapters dealing with the Australian situation, we find an equally strong call for time, social progress, personal advancement and a fair share of the cultural wealth of modern society, but in Australia it was being raised in the 50s, at a time when machinery was not an issue and the pressures over general contacting and job control were not yet so pronounced.

The great London short-time dispute of 1859 emanated from an initiative of the Stonemasons six years earlier, in 1853. According to a 'balance sheet' surviving from the short-hours campaign, agitation by this rank of 'enterprising and intelligent mechanics' was vigorous at first, and seemingly, it was part of a recognised demand across the Empire. As stated, 'this equitable and human concession' that began in England was occurring in the 'remotest proportions of the globe' notably with the 'Masons of the United States, Canada, Australia and Tasmania'.<sup>127</sup>

Although the Stonemason's campaign languished for half a decade, it was boosted on 12 January 1858 when the Carpenters and Joiners of London also resolved to agitate for shorter hours. Curiously, of the numerous local Carpenter unions of London joining the dispute, the group said to be prominent in the campaign shared the name of the Sydney and Melbourne organisations – The Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners. Possible links between them are discussed in chapter four. Soon thereafter other branches of the building trades joined the movement. The agreed means of achieving the concession was seen to be 'moral' and 'constitutional' and in keeping with custom and law. The working class and public opinion generally were 'enlightened and influenced' through essay competitions, general meetings, lectures and similar events promoting the idea of the nine-hour day. In addition, delegations and addresses were sent to the major building firms. The appeals were said to be earnest and respectful. These, however, were in general met with contempt and rudeness and in some cases led to some workers in the deputation being discharged. 'This conduct on the part of some of the master builders, was not only grossly unjust and tyrannical towards the particular operatives thus victimised, but highly insulting to the entire body of the working classes.'

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<sup>127</sup> This source document, known as the 'Balance sheet of the late Strike and Lock-out in the London Building Trades', written in 1860 sets out the history, and the following paragraphs are a summary of its contents. See Cole & Filson *ibid* p486 ff.

A spark to action occurred when a deputation approached the large firm of Messrs. Trollope. Several workmen employed by the company on a site in Knightsbridge waited upon the managers asking for the nine-hours concession. A mason, a prominent member of the deputation, was dismissed, causing a walkout of all masons on site demanding his reinstatement. 'Joiners, Bricklayers, Plasterers, Labourers, etc united with the Masons' in supporting the unfairly dismissed delegate, and seeking the reduction of work hours from ten to nine. The men walked out on 21 July 1859.

Employers too found common cause. A 'large and influential number of master builders' not only supported the actions of Messrs. Trollope, but locked out their own men until the strike was abandoned. Moreover, they resolved not to open their gates to any worker who did not give a written pledge 'not to belong to ANY society that in any way directly or indirectly interfered with the rate of remuneration, the hours of work, or any other arrangement between employer and the employed.' The pledge was widely known and was even 'famous' as the 'odious document'.<sup>128</sup>

The lockout and the demand for the pledge occurred on 6 August 1859. 'No less than 225 building establishments joined in this 'Lock-Out' The balance sheet claims that the Document was 'designed and even avowed to be a death-blow at all the trades' unions or working man's clubs throughout the kingdom.' It is reckoned that an enormous number of workers – 24,000 out of 40,000 building operatives were affected during the ensuing eight-month struggle.<sup>129</sup> Having reached stalemate the workers dropped the nine hours demand on Trollope in November 1859 and in February 1860 the Employers gave way and withdrew the Document unconditionally.

The 'Balance Sheet' is an interesting portrayal of how nineteenth century workers chose to initiate change and contains features somewhat reminiscent of the OBU. Introducing new standards required not merely industrial militancy but eliciting broad popular support. We find the workers appealing for moderation and for public sympathy, promoting education and culture. Yet in the face of this 'reasonableness'

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<sup>128</sup> Full copy of the document is annexured. It can be found, along with George Potter's quip that it be 'used to light a pipe', in Chandler, F. *Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners: History of the Society 1860-1910* co-operative Printing Manchester 1910.

<sup>129</sup> See Price *op. Cit.* p 45.

by the operatives, no one could realistically argue that what the workers were attempting, in trying to control their hours of labour, was not radical. The reaction of the major builders was fierce and tells of underlying bitter class tensions implicit in free market economy. Also reminiscent of the thirties was the reintroduction of a 'Document'. The terms prescribed states clearly the political and industrial intent – abandon combinations that restrain trade.

The Balance Sheet's author was perhaps George Potter of the Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners. Potter is not well regarded, if at all, by labour historians. But at the time of the strike he was recognised nationally - within trade union circles, as well as outside – as publicist and leader of the movement. His notoriety was such to be 'from time to time described in the *Times* and even in the House of Commons, as secretary to the Trade Unions'.<sup>130</sup> Potter's great influence on the labour movement throughout the 1860s and 1870s was felt as far as Sydney where his journal *the Bee-Hive* was received by the Carpenters and the Sydney Labour Council. His contribution to the working class struggle, however, has been almost completely overshadowed by the activities of his rivals, who are named 'the Junta' by the Webbs, prominent among whom is Robert Applegarth of the newly formed Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners; and it is the character of these opposing groups at the lead of British union policy after the London building dispute, that is the subject of the next section. We will see that the great and disastrous London building dispute caused the union movement to dramatically reconsider their tactics and methods of operation, though implicit in their ideology remains the influence of Owen and the early radicals.

### **The consequence of the London building dispute: the Junta, Potter, and the Beehive Group**

#### ***Building union policy following the Dispute***

The sixties saw the rise of the celebrated amalgamated societies, known as the 'Junta', and represented in the building trades by Applegarth of the ASC&J,

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<sup>130</sup> See Coltham 'The Bee-Hive Newspaper: Its Origin and Early Struggles.' In *Essays in Labour History*. Asa Briggs and John Saville Macmillan 1967 p 176 –78, 186.

supported also by the London based Operative Bricklayers.<sup>131</sup> Others coalesced around Potter and older unions such as the Stonemasons, and determined to hold on to localised union structures – closer to the rank and file and with greater degree of autonomy.<sup>132</sup> Postgate, who charts the Amalgamated building union’s success and the demise of the older branches that for thirty years had driven radicalism, claims that by 1890 the building trades, ‘once the extreme Left, the most revolutionary wing of the Labour movement, had now become the extreme Right, the most conservative.’<sup>133</sup> Further, Postgate believes, from the sixties can be traced a growing division between building tradesmen and labourers. He too calls them aristocratic, creating for themselves an island of ‘temporary and relative comfort’.<sup>134</sup>

Dominant factions within the operative builders by late nineteenth century had indeed defined themselves as separate and different from the ‘new’ unions referred to by Engels and others in the literature review. Their very determined policies won out against strike action, favouring stable and surefooted growth. Nevertheless, unionism in the building trade in the years following the great strike did not lack critical debate - the period involved in reality a flux of motives and ideas. Though certainly diminished from the grander aspirations of the OBU, the co-operative ideology remained, as did other radical traditions of working class rights, education, egalitarianism and the vote.

As indicated, the apparent division between Potter and the Junta was mainly on the basis of rank and file activism. But where the Junta is celebrated, George Potter is regarded as a ‘trouble maker’ - ‘the only discordant note of the sixties’. Moreover he is called destructive and ‘[a]gainst the careful cautious programme of the Junta urged a vigorous strike policy.’<sup>135</sup> As Postgate cautions, however, we should not overstate

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<sup>131</sup> The ASC&J formed 4 June 1860, the idea was raised in the 1859 dispute. Chandler, *op. Cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Coltham *op. Cit.* notes the Progressives withdrew very early from Amalgamation negotiations p178.

<sup>133</sup> Postgate *op. Cit.* p 339.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid* ‘The bitterness of the war of craft on craft and of all against the labourer dates from the sixties’ p 205.

<sup>135</sup> Brand, C.F. ‘The conversion of the British Trade-Unions to Political Action’ *The American Historical Review*, vol 30, Issue 2 (Jan 1925) pp 251-270, p255. Coltham is perhaps a little fairer. Like the others criticises Potter but does point out positives beyond establishing the *Bee-Hive*. He claims Potter helped the Junta reassess its policies making them broader unions and less exclusive. Also, he writes that despite his misjudgements and efforts towards personal aggrandisement, Potter’s positive contribution to the movement included the Reform agitation, the establishment of the T.U.C.,

the differences between the positions of the two groups, imagining it a split between socialism and conservatism. He calls both sides liberal,<sup>136</sup> but what exactly is meant by the term? What was the nature of building worker ideology being transferred to the colonies through immigration and trade union literature? Certainly, as we shall see, building workers accepted liberalism as easily as they accepted any other political philosophy, but only where they believed it extended their freedom and gave them the right to control their industry. If by liberalism, however, is meant their accepting the status quo and the primacy of market forces, nothing could be further from the truth.

It must first be acknowledged that a change had indeed occurred during the sixties and that by the nineties, British artisan unionism perhaps became as business oriented as is recognised by the Webbs, Engels and others: but if over this 25 year period dominant conservative elements in craft unionism began to sway the rank and file, it is perhaps understandable. The industrial activism of the thirties, forties and fifties, inspiring and traumatic, had not delivered the working class their paradise, their time, or their control of industry. The advance of British capitalism was relentless, eating away at their conditions and brutal upon the sick and the lame and the old - all those falling before it. To the Marxists there was revolution. As for the builders, they would look after their own, buffer members against the vicissitudes of modern industry, and while they took to the streets to finally win parliamentary representation in 1867, many contemplated still the co-operative utopia. In the end, even for the most conservative, their faith in class unity and social progress was undiminished.<sup>137</sup>

### ***Class unity and parliamentary reform***

In many respects solidarity between the British tradesmen after 1859 was in fact stronger than ever. The Document united British workers. According to Cotham, it was only 'the financial support from sympathisers outside their own ranks that had enabled the building operatives to hold out.' He says that the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (formed in 1851) 'had astonished everybody in 1859 with three successive

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campaign against the Criminal Law Amendment Act, and the organisation of the Agricultural labourers. Coltham, S. *op.Cit.*, p 203.

<sup>136</sup> Postgate *op. Cit.* p195, 280. To Postgate, building leadership of this time was liberal, including Potter.

<sup>137</sup> See ASC&J rules, discussed in chapter four which echo the ideas of Owen, eg education etc.

donations of £1000 to the funds of the Building Trades Conference.’<sup>138</sup> The dispute of 1859 changed the structure of labour movement. Previously, political and radical worker organisations came and went as circumstance required; but with the strike, temporary and spontaneous joint committees of local trade-clubs were replaced by the institutionalised and continuous existence of permanent groups such as the London Trades Council.<sup>139</sup>

It was also a period of continuing industrial battles and class tensions. We see for example that, in the wake of extreme industrial dislocation in England’s north, of strikes, lockouts and beatings of blacklegs, Parliament bowed to pressure for a Royal Commission challenging the existence of unions. During the Commission, according to Postgate, the carpenter Robert Appelgarth impressed upon the public and Commissioners that he represented a new form of unionism, standing for ‘peace and good feeling between masters and men.’<sup>140</sup> However, though these tactics appear to have deflected the blow of the Commission, soliciting from it positive recommendations, Capital did not walk away empty-handed from the process. From the Royal Commission came a raft of repressive legislation that prescribed penalties against them – the Trade Union Act and Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871.<sup>141</sup>

Permanent relations between Societies also allowed a pursuit of broad class objectives. Where unionists traditionally sought to regulate their trade on the job-site, conferences were now established to discuss, formulate and agitate a working class agenda, very distinct from the liberal view of society, economics and industry. National trade union congresses sprang up from the 1864 (supported by Potter’s Group) and gathered momentum in the seventies (which included other building unionists). These assemblies dealt with broad class concerns such as reform of the oppressive Master and Servant Act which was used to imprison miners refusing to descend into dangerous pits, and which gave substantial penal powers to employers but left workers with paltry civil rights. By the sixties there were ten thousand cases

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<sup>138</sup> Cotham *op. Cit.* p176, 196.

<sup>139</sup> ‘The Trade Unionists, in order to enlist support for the great London building dispute of 1859, had organised in 1860 the London Trades Council...’ Cole *Working Class... op. Cit.* p 26.

<sup>140</sup> Postgate *op. Cit.* p 283.

<sup>141</sup> See Cole *Working Class... op. Cit.* p33 ff. For a discussion on machinations surrounding disputation in the North and acrimony between the Junta and Potters group whose rivalry manifested in the directions each took regarding the Commission see p36.

brought annually against workers under the Act.<sup>142</sup> Other subject matter before the congresses also aimed to deal with regulatory regimes affecting all unions and their role in society, practical rather than theoretical measures.<sup>143</sup>

During the sixties the combined movement agitated for and achieved a major extension of the franchise with the 1867 reforms, extending the vote to town labourers.<sup>144</sup> The more prominent groups driving the reform - the Manhood Suffrage and Vote by Ballot Association, the Reform League and Potter's London Working Men's Association - were, if not in all cases led by artisan unionists, had tradesmen playing significant roles. Building operatives were foremost among them. In October 1862, at the behest of the Silver Cup Society of Carpenters, the London Trades Council established the Manhood Suffrage and Vote by Ballot Association.<sup>145</sup> In the true sense of craft elitism they believed their position as skilled artisans gave them responsibility to improve not merely their own circumstance but that of all workers.

Their influence:

if wisely directed, would greatly advance the interests of the toiling masses of our fellow countrymen in every direction. Hitherto, our efforts have been directed to the removal of one evil only, forgetting or only partially remembering, that all the evils under which we suffer have a common origin – namely, an excess of political power in the hand of those holding a higher social position...Our object is, therefore, to create an organisation for the purpose of obtaining our rights as citizens; or in other words, our just share of political power<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Cole *Ibid* p30. Brand *op. Cit.* p256,7 notes under the Act operatives could sue employers in breach of wages less than £10. It was a civil proceeding. But if a worker erred he was liable to criminal prosecution. He could be seized and brought before a magistrate, probably an employer himself. An operative could not be a witness in his own defence, it being a criminal case. An employer, however, because he was dealing with a civil matter could. A sentence of three months could be imposed on a worker who then could be sent back to his master to complete his term of service, where an employer may be fined. Changes to the Act in 1867 allowed workers to have evidence in their defence heard in court, but still left structural injustice. Cf Bavister's anger (chapter six).

<sup>143</sup> Viz: Co-operation, Effect of Trade Unions on Foreign Competition, Regulation of Hours of Labour, Trade Unions and Political Economy, Technical training and limitation of Apprentices, Courts of Conciliation and Arbitration, Co-operation, the Factory Acts Extension Bill for the inspection of factories, The Royal Commission on Trade-Unions, The legislation of Trade Societies and 'The present inequality of the Law in regard to Conspiracy, Intimidation, Picketing, Coercion etc. See Cole & Filson *op. Cit.* p515, 516, 517.

<sup>144</sup> For a discussion of the change to politics see Brand, C.F. *op. Cit.*

<sup>145</sup> Minute Book of the London Trades Council Oct 1862 cited Brand, C.F. *ibid* p251-270. Brand holds that this agitation, that led to huge working class demonstrations led eventually to the 1867 Reform Bill conferring the franchise on the 'town labourer'.

<sup>146</sup> From *Reynold's Newspaper*, Nov 23 1862, cited in Cole & Filson p523, 524.

While sensible to political power, the Association urged tradesmen not to ‘relax one iota’ amelioration of their social condition:

Our advice is to be more than ever united for the purpose of reducing the hours of labour, and for advancing its price...[We do not] wish to turn our trade societies into political organisations...[but]... Recollect also that by obtaining these rights we shall be able more effectually to secure our legitimate demands as Unionists.’<sup>147</sup>

Trade union agitation to secure democratic rights had an industrial objective. It was about political and economic reform, but it was also about regulation and industrial peace. George Odger of the Junta, it is said, was applauded when he expressed his belief that, ‘if the working class had political enfranchisement, such a lockout as that [in the iron trades] now disgracing the country would not have occurred.’ And a correspondent to *The Miner and Workman’s Advocate* ‘looked forward to representatives of labour and capital being able to settle problems peacefully in the House of Commons’.<sup>148</sup>

To Odger, the vote would deliver the working class industrial justice and control over productive forces:

the working man’s daughter[s] shall not be driven into the close garret or unwholesome workshop, there to labour fourteen or sixteen hours a day...they should have leisure hours to acquire those attributes...to make them intelligent and useful wives. Poor boys should receive a better education and not be thrust into mines before they were strong enough for the work. The poor agricultural labourer should not be compelled to work and maintain his family upon eight shillings a week, nor yet sent to gaol for taking a bit of old wood to kindle a fire to warm a sick wife. The machine...should become a blessing... not be used to drive families upon the world to live or starve as the case may be. A change in the law should not starve hundreds of ribbon weavers, nor cotton panics make the industrious workman a pauper or a dependant on charity...The working man with the vote would feel free and independent; self reliance, that

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>148</sup> Brand cites the *Miner and Workman’s Advocate* 18/3/1864 and 22/10/1864 respectively. *Op. Cit.* p257. Liberals also hoped to transfer disputes to the floor of Parliament, believing that if workers felt equal under the law with other classes they would forego combination ‘to wage war, not against their enemies but against the greatest friends they had in the world- the capitalists’. Brand p262 cites the *Times* 8/12/89.

noble soul-animating quality, would fully develop itself to the benefit of the whole of the community.<sup>149</sup>

Clearly then, the labour movement after the London building dispute of 1859, was etching a distinct political and organisational agenda that at its centre sought to legitimise unionism and to control industry. Even so the movement was no less concerned with the ideological and political development of the working class, and again, leading figures in this were building workers, and in particular George Potter, whose activities and associations are discussed next.

### ***Potter and the beehive-group***

As stated earlier, the Progressive Carpenters of Sydney and the Sydney TLC received regular copies of the *Bee-Hive*. It is necessary then to review who Potter was and what the *Bee-Hive* contained. George Potter was born in Kenilworth in the English Midlands in 1832 and was apprenticed as a Carpenter and Cabinet Maker. In 1853, upon arriving in London to work his trade, he became a member of the Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners and by 1854 became its Secretary. At the age of 27 he was the leading figure in the London working class movement, its propagandist, organiser and secretary of the lockout committee during the short-hour dispute. Apparently it was he who revived the agitation for the nine-hour benefit among the carpenters around 1858. In the aftermath of the dispute that had exhausted the building unions, and when they were in the process of reorganising, Potter pushed on to establish the nine-hour movement nationally, an important matter dividing his supporters and the cautious Junta. Potter was also instrumental in organising labourers and rural workers and was involved in fights such as against those Master Builders attempting to introduce the hourly pay system.<sup>150</sup>

Notwithstanding conflict with Applegarth and the Junta over matters such as the disputes in northern England and tactics before the Royal Commission, Potter, as

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<sup>149</sup> Brand pp 257,8. cites the *Workman's Advocate* of December 1865. It is noted the gender bias of our Trade Unionists, whose sentiments cry out to progress yet to be made by the labour movement. Though Odger is not a building worker and was part of the more conservative Junta, his paternalistic sentiments can be applied to building trades unionists generally, British and Australian, as the discourse recorded in later chapters show.

<sup>150</sup> Details on Potter can be found in Coltham *op. Cit.* pp177,178,198 and Brand generally *op. Cit.*. A web note from Spartacus.school.co.uk. makes brief biographical comment.

Postgate suggests, was no revolutionary and maintained links with liberal elements. Moreover, not even Potter, supporter of rank and file militancy, welcomed the destructiveness of strikes.<sup>151</sup> It was a period when both sides of building union debate underlined a need for class unity, and industrial regulation, discipline and control. Walking off the job could be an effective way to maintain standards, but to bring about progressive change by industrial means required an extraordinary level of working class discipline, administration, and money. Potter, in common with other British union leaders, championed working class representation in parliament and was active in the parliamentary committees of the late 1860s and 1870s.<sup>152</sup>

George Potter was President of the London Working Men's Association, an organisation created in February 1866, resulting from a split between his group and the Junta.<sup>153</sup> The LWMA was modelled on, and named after, the earlier radical group of the same title founded by Lovett. Moreover, the secretary was compositor Robert Hartwell, a radical involved in the original body. Cole notes it was the LWMA, 'rather than the London Trades Council or the National Reform League, that ... brought the London workmen out on the streets to demonstrate for Reform.'<sup>154</sup> C. F. Brand, who normally tends to disparage Potter agrees that, through organising the LWMA, he 'did render one valuable service: it was the first body to take up the subject of 'labour representation', which meant nothing less than placing workingmen in the House of Commons.'<sup>155</sup>

In its address to the 'Working Men of England' in June 1866, the LWMA Executive noted the following subjects as their aim: Complete enfranchisement of the people, reduction in the hours of labour, improvement of the dwellings of working men, amendments or abrogation of legislation affecting industry, education, and the organisation of labour. Cole sees the LWMA as a poor reflection on what was once

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<sup>151</sup> An extract from the *Bee-Hive* illustrated this point, recording a very rowdy LTC meeting in April 1865 where he was accused as a 'trader in and an abettor of Strikes: '(Cries of 'Shame, shame!' and groans.) He thought that such aspersions were most unjust and unfounded. (Cheers.) Mr Potter had by his own conduct shown that he was not guilty of these charges -(Cheers)- and he called upon them to pass a resolution which would express their own appreciation of the high character of Mr Potter, and his perfect disinterestedness and public spirit in this matter. (Cheers)' Cole & Filson *op. Cit.* pp 491- 492.

<sup>152</sup> Cole *Working Class...etc op. Cit.* p67.

<sup>153</sup> Brand *op. Cit.* p261.

<sup>154</sup> Cole *WC op. Cit.* p39.

<sup>155</sup> Brand, *op. Cit.* p 262.

‘reputed to represent the left wing of the London Labour Movement’, especially as it lacked an economic programme.<sup>156</sup> While perhaps he is being a little too harsh, it is true that much of the fight seems to have gone out of their manifesto. Yet there remained in it hope for humanity through working class unity:

we do believe that our united efforts may result in removing some and modifying other of the many social and political evils now existing...[W]e use the term workmen in the broadest possible sense; we do not simply mean skilled artisans only, but include in that term clerks, shopmen, warehousemen, porters, and labourers of every description; all in short, who live by the earning of wages. Neither will we refuse the honest co-operation of those of any other classes sincerely desirous of rendering useful assistance in furtherance of our objects. In conclusion...all true friends of Progress.<sup>157</sup>

What can be seen clearly is a continuation of the artisan tradition, their egalitarianism, and their hope for enlightened social progress, without necessarily the spectre of class conflict.

The LWMA, however measured in its rhetoric, was not reticent about popular agitation. In December 1866, the LWMA organised a successful rally in London where it was reported between 25,000 to 35,000 trade unionists attended despite the pouring rain, and the forgoing of a day’s wages.<sup>158</sup> Another one was held in February of 1867 which was joined by many others, such as the temperance and benefit societies. Some, like Brand, say the rallies were rather benign and an example of ‘liberalism and labour working together harmoniously in a manner unknown since 1832 [and that] Bright and other members of parliament were cheered by vast throngs of working-men.’<sup>159</sup> However, ill-temper also featured in the reform agitations with ‘riots’ in Hyde Park where workers took possession of the grounds for three days.

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<sup>156</sup> Cole *WC* p 43, 44. It is a reformist group, but it is easy to see remnants of Chartism and Owenism in the programme. Further socialist Political Economy had not yet been fully espoused by Marx (*Capital*; not yet fully complete). Moreover, it should be remembered that Marx was not fully disapproving of ideas like those put forward by the LWMA. His inaugural address to the IWMA in 1864, shows positive reference to Owenite schemes of co-operation. ‘The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated’. Marx argues for greater emphasis on political organization which is exactly what the LWMA represents. ‘To conquer political power has therefore become the duty of the working classes.’ Marx’s IWMA address also shows his appreciation for education, and again we see this as part of the LWMA’s programme.

<sup>157</sup> Cole & Filson p 540, 541. It is noted by these authors that these sentiments towards the unity of the working class was in opposition to the direction taken by the tradesmen in forming their broad amalgamated unions (the Junta) and the London Trades Council.

<sup>158</sup> *Times* and *Bee-Hive* respectively.

<sup>159</sup> Brand p266, 267.

More extreme undercurrents were evident were banners called for ‘Reform or Revolution’. A people’s parliament was talked about. George Potter spoke of a General Strike. Brand does suggest that the prospect of violence did in a limited form exist if the reforms did not go through.<sup>160</sup> Violent or not it was radical working class agitation that brought on the significant reforms of 1867. Potter’s role in this agitation was very important, however, his lasting legacy, at least one for which he is better known, was the establishment of his trade union journal.

The 1859 conflict and subsequent disputes allowed Potter to understand the power of the press and the need for a national newspaper dedicated to the trade-union movement.<sup>161</sup> As secretary of the Building Trades Conference, Potter had spent much effort and time publicising benefits of shorter hours and of rallying against the Document. Whereas he gained backing from journals like *Reynold’s Newspaper*<sup>162</sup> and the *Morning Advertiser*, most other publications were critical and rejected his correspondence. In late April 1861 Potter therefore circulated a leaflet entitled ‘Strikes, Trade Unions, “Demagogue Leaders”, and the Hireling Press, accusing them of being ‘[i]n the hands of the capitalist, who pays well for any denunciations against labour.’<sup>163</sup>

Potter’s *Bee-Hive* was to be none of this. Unlike even the worker-friendly journals, the *Bee-Hive* was wholly dedicated to the trade societies. Established in October 1861 and lasting for about 16 years until the end of 1876, it advertised itself as ‘The People’s Paper, Organ of Trades, Friendly, Co-operative Societies, Working Men’s Clubs, and other Associations of the Industrial Classes.’ It also had as its subtitle ‘A weekly newspaper of general intelligence and trades’ friendly society and co-operative journal.’<sup>164</sup> The paper was registered in September 1861 with articles of

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<sup>160</sup> Brand *ibid* p268.

<sup>161</sup> For this point and information in the following paragraphs see Coltham *op. Cit.* pp 176 –181.

<sup>162</sup> A Journal surviving from the Chartist period, though outside the control of unions and failing from time to time to mention them. Colt. p 181.

<sup>163</sup> Coltham *op. Cit.* p180. The leaflet is said to exist in a scrap-book owned by a Mr Thomas Dunning and held in the office of the London Bookbinder’s Branch of the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers.

<sup>164</sup> Copies of the *Bee-Hive*, including those under the title *The Industrial Review, Social and Political* from 4<sup>th</sup> October to December 1876 are kept on microfilm. Unfortunately I have been unable to locate any copies in Australia. This has prevented my making a full and proper analysis of the influence of the *Bee-Hive* on Australian unionism.

association stating its objects to be a mix of ideas which we find are consistent with the aims of the early co-operativists and Chartists:

‘To print and publish newspapers advocating the principles...viz.: the claims of the working classes for a complete reform in Parliament: a reduction in the present hours of Labour: the co-operative system: sanitary reform; and educational measures on non-sectarian principles in reference to religion.’<sup>165</sup>

The *Bee-Hive* was adopted as the official organ of several radical working class groups including the London Trades Council, Labour Representation League, the TUC and its Parliamentary Committee during its labour laws campaign of 1871-75 and the LWMA.<sup>166</sup> According to Coltham, Marx in 1864 wanted to make the *Bee-Hive* the organ of the International - starting a share fund to ‘swamp the old majority’, and dismiss Potter (this ‘rat of a man’).<sup>167</sup> Notwithstanding Marx’s opinion of Potter, the *Bee-Hive* is proof that old class based ideas of co-operatives, political radicalism and broad, inclusive, trade union consciousness were alive and well.

Though the force behind the *Bee-Hive* was Potter, those working on it also had long histories in the movement, in newspapers, pamphleteering and activism. The original editor, George Troupe, was a professional journalist associated with the liberal press for thirty years, but most importantly, the sub-editor was Robert Hartwell, who had been active in the labour movement, involved in countless working class committees from the eighteen thirties. He had been involved in the Chartist Convention and was editor of the *Charter*, a newspaper for Lovett’s LWMA.<sup>168</sup> Moreover he chaired both the 1865 meeting inaugurating the manhood suffrage Reform League and had also presided at the Crown and Anchor meeting which instituted the Chartist movement thirty years earlier.<sup>169</sup>

Activists like Hartwell were also concerned with international issues. Artisan unionism, far from being interested only with its own affairs, understood the links

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<sup>165</sup> Cited Coltham. *S. op. Cit.* p184. Coltham reports that the newspaper, sometimes devoted more than half its space to general news items, police court matters, murders, accidents etc. Coltham, claims p174,5 that it ‘exercised an influence out of all proportion to its circulation.’ He notes also that the Webbs claimed that it was ‘the best labour newspaper which has yet appeared’, up until the 1920s.

<sup>166</sup> Coltham p174,175.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid* p202 Coltham cites correspondence between Marx and Engels to establish this point.

<sup>168</sup> From Cotham *ibid* p187.

<sup>169</sup> Brand op Cit p 260.

between global capital. The London Trades Council in May of 1867 was of the opinion that the workers' position can never be improved while 'people of different countries have no regular intercommunication...for the purpose of regulating the hours of labour and assimilating wages'.<sup>170</sup> But it was not merely matters of regulation which concerned tradesmen; they were genuinely interested in the progress of liberty worldwide, supporting anti-slavery forces in the American Civil War, and we note too that Applegarth and Junta leaders participated in Marx's International Working Men's Association.<sup>171</sup>

We see that the Tradesmen of London championed Garibaldi on his tour of England – by demonstrating and providing stout defence against police dispersing their rally.<sup>172</sup> Robert Hartwell reading an address from the Working Men's Committee idolised the Italian hero, and gives us a sense of their idealism:

Illustrious Chief - in the name of Britain's sons and Daughters of Toil, we bid you welcome...Your name is a household word, the symbol of liberty, [of] devotion to the cause of human progress; for your noble deeds we thank, love and welcome you; and in the name, the sacred name, of that liberty for which you have fought, bled and won for the oppressed peoples, we give you a place - the first place in our hearts...Accept then, dear brother, our heartfelt delight at seeing you in our midst; and in expressing a fervent desire for the full realisation of your hopes, viz., your country's and the world's freedom, once more – in the unbounded fullness of our love for you and liberty – welcome.

In his equally magnanimous reply Garibaldi - 'bursting with emotion' and 'overcoming his feelings with an effort' said:

I wish to say to the workmen, particularly that I am very grateful, and shall never in my life forget the welcome of a class to which I have the honour to belong...I like to call my brothers the workmen of every part of the world<sup>173</sup>

Hartwell surely lent the *Bee-Hive* and international perspective. The internationalism of British trade unionism, so often regarded by scholarship as a facet of imperialism,

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<sup>170</sup> Cole and Filson *op. Cit* pp 528, 529.

<sup>171</sup> Debate raged among the British working class over the American Civil War, the vast majority supporting the Anti Slavery forces of the North. It has been said that Potter favoured the Southerners at first, though changing sides by 1865 where he addressed the Working Men's Anti Slavery Committee. For a discussion of this matter see Coltham pp198ff.

<sup>172</sup> According to the letters of Bricklayer George Howell. Cole and Filson *op. Cit.* p521.

<sup>173</sup> From *Reynolds' Newspaper* April 17 1864, Cole & Filson *ibid* p526, 527.

appears then to have a more generous tenor, and it is this feature of racial tolerance and humanity which will be demonstrated later to have transferred to the Australian colonies as we shall see in particular when discussing the Sydney Progressive Carpenters.

While the *Bee-Hive* clearly resonated with the political aims of the greater trade union movement, we suggest that it had particular appeal to the operative builders, especially those Carpenters filling the pubs and trade clubs of the major towns. Many of the original financial supporters of the *Bee-Hive* appear to be from the building trades, mostly the smaller societies of Potters' world. Coltham records that the first seven Societies taking shares in the paper were: Old Lambeth Carpenters, Maidenhead Society of Carpenters (Lond.), Painters' Society, Silver Cup Carpenters, Barley Mow Carpenters, Green Man Carpenters and the Operative Bricklayers (Hull). Of the next ten Societies, five were also from the building trades.<sup>174</sup> Unsurprisingly the *Bee-Hive* appealed to the émigré carpenters of Sydney.

### ***Nineteenth century British working class politics***

British working class ideology was transformed throughout the nineteenth century, and the nature of these changes have been the subject of great critical historical debate, as outlined in the Literature Review. This thesis argues that despite variations, three prominent features are consistent in their philosophy. Firstly, it was made up of many different but co-existing themes; secondly, it was a necessary response to the disruptive force of capitalism and competition; and finally, at its heart it was about freedom, rights and equality.

The activities of twentieth century radicals, with their resolute strictures cannot be regarded in the same way as the agitators of the nineteenth. Many tradesmen expressed ideas of industrial unionism and co-operation, though some argued for craft isolation; some believed in parliamentary reform, others held a distinct view that such reform is worthless. We see militancy and strikes yet also disdain for them, common

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid* p185. This reckoning as to the predominance of building trades is Coltham's. Interestingly, the large amalgamated unions, like the ASC&J, the ASE and Ironfounders did not take out shares (However, a Thomas Hughes, an ASC&J member was on the board of directors) p196-7.

cause made with liberals but also conferences on trade regulation - indeed all manner of conflicting ideas.

Moreover, the allegiances that formed between various classes of Edwardian and Victorian society, or indeed conflict between them, cannot be compared neatly with the tensions and alliances of later eras. Artisan radicalism co-existed with the sympathy of some conservatives like Benjamin Disraeli who lamented the awful poverty of the working class and who disapproved of their loss of traditional rights.<sup>175</sup> It existed among middle class philanthropists also horrified at the degradation of workers and their communities. Many working class radicals likewise worked with middle class reformers and accepted the legitimacy of Monarchy.<sup>176</sup>

It is pertinent to ask what bound these conflicting ideas and what remained common to unionism throughout the century. In this regard the work of E.P. Thompson concludes this survey of the British labour movement. His approach is broad enough, in the view of this thesis, to encompass the many streams of working class ideology within a radical tradition. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson sees Tomas Paine in the late 1700s casting the enduring tradition of working class radicalism which he says lasted nearly 100 years. 'There were times, at the Owenite and Chartist climaxes, where other traditions became dominant. But after each relapse, the substratum of Painite assumptions remained intact.' According to Thompson, these assumptions - that of the 'Freeborn Englishman' who are unhelpfully and pejoratively labelled '*petit bourgeois*' and individualistic - demanded universal democratic rights. To Thompson, the Painite tradition, though pointing to state and class power, avoided theoretical problems. It was a belief that was empirical and appealed to common sense, and was ambiguous.<sup>177</sup>

More empirical still is William Cobbett, who is another of Thompson's main springs for radical ideology, and whom he regards as the epitome of the 'freeborn Englishman', railing on behalf of the 'small men, producers artisans and farmers'

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<sup>175</sup> See his novel *Sybil or: the two nations*, that portrays the natural nobility of nineteenth century Britons rising from the yoke of Normal institutions.

<sup>176</sup> Prothero *op. Cit.* gives an interesting account of worker protests and demonstrations in support of their favourite, the sympathetic Queen Caroline, who was slighted by the disliked George IV. Ch 7.

<sup>177</sup> Thompson *opcit* p100, 103, 104, 105. For rejection of *petit bourgeois* character see pp 789, 805

against the middle-men and idle. Freeborn under the English crown, Thompson cites an address by Cobbett to Journeymen and Labourers where he warned against those persuading there is ‘nothing good in our constitutional laws’, and also pointing out to them that the Americans took care to preserve Magna Carta, the bill of rights, Habeus Corpus and the common law.<sup>178</sup> When our study notes the curious fact of radical working class support for the British monarch and constitutional rights, we can attest to Thomspson’s view that Cobbett allowed into working class discourse room for British institutions, where one may perhaps expect the rational rejection of all form of hereditary and class privilege. Significantly, Thompson, also sees Cobbett nourishing the ‘anti-intellectualism and theoretical opportunism’ sometimes found in the British labour movement.

Thompson also raises the influence of Owen in the development of the character of working-class ideology. Owenism and the co-operative movement, which, unlike Paine and Cobbett, do question *laissez faire*, have been suggested by this thesis as an important point of connection between building worker activism of the thirties and the seventies, eighties and nineties – though certainly the later period was far from the feverish OBU. Thompson accepts that Owen brought workers an understanding of economic socialism, denouncing the idea of profit, and promoting notions of co-operation, education and practical help as means of progress. Thompson also sees as fundamental to Owenite principles that were taken up by the artisan radicals, an absence of hate and ‘irrational class conflict’ and the possibility for ‘different intellectual tendencies to co-exist within the movement.’<sup>179</sup> As this thesis will attest, primary to relations between building workers and their masters, and indeed the community at large, is a sense of radical egalitarianism, without malice. Tradesmen, like Owen himself, could look with a steady eye at the Nobles and Clergy and the Capitalists, seeking on one hand not to overthrow or murder them, or on the other, to join them in oppression, but to urge them to build a humane and enlightened society.

What can be seen common to these three radicals is their belief in practical action rather than speculation. Throughout the nineteenth century agitators exhort workers to ‘take matters into their own hands’ - from the London Metropolitan trades union to

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<sup>178</sup> *ibid* pp 830, 831, 834. Thompson believes calling Cobbett a Tory is unhelpful p833.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid* p864, 865, 875, 876.

Marx's International. It is application, and not the theoretical aspect of social change that appealed to operatives; a stance that is found time and again throughout the speeches of building tradesmen in Sydney.

Thompson cites a variety of other influences on British working class, the internationalism of the Jacobins, ideas of collective, free press, right to demonstrate, of self-help and self-improvement, the 'working class Unitarians', all of which are illustrative of the rich radical tradition of the working class, and which allows space for various ideas of change within the British and Australian labour movement. The issues of rights, co-operation, empiricism and practicality rather than theory, permeated British working class radicalism. The fact that these various ideas co-existed is important for this thesis. As following chapters show, these often disparate ideas recur in the discourse of early Australian trade unionism, and they demonstrate a profound discontent, not concurrence, with the form of capitalist society.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavoured to understand the nature of nineteenth century Operative Builders which, it is argued, has been overshadowed by labour history's focus on proletarian radicalism at the turn of the century. It shows that operative builders struggled against both the ideology and productive organisation of capitalism. When first challenged by general contracting in the early 1800s, being practical men, their response was to take matters into their own hands, uniting, striking, and aiming to capture all building work in all of Britain, and carry this out through co-operation, not destructive competition. The OBU would house, educate and protect workers and their families, giving them time and a rightful share of the modern world they were producing. Though their hopes were smashed by the employers who were growing powerful through the new industrial regime of general contracting, the building unions were not fully subdued, and operatives still battled against unrestrained capitalist forces across the building sites of Britain.

Following the Great London Building dispute of 1859, opinions divided as to the use of rank and file militancy to achieve broad class goals, but there was no question as to the need to organise better as a class, institutionalise inter-union relationships through

the establishment of permanent trade councils, and to define working class agendas in conferences. There was also no question among operatives regarding the importance of spreading working class interests through a trade union press - the influential *Bee-Hive*. This journal carried in it ideological links from the thirties – co-operative societies, non-sectarian education, democratic and trade union rights. From the sixties tradesmen again saw a need to control industry and society through parliamentary and legislative measures. Overall, it is clear from the relentless organising by the much maligned British artisans of the later nineteenth century, particularly the operative builders, from their protests and struggles, violent or benign, that they were far from content with the disorder of capitalist Britain. They were angry, and they fought for their rights and the rights of workers internationally, determined and insistent on change – political, economic and social.

We will see that the traditions, aims and even the names of the British building trades unions were transferred almost without exception to Sydney. A building unionist, off the boat from Britain from the 1850s, would find a familiar House of Call and Society at a local pub, where he might read or be read copies of British journals like the *Bee-hive*. By the 1860s and 1870s his worksites would become more greatly organised under the system of general contracting. He would discuss vital issues of the trade – shorter-hours, work rules, blacklegs. He would aspire to education and debate politics, equality, injustice and democracy - just as he might in the old country. In short he would blend effortlessly into the local building culture. Thus British working class politics, industrial activism and radical dissent were carried, along with its goods, across the seas.

## CHAPTER FOUR, THE EARLY AUSTRALIAN BUILDING UNIONS

In 1850 colonial Sydney was alive to possibilities, and unionists were creating new order from the dashed hopes of old Europe. From the terrible Britain of the early capitalist era they determined for a better world, built by their own efforts and by their own hands. It was a time of confidence for the working classes. The building unionists arriving in the 1850s had been active in working class political movements in the growing towns of Great Britain<sup>180</sup> and were old hands at strikes, protests and at initiating broad class action. Using these measures they sought to advance and maintain their wages and conditions in a *laissez faire* industrial relations system.

Militants in the 1850s resolved to abolish capitalism, oppression and class conflict by means of unionism and self-education, and through systems of co-operation in a social, economic and industrial sense. Industrially they sought to bring the Masters to their programme. It was an agenda that drew upon the ideas of the Chartists, of Robert Owen, and of the Operative Builders Union of the thirties. It paralleled the later labour movement of the British trades that led to establishing permanent working class industrial and political structures following the great London building strike of 1859. Like the British unions, they went on to organise national congresses as a forum for progressive debate, organised parliamentary representation, and founded a newspaper to represent the working class. Building tradesmen co-operated with some employers and fought with others, gained the consent of the community, and educated their rank and file. In very many ways the industrial and political radicalism of the British labour movement grew fast on the open soil of colonial Australia.

Throughout the period, building workers faced a continual effort to maintain a rigour and structure to their trade, only to then have it collapse. By the 1891 Royal Commission into Strikes industrial relations in the building industry as we shall see

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<sup>180</sup> As put by W.E. Murphy, who knew many of these figures intimately, 'It would be altogether beyond the limit of the readers' patience...to detail the names...[of]...numerous other 'agitators' arrived either in New South Wales or Victoria during the early 'fifties'. It may, however, be interesting to point out that, although the places of their nativities were scattered over various parts of the United Kingdom, nearly every man amongst them graduated in that university of overt conspiracies and political ferment – London.' *History of the Eight Hours' Movement*, spectator Melb.1896 p38, 42. Murphy was Secretary of the Victorian Eight Hours' Anniversary committee 1881- 3, Secretary of Melbourne Trades Hall, Secretary of the Intercolonial Trades' Union Congress in 1884

became very formalised, though overall it was no less prone to conflict and disputation than ever. Every player, the unionist, the employer and the rogue, were set in their place watching tensely as fortunes rose and fell - making good, going broke,<sup>181</sup> walking off the job with high minded principle or being thrown off it in contempt. It was as if a stalemate had been reached.

This chapter examines the conditions of working life of building tradesmen who worked in Sydney in the years 1850 to 1891, and their relationship to their employers and society. It brings in focus the nature of the trade societies around which operatives gravitated. It argues that building tradesmen held no 'special and privileged' position in society from which they looked down on fellow workers, and sheds doubt on the veracity of the six criteria used to denote the character of a 'labour aristocracy'.

### *The Artisan's Work, Life and Society*

In October 1875 the Sydney Masons' lodge read a simple appeal from a Mrs Milligan whose husband, presumably a non-society man, had been dead some five months, leaving her in dire straits. She states: 'I am left in Destitute circumstances Having three children and a baby born since he died and only knowing a few Masons in Sydney I shall feel exceedingly obliged if you could assist me in the shape of a raffle my late Husband having a good Box of tools.' The masons drew up raffle lists, forming a committee accordingly.<sup>182</sup>

The request is not untypical of the business of early unionism, where minutes are littered with similar appeals for the auction and disposal of a tradesman's tools or the raising of subscription lists in favour of bereaved wives and families. Mrs Milligan's unfortunate situation demonstrates the precariousness of nineteenth century society, and, even for tradesmen, how close were the worlds of survival and crushing poverty.

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<sup>181</sup> Using Coolican's figures bankruptcy in building trades among all occupations amounted to about 13.5 per cent between 1860 and 1890 and a little above 10 per cent over the years 1886 and 1899. Coolican says between 1891 and 1894 building bankruptcies exceeded all other industries, see Coolican *op. Cit.* p201, 376

<sup>182</sup> Masons Lodge Minute book (Masons Idg) 18 October 1875.

When a worker was a financial member of a trade society he or his family could receive a funeral benefit, the death of his wife perhaps drawing half or two-thirds of the prescribed amount. Maybe, as with the Masons, there was entitlement to a death and disability benefit and he may, if injured or sick, receive a weekly allowance, and perhaps also take a bed in the infirmary.<sup>183</sup> If a member had not kept up his subscriptions, however, the result was quite cut and dried. As the Progressive Carpenters minutes record, 'no funds to the widow and orphans of Mr Brough, bad on the books.'<sup>184</sup>

An assumption exists that pensions and benefits of early trade unionism set them apart from the general worker. However, it must be pointed out that, for the right to obtain most benefits, members needed normally to be good on the books for six months to a year, and in some cases to have become a member before the age of forty. It must also be considered that the amounts were not substantial and even the full payment of these entitlements would certainly not protect a worker or his family very long from poverty. By the 1880s a typical payment for a funeral, from each of the societies, was about £10. The Bricklayers paid £1 10s per week for six months in the event of a workplace accident, and 15 shillings per week for six months thereafter. The Progressive Carpenters' sickness benefit was 15 shillings per week for the first three months and 5 shillings per week for the next three months. The Masons had similar conditions and also paid a relatively substantial death benefit of £25. The greatest payment appears in the Mason and Amalgamated Carpenter rules where they grant an allowance of £50, and £100 respectively, for total disabilities such as blindness, amputation or other permanent damage. Bearing in mind that a day's wage was around 9 to 15 shillings, a member, who in the last case was not ever able to work again, would need to survive on savings and other provident measures, or by begging. Even the ASC&J, who boasted of their benefits, in providing the grand sum of £100 for total disability, were in reality delivering far less than a year's pay.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> The need to maintain a sick bed in itself tells us the level of their concern: Notice of Motion (NoM) from John Noble is to subscribe annually for two beds in the infirmary to 'enable us to send any of our members there who through accident of sickness may be unable to pay for proper attendance.' Masons Idg 28 August 1865.

<sup>184</sup> Several weeks later they decide to draw a lottery for his tools for the benefit of the widow and children. Prog 6 March 1876, 20 March 1876.

<sup>185</sup> Bricklayers rulebook 1883 rule 21, Progressive rulebook 1884 rule 16, Stonemasons rulebook 1887 Class VII. 2,3, Amalgamated rulebook 1881 rule 38.1, 2.

For those building workers who lived long enough to be superannuated, only the Amalgamated Carpenters made any remuneration. Here a member over 50, being 25 years successively in the Society, and incapable of earning normal wages, could receive eight shillings per week for life, conditional that any work he managed to secure paid less than half wages.<sup>186</sup> With respect to ‘pensions’ or concessions, the Bricklayers consented to allow aged members, those 50 years and over, to work with non-unionists, but only after receiving permission from the lodge.<sup>187</sup> Aged or infirm Masons could also apply to their lodge to ‘work by the piece’, a system normally vehemently opposed. The fortunate applicant could work in co-operation with other members in the same situation, but may not employ them on piecework.<sup>188</sup> It is a notable fact that Francis Dixon, about whose enormous influence on the labour movement more will be said, died in poverty at the age of 48. The Trades and Labour council raised funds for his funeral expenses and for the erection of a monument over his grave at Rookwood Cemetery. The Council also raised money for his destitute wife and six remaining children.<sup>189</sup> Further, another prominent stonemason, James Stephenson, one of the pioneers of the eight-hour movement in Victoria, a most senior trade union figure, was also destitute in old age, both arms finally seized - he having broken them as a young man by falling off a scaffold. Melbourne Unionists in 1884 were moved to raise £500 for he and his wife.<sup>190</sup> Tradesmen, even those playing a leadership role, could not really be assured of a secure or prosperous retirement.

It would be difficult to know the exact condition of the housing of building operatives or where specifically they lived. Nineteenth century Sydney was really not old enough to have produced permanent precincts for the working class, although Shirley Fitzgerald’s study of Sydney in the 1870s and 1880s shows that social stratification was occurring in housing, with areas like Woollahra and Randwick accommodating a high percentage of professionals and other areas – many with little or no social

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<sup>186</sup> Amalgamated rulebook rule 40. 1,3.

<sup>187</sup> Bricklayers 1883 rule 22.

<sup>188</sup> Stonemasons rulebook rule class X. 16. The Progressives by 1892 had a similar rule to this with the additional bonus of not having to pay subscriptions after being 25 years financial with the society, and remain entitled to all the benefits 1892. rulebook 1892 rule 45.

<sup>189</sup> See Bede Nairn’s biography of Francis Burdett Dixon in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Dixon died of a lung disease, as did a daughter, also buried at the expense of the TLC.

<sup>190</sup> Turnbull, C. *Blue Stone: the story of James Stephenson*. Hawthorn press Melb 1945.

services – were becoming more entrenched working class localities.<sup>191</sup> Nineteenth century Sydney housing was, according to Max Kelly, ‘ frequently appalling’ for tens of thousands of citizens, and he cites contemporaries who witness a ‘terrible state of overcrowding’ and reference the ‘working man’s paradise’ to a ‘Workingman’s Hades’.<sup>192</sup>

Housing stratification within the working class, however, is another question. Membership records show building operatives scattered around town generally, and there is no evidence to show that their dwellings were distinct from other workers or to suggest that building tradesmen enjoyed salubrious surroundings; in fact, John Grant complained to the Royal Commission that he and his fellow residents of the Glebe district were ‘cooped up like sardines in a tin.’<sup>193</sup> Some areas where building tradesmen lived, like Newtown, where the Bricklayers set up a lodge in 1883, were new and with more than their share of well to do houses. Importantly, they were outside the pestilent slum areas described by Kelly. But it cannot be assumed that these were places for tradesmen on the way up. Lodges like that in Newtown being established to meet the requirements of members residing there and in surrounding suburbs<sup>194</sup> were in the 1870s and 1880s close to construction projects - rail, factories, shops and dwellings - to meet the crisis in population growth. Bricklayers, like other building operatives, were merely following the job.

The working life of a building tradesman in the second half of the eighteenth hundreds was extremely arduous. Work gave operatives a trade and class identity, the means of production required them to struggle together and form companionship. George Parker Jones recalls very well the physical strain he endured as a young journeyman carpenter in Colonial Sydney of the 1850s:

Up and before this time building was a slow process, and very hard laborious work.

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<sup>191</sup> Fitzgerald, S. *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-90* Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1987. This text illustrates very well poverty, illness and deprivation in late nineteenth century Sydney, successfully challenging the idea that workers were in a vastly better circumstance that they had been in Britain.

<sup>192</sup> Kelly, Max ‘Picturesque and Pestilential: The Sydney Slum Observed 1860-1900’. *Nineteenth century Sydney: essays in Urban History*. Sydney Uni Press 1978 He cites respectively Alderman Chapman in 1875/6 and Bertha McNamara ‘Working Men’s Houses’ 1894 p66, 67.

<sup>193</sup> Royal Commission question 9857.

<sup>194</sup> Bricklayers Notice of Motion Book (NoM) 24 august 1883.

Most of the foundations were of stone, and as a derrick or shear legs were the only lifting appliances, and they had to be shifted and set for every single stone, one can reckon there was much pulling, hauling, tightening, and slackening guy ropes, levering and lifting to get the stones in place. The same may be said for the superstructure. The heavy stones had to be lifted into position in the same way, by shear legs or derricks, but the majority were carried on hand barrows up a run constructed for the purpose. Scaffolding was a mighty big thing in the reckoning. It was all hard wood and always very heavy to handle. It was very green, being brought direct from the bush.

The flooring, oh, horror! Always hardwood...it shrank, buckled, and warped into all shapes...Stone and brick being dumped and trodden in made it lovely for the carpenter when he came to dress it. I would have said plane it, but that was out of the question. He simply scraped it with a plane, the iron in the same being turned upside down, and he scratched away for dear life generally out in the broiling sun, and often in a southerly buster that rolled through the town and brought along tons of sand and pebbles

The shooting and joining were no less a job, sometimes in timbers were tongue and grooved by hand. We had none of your modern planing machines, and the timbers were all thicknesses, being cut with a pit-saw, when laid the surface was something like a corduroy bridging, and the adze was made free use of to level off the bumps. The nails used were called flooring brads. Heaven save the maker: they were hand-made and resembled spikes or wedges!<sup>195</sup>

The degree to which tradesmen were respected and had opportunities for social elevation is a more tricky question. No doubt there were possibilities for particular tradesmen to move to the employing class, especially in the flux of colonial society. In fact G.P. Jones, whose memoirs are used here, himself progressed from carpenter and trade unionist to an employer, senior official of the Master Builders Association, and Mayor of Paddington. Moreover, as will be discussed below, the building trades, traditionally organised on contract basis, often in small teams, had an accommodating relationship between masters and men, distinguished somewhat from capitalists and labour.

Nonetheless it cannot be argued that class awareness did not exist or that workers or employers interests did not clash in a real and practical sense. Work again is at the

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<sup>195</sup> GP Jones *The Road I Came* p10,11. Jones moved from the tools to become a master builder and a respected social figure. His position on labour issues is interesting, speaking from both a worker and employer's point of view. He was certainly no radical, though professed democrat principles. Jones came to Sydney as a boy and followed his father's steps into the trade. Apprenticed in Sydney he missed the political ferment of British towns. His recollections are perhaps for these reasons not overtly political or written in mind to debate grand issues of state. But in this respect too they are perhaps a more candid reflection of ideas current on building sites in the period.

heart of the matter. Jones, recounting the campaign for the introduction of a 58 hour week in the early 1850s, finishing at 4pm on Saturdays rather than 6, writes that the improvement was granted very grudgingly. Many in the 'employing class' were 'so spiteful...they would not commence paying until after six o'clock just to be equal.'<sup>196</sup> Later, those supporting the eight-hour campaign, Jones remembers, also met with reprisals and unemployment.<sup>197</sup>

The precarious nature of employment and earnings was a frequent comment made by tradesmen, as were the distances travelled following the job. Moreover, at times employers were arrogant and withheld pay:

Rain, holidays, oversleep occasionally, and all the ills that flesh is heir to make full time {i.e. full weeks work and pay} the exception rather than the rule. So we had to tramp to work no matter how far. There weren't many sixpences to spare on 'bus fares. The distances that some men walked would astonish the workmen of to-day. The roads were horrible. There were no asphalt paths or wood-blocked roads. On Saturday, no matter where your work lay, you had to go to the shop for your own pay in your own time. I got to work with Mr H. Dobson. His shop was at Forest Lodge. I was sent to work at the gasworks in Kent Street. All the week I had to walk from Woollahra to the Gasworks and back and on Saturday to Forest Lodge and back to Woollahra. On one occasion (and I was told it was a common occurrence) I got to the shop at about 6 o'clock on Saturday evening, and Dobson had not returned from a fishing excursion. I waited till nearly 8 o'clock, and then went home without my money. On Monday Dobson told me I was a d..... independent fellow, and he did not want my sort. Of course I left.<sup>198</sup>

Those with some experience of Sydney town, knowing the many miles Jones walked for a hard day's work (and then not to be paid), would question if this life was that of a respected aristocrat – though, as noted above, Jones living in Woollahra is perhaps evidence of an aspiration for self advancement.

The infrequency of obtaining paid employment was another factor which no doubt reinforced the idea of class and disadvantage. We see for example that the Masons' minutes refer to loss of pay due to inclemency, demanding the erection of work-sheds 'as the present system of losing time in hot and wet weather is a source of great loss to

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid* p10.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid* p30.

<sup>198</sup> Jones p55.

masons individually.’ The Bricklayers minutes also refer to the issue of lack of paid work. When recording employment levels in 1878 they claim that out of a probable 500 belonging to the trade only about 100 are constantly engaged, with 350 causally employed. The state of trade described at the time: ‘middling’. Further, Bricklayers Committee records inform the TLC, probably in the mid 1870s, that of 260 bricklayers in Sydney, 200 are in work, trade steadily declining and that 4 days per week is the average time worked, due to weather and ‘so many small jobs’.<sup>199</sup>

Many of the points made above are of course anecdotal. But through them we see a great need to qualify the normal assessment of a building tradesmen’s alleged privileged position. Compared with the destitute and the infirm, at the mercy of the charity systems of the Victorian era, qualified builders were surely better off. But it was no life of wealth or ease. What they got they demanded through their brotherhood, what they earned they worked hard for, and they were often unemployed, poorly housed and mostly made no old bones. Trade societies were to provide a protective social network and safety net but as will be seen in our next section, this safety net was accompanied, even overshadowed by, industrial and political imperatives.

### **The Operative Societies.**

#### ***The Sydney Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners***

A trade union of militant carpenters and joiners existing in any town of the British Empire was not surprising, but that they adopted the title ‘Progressive’ was significant, inviting speculation as to their character and purpose. In chapter three we saw that the combative leader of the London short-hours movement, carpenter George Potter, also led a Society of that name. We noted further his fame in establishing the successful labour paper *The Bee-Hive*, as well as his ongoing activism to advance working class interests in many other important fields. Whether there is a direct link between the Progressive Carpenters in London and the Australian Colonies we do not

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<sup>199</sup> Masons Idg 3 June 1874. Bricklayers Minutes 26 April 1878. ‘so many small jobs’ Bricklayers Committee minutes June 14<sup>th</sup> no year, c late 70s. One should also look at Fitzgeralds work *Op. Cit* which deals with the casual nature of colonial employment and how the building industry in particular was affected at the completion of major projects like the Exhibition Building in 1879 and the finalisation of the water supply works in 1887. P 204

know for sure, but we do know that the Progressive Carpenters organisations that arose in both Sydney and Melbourne in the 1850's and early 1860s, though independent of one another, shared a radical and political tradition.<sup>200</sup> We know that the Sydney branch waited eagerly for copies of *The Bee-Hive*, and from their very name it is reasonable to suggest that the Progressives were more than mere union members - they were motivated agents of the working class.<sup>201</sup>

The rival to the Progressive Carpenters, the British based Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASC&J), will not be examined in any great detail because very few records of their early Sydney branch remain. Besides, they were latecomers to Sydney, and were therefore not important to the eight-hour struggle and subsequent industrial campaigns about which this history focuses. It is noted, however, that the ASC&J were the less politically adventurous of the two carpenter groups, and referred to earlier is the historical antagonism between them and Potter's group of smaller independent societies in Britain. No doubt these old prejudices were the reason the Sydney Progressives refused to accept ASC&J offers to amalgamate.<sup>202</sup>

A Carpenters Society was up and running in Sydney from 25 Oct 1853, and in July 1856, immediately prior to the eight-hour campaign, it had about £90 in funds and 27 payable members.<sup>203</sup> The early group was more than a benefit society, because they

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<sup>200</sup> The Melbourne Progressive society under T.W. Vine is said to have been established and presumably named on 16 April 1856. The Sydney Society broke away from the Friendly Society on 23 December 1856. Progressives insisted on the 8-hour principle and Friendly Society members were a mix of 8 and 10 hours men. One member told the press that the new society would be progressive in every sense of the word, 'bringing about, for instance, improvement in geometry' (*SMH* 24/12/1856), obviously symbolising the advance of humankind through education, a motive discussed next chapter. The 1884 Sydney Progressive Society rules record the initiation year, 1861.

<sup>201</sup> Progressive society minutes record continual reference to this journal and has them anxiously awaiting copies of it and note Potter's apologies for their delay.

<sup>202</sup> The ASC&J set up in Sydney in November 1875. A deputation from the ASC&J was announced at the door of the Progressives' meeting on 19 November 1877 and was admitted to state their business. They tried to show some advantage in amalgamation and left a rulebook and some circulars. On 3 December 1877 Progressives discussed amalgamation but would not entertain it, they said 'this society considers that by joining the Amalgamated Society they would be placing its members to a great disadvantage in every way'. The following meeting, 17 December 1877 the Secretary reads a letter to ASC&J rejecting amalgamation and 'read a very long reply sent by the society of Amalgamated Society in answer to same asking for the society to reconsider the same.' They resolve to inform the ASC&J 'That this society will take no further action in the matter' carried. Another letter from the ASC&J arrived 21 June 1880 to no avail. Amalgamation was finally achieved in 1920.

<sup>203</sup> Carpenters minutes in the Progressive Carpenter's collection, Mitchell library.

discussed the regulation of wages. In January 1854 Brother Henry Holland called for a general meeting of carpenters and joiners in Sydney to consider 'the 'unequal wages prevailing in the trade.' Further, in 1854, they were mature enough to suggest a report was required to consider a building society among the 'general body'.<sup>204</sup>

The character of the early union is hard to determine, as minutes are scant and peter out during the 1850s. But from G.P. Jones we understand that the eight-hour day initiative caused a stir, creating factions. Youth were more favourable to it than older men who, with 'financial calls upon them', were unwilling to take a drop in wages the movement offered for the reduced hours. The society appears to have been disbanded August 1858 and funds were disbursed among 21 eligible members. The next entries in the journal is a Balance Sheet from 30 December 1861 where they were known as the Sydney Carpenters and Joiners Progressive Society, 18 members on the books and a little over £20 in assets. As the short-hour campaign again cranked up in the 1860s, membership grew. By June 1863 there were about 200 financial members and over 86 pounds in the kitty.<sup>205</sup>

The Sydney Carpenters communicated with the Melbourne Branch from at least 1857,<sup>206</sup> and if policies were not directly linked, we can assume that tradesmen moving from colony to colony transferred ideas between the branches. We note too that the Melbourne society was one of only three interstate unions visiting Sydney for the inaugural Intercolonial Trades Union Congress in 1879, which indicates communication between the branches was active. Much more is known about the establishment of the Melbourne Progressive Carpenters Society. According to W.E. Murphy, the founder of the Melbourne branch was T.W. Vine who arrived at Portland Bay in January 1855 on the ship *Calpurnia*, and took to the gold fields. Vine was born at City Road, London in 1796, the days of 'seething agitation' in England, 'which had its origin in the scenes of blood...on the other side of the channel'. Murphy claims that Vine 'became the compatriot of John Cartwright, William Cobbett, Daniel O'Connell, and the leaders of the Reform movement of 1832. The passage of this Bill he had the satisfaction of witnessing, and soon after joining the very men who were

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<sup>204</sup> Carpenters 3 January 1854, 10 January 1854, 6 June 1854

<sup>205</sup> Carpenters minute book

<sup>206</sup> Carpenters 7 April 1857. Progressive minutes generally record only occasional reference to the Melbourne branch but it may be correspondence was more frequent.

loudest in declaiming against it then – the Chartists.’ The Melbourne branch was established on 16 April 1856, like other Victorian building unions, in consequence of the eight-hour campaign.<sup>207</sup> The defining feature of the Progressives, both in Victoria and New South Wales, was their guiding principle, the establishment and maintenance of an eight-hour day, a social, political and industrial objective.

Articles of association for the Sydney Progressive Society represent a ‘modern’ industrial idea of unionism – not merely security against exploitation, but working class unity and struggle for justice and rights. Their 1884 Rule-book - the earliest remaining from the Society – is like many such trade union documents, a lofty tract legitimising and making moral the purpose of the society and advertising benefits to prospective members. But it also posits humanistic and political ideals. The preface states with conviction that the rules were carefully scripted to protect members ‘from any oppression that unprincipled persons may attempt’. Moreover it declares:

In this age of improvement it is the duty of every trade to combine with his fellow-workman to form Trade Councils, so that disputes of any kind may be adjusted by their Delegates without the baneful effects of strikes or lockouts, which have so often occurred to the detriment of the trade and loss to all parties concerned; for unity is strength, and that unity must be with every trade that we may come into contact with.

They reason:

The capitalist finds that it is to his benefit to co-operate with his fellow-capitalist, and why not the mechanic co-operate and balance his skill and labour in the same scale of justice?

These are a mix of ideas, conscious of injustice and calling fellow workers of all societies to combine in strength to challenge united capitalists. But in hand with this, their aim was not to embark upon industrial conflict but to avoid it entirely.

The rules, further, have an eye on the community, entreating workers to act with ‘prudence and discretion in all transactions’ and so find ‘that the prejudice which hitherto existed towards trade societies will cease and men will join’. Likewise they

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<sup>207</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p38, 39, 44,45, 58.

insist that the rules are designed to promote harmony and brotherhood among members, and are in no way framed to injure, restrain, or intimidate; their motto being 'United for justice and rights'.

We can compare the 'modern' character of the Progressive's rules to the ASC&J's, drafted in England. Where the foremost objective in the Progressive's rules is trade regulation, protecting the eight-hour day, prefacing their struggle within a capitalist framework, the rulebook of the Amalgamated Society is the exemplar of nineteenth century bureaucratic craft unionism.\* They picture 'honest tradesmen', afflicted by the 'fluctuations of commerce', forced to 'wander through the streets of town or city day after day seeking to regain employment, but, alas! in vain; returning to their homes with the too oft-repeated words, 'No work again.'" The preface goes on:

This continues until upon many an honest man's mind rests, like an incubus, the thought, when and how shall I relieve myself of debt? Debt so much dreaded by every honest woman, who heaves her lonely sighs and sheds her silent tears! Debt, the natural effect of which slowly but surely deprives of self-respect, and changes many an honest man into a dishonest one.

One ought resist labelling such sentiments maudlin and melodramatic. The spectre of unemployment and poverty to nineteenth century workers was real, as were its most terrible effects on women and families (as Mrs Milligan could tell). To the ASC&J it was the responsibility of a man to guard against this. 'Devoid of humanity' they claim 'must be the men who are not willing to relieve these distresses, and to prevent, in some degree, this wreck of character, by uniting to support their brother whilst seeking work but finding none.'

Where the Progressives take a pugnacious look at the world, seeking safety in working class solidarity, the ASC&J differs in that it aspires to ameliorate the privations of capitalism by securing a sound funding base. 'Long the pride of all intelligent men', they write, whose Societies hold funds available to support their 'sick and infirm, superannuated, disabled...affording aid to families bereaved by death.'<sup>208</sup>

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\* Bureaucratic by way of its lengthy and precise governing rules.

<sup>208</sup> ASC&J rulebook, preface.

Although the 90 plus pages of ASC&J rules outline meticulous bureaucratic regulation, emphasising member benefits and centralised control at the expense of working rules and direct industrial action, it would be wrong to portray the ASC&J as totally bereft of political ideas. Like most unionists of the era they were co-operators,<sup>209</sup> and while it is true that of the two carpenter groups, the less politically and industrially active, they were nevertheless a serious global organisation, not to be broken by what they may regard as foolish industrial adventure or misappropriation.

The Progressive's numbers were far lower than the ASC&J, probably due to immigration from Britain of those already belonging to the Society, but Progressive numbers rose to almost over a third of all unionised carpenters by the Great War.<sup>210</sup> The numbers good on the Progressive's books fluctuated greatly in the period from the 1860s, with around a score in 1862, about two hundred in 1863, dropping to 45 in 1870, and rising again to about 175 in 1875.<sup>211</sup> The pattern seemingly follows industrial agitation and political campaigns. We can only guess as to what percentage of carpenters in the union were of the total trade, but at any time they would comprise only the smaller part. For example on 13 August 1877, when then Progressive's membership was 111 and when the occasional meeting lapsed for lack of quorum, they distributed 500 sheets 'showing the benefits to be derived by members belonging to the society to be distributed to all Carpenters and Joiners in and out of the trade.' If 500 was considered the number of carpenters in Sydney, and assuming the ASC&J had not yet become entrenched in Sydney, it indicates less than 20 per cent density at most.<sup>212</sup>

Perhaps membership numbers in themselves are not the important issue. Trade societies in a deregulated industry did not seek members for their own sake, only to the extent that membership meant adherence to industry standards and allowed them to control supply of trade skills. The same can be said of relations between societies where the Progressives excluded groups on the basis of their non-adherence to the

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.* The preface harks back to Owen: 'trusting that our children may see the universal establishment of productive and distributive co-operative societies'. And with principle and sobriety, libraries and lectures, 'we and our sons shall become respectful and respected, and make rapid progress in the onward march of reform.'

<sup>210</sup> Coolican's thesis produces tables numbers and ratios *op. Cit.* p363, 365, 367.

<sup>211</sup> Coolican tables membership numbers from 1870 *ibid* p363.

<sup>212</sup> Coolican *ibid.*

eight-hour principle. This policy is shown in the way the Progressives dealt with country branches. They would not, for example, allow carpenters from Bathurst to form a branch until they worked the eight-hour system, though they resolved to give them 'all they require' to campaign against troublesome bosses.<sup>213</sup> Nine potential members from Orange, applying to join the branch, were told the same, though were admitted once able to advise they worked the system.<sup>214</sup> Other unions were dealt with in much the same manner. Societies fighting for the short-hour principle were assisted promptly, skilled or unskilled. For example, in September 1871 the Progressives resolved to assist the Bakers in their short hours dispute, and soon after empowered delegates to act with the Sydney Trades and Labour Council to assist labourers in 'trying to get the 8 hours system.' They also supported the iron trades short hour strike with a £20 donation in February 1874. However, a delegation from the Boot and Shoemakers in 1872 was told to expect no assistance while they did not work eight-hours per day. Moreover, they refused to even consider the Drapers' request for assistance with their short hour campaign unless they 'recognise the short time movement by affiliating' with the TLC.<sup>215</sup>

Unfortunately the Progressive Carpenters' records are not complete, missing many significant periods of working class struggle. From those that remain, however, we can see that they formed an energetic and determined body with strong political principles; but above all they were decent. The way the Progressive Carpenters handled the huge anti-Chinese agitation of December 1878 provides a good insight into this aspect of their character. The issue of Chinese labour was a foundation for the nationalist sector of the Australian labour movement. The Progressives, however, founded upon a doctrine of equal rights as free-born subjects of the British Crown, were more discerning on the issue of race - the dispute, they saw, was between capital and labour.

The problem was this: in the latter months of 1878 the A.S.N. Co. shipping line engaged Chinese seamen on its vessels, about 100 in number, provoking a great

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<sup>213</sup> Prog quarterly 5 October 1874.

<sup>214</sup> Prog 16 November 1874, 28 December 1874.

<sup>215</sup>Bakers Prog 11 September 1871: the meeting was addressed by a delegation from the Bakers and the meeting pledged support '...by patronising the Bakers that have attached their names to the circulars...' Labourers Prog 6 May 1872, Ironworkers Prog 9 February 1874, Bootmakers Prog 25 March 1872, Drapers Prog 27 July 1874.

strike that coalesced trade unions, and indeed the general populous of Sydney, in anti-Chinese agitation. Public meetings were convened by town officials; the mayor of Balmain invited locals to attend a rally in Darling Street on the second of December. The Working Mens' Defence Association met the same night at the Bathurst street columns. Further, with ill portent, 'A Great Torchlight Demonstration' was advertised for Wednesday the 4<sup>th</sup> – perhaps for significant reasons – at Captain Cook's Statue, Hyde Park, under the auspices of the TLC and the Political Reform League.

As might be imagined, the monster rally got out of hand and rather than forming an ordered procession to petition parliament and protect 'Australian civilisation and working rights', the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that 10,000 congregated in separate groups and were addressed by 'men known chiefly as anti-Chinese agitators and orators', employing 'logic as faulty as their grammar'. Violence ensued with 'larrikins' stoning the homes of the Chinese community, and one party thrusting a lighted torch through the window of Ah Toy's joinery shop which employed 60 –70 cabinetmakers. The premises were saved by a constable retrieving the torch, and other police assisted individual Chinese men being attacked by youths – one was shuffled onto an omnibus, another found refuge in a pub, having been rushed at by 'the mob'. Unable to persuade them otherwise, the police dispersed the larrikins, laying into them 'unmercifully with whips, and staves, and sticks, chasing them up George Street.'<sup>216</sup>

The Progressives appear to be the only union responding publicly to the incident, and took the unusual trouble to glue into their minutes two separate newspaper reports of their Special General meeting in the Hyde Park Hotel 13 December 1878 where a very large attendance unanimously carried:-

- (1) That this meeting views with regret the action of...the A.S.N. company, in introducing Chinese labour into New South Wales
- (2) [As] is calculated to produce the most baneful results to our moral, social and commercial prosperity.
- (3) [The]seamen in refusing to work while Chinese were employed in the company's boats, was commendable and praiseworthy...the very

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<sup>216</sup> *SMH* 5 December 1878.

best means...to awaken public indignation to...the importation of large numbers of Chinese.

(4) [P]ledges itself to support by every means in its power the seamen in their noble struggle for the preservation of our rights and liberties as British subjects.

(5) £50 be voted from the funds... in aid of the Sydney Seamen's Union, and we further pledge...to vote... further sums of money... [and]

(6) *That this meeting expresses its abhorrence of the conduct of certain inhuman individuals in maltreating Chinese Residents and pledges itself to assist in bringing to justice any such like cases that may come under their personal notice.*<sup>217</sup>

The Progressive Carpenters here held to humane values with a more mature world-view. They felt themselves, not just British, but part of a global community. As noted, they remained in touch with the working class of Britain through regular receipt of Potter's *Bee-Hive*, and it is not strange to see them responding to the 1875 floods in France,<sup>218</sup> or strongly debate whether to congratulate the efforts of liberal leader, William Gladstone, who though having a mixed relationship with labour, could perhaps still be seen as a champion of oppressed peoples on the continent.<sup>219</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to interpret the Progressives as an elite political group ahead of the working class. They were certainly concerned with social and political issues, but were at the same time a trade body. One must remember their basic rule that a member 'be of moral character and have honest intention to the trade.' They were of course focused on the day-to-day matters of unionism: regulating trade, reviewing rules, administering society benefits, conducting wage campaigns and monitoring their membership for adherence to industrial standards. They responded to complaints like that from Brother Baker who preferred a charge against Brother Davis for 'telling a non society man where he could obtain work'; and investigated

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<sup>217</sup> Italics mine. The minutes do not state where this clipping is from, perhaps the *Workman* or other paper now lost. The *SMH* report of the resolution (13/12/1878) is also glued into the progressive's minute book but is in slightly different terms: 'The association views with displeasure the inhuman conduct of certain individuals in wantonly maltreating Chinese residents, and pledges itself to assist in bringing to justice all such like cases coming under its immediate notice.' It is interesting to note that labour politics around this time, the vicious racial overtones of the anti-Chinese agitation was not universal among the urban artisan unions, who were generally cold on the issue, the exception being the ASC&J.

<sup>218</sup> Prog 23 August 1875, TLC 20 July 1875 also move condolences for French flood, from the 'representatives of the Working Class.'

<sup>219</sup> Prog quarterly, 30 September 1878.

matters such as whether joinery work was taken home to do of a night by an ‘unnamed’ member, as was wrongfully alleged by Brother Young.<sup>220</sup>

Most critically, the progressives were democratic and diverse, debating the direction their association would take. For every point of idealism can be found undercurrents of negativity – questions such as to remain affiliated to the TLC, whether to support working class representation in parliament, whether to fund a working class newspaper. Even as late as 1876, proposals to change their title to the ‘Sydney Carpenters and Joiners Benefit Society’ were raised, though defeated.<sup>221</sup> But, on the whole they were very true to their enlightened name and principles.

### *The Operative Society of Stonemasons*

A shop steward for the Operative Masons would deliver, in ceremony, a candidate to the President, who then made clear the objects of the society. Like the Progressive Carpenters, they were industrial before beneficial - ‘to regulate the price and lessen the hours of labour.’ The rules then set out the following aspirations: ‘the social elevation of our position as tradesmen, by maintaining the eight-hour system of labour, and the Saturday half-holiday in their integrity; insuring sums of money to be paid on the death of a member or a member’s wife; rendering pecuniary assistance to its members when unable to follow their employment through sickness or accident.’<sup>222</sup>

Overall, determining the character of the Sydney Operative Masons is an easier task than our other two subjects, for there are much better records; not only rules and detailed minutes, but also banners and circulars that advertise their institution to the masonry trade.<sup>223</sup> The preface to the 1887 Stonemason’s amended rules are a little surprising given the distinguished militant history of the Society - they lack the verve

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<sup>220</sup> Prog 19 October 1874, 22 February 1875.

<sup>221</sup> GP Jones argued against investing in ‘newspaper speculation.’ Prog 3 July 1871, name change 30 October 1876.

<sup>222</sup> Stonemasons rules p 9, 47. The rules were first registered in 1884 but these are now lost. Referred to are the 1887 rules.

<sup>223</sup> Nevertheless there are limitations with earliest committee records available only from March 1856 and gaps in the Sydney and central lodges occurring in important periods such as the establishment of the labour leagues and the formation of the TLC.

that preface the articles of other less influential and less adventurous societies. Authoritative and to the point, they are not written to please the public or attract members, but are written in a way to end debate on contentious working laws. Their preface evokes a labour of office, exhorting all masons to do their bit for the organisation, and for the ‘cool and indifferent to cast aside their apathy.’ They seek ‘good working members’ who attend Lodge Meetings and lighten greatly the duties of office bearers.<sup>224</sup>

The idea of work and duty ran deep within Mason Society culture and had a long history. A circular issued to fellow workmen 15 July 1857, appeals to the ‘sacred duty of every man to be united and provident, preparing for times of depression and difficulty’.<sup>225</sup> These obligations were expansive. Beyond regulation, prudence and hard work, the Society called to higher values of unity and improvement and fighting oppression. ‘You are doubtless aware’, the document reads, there have been, and are now, men in power who will ‘encroach on the rights of the employed, causing those baneful, although necessary strikes among Mechanics, unfortunately, too frequent.’

Working an eight-hour day was no cause for idleness. The document draws notice to their Library, hopefully to ‘rank with the best’, and argues:

The devotion of a few leisure hours to the culture of the mind is essentially necessary after the toils of the day, and it is the duty of every man to render himself familiar with the information of the times; and that, by searching for knowledge and practising virtues, he may be enabled to exercise his rights and privileges as a member of the great society of mankind.

Referring to the six hundred Masons already in Unity in Melbourne it brings to mind the importance of union building:

It may be considered an insurmountable task to unite all craftsmen; but by energy and perseverance, and using our utmost endeavours...we feel confident of attaining the desired position of a high standing amongst the working classes of society [and] In conclusion, we trust that you will give early attention to our invitation to enrol ...[We feel] mature consideration

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<sup>224</sup> See Annexure.

<sup>225</sup> Niland *op. Cit.* annexes a copy of this document to his thesis, but does not provide a reference for it.

of the pure principles of brotherhood will induce you to come forward, and assist in raising an indissoluble structure. We having for our sole object the advancement of our social, moral, and religious welfare, and the study of honourable conduct and good-will to all men, in this our adopted home.

Accordingly, reading the Mason's minutes, one is impressed by the contribution of its leaders to the service of their union and its ideals. Active members regularly attended fortnightly lodge meetings, central committee, organising committees, library committees, committees for the mass purchase of tools. They ran endless subscriptions for good causes and the raffling of the tools of masons who had passed away, leaving wives destitute and children hungry. They waited upon architects and builders and sent delegates to explain their policies to potential or wayward brethren. All this and more after working stone from dawn to dusk - 8 hour day notwithstanding - six days a week. \*

The Stonemason's Society was democratic from head to end, whose processes must have consumed a great deal of their time and energy. We shall see in chapter six that John Grant, though President, was not given, but won his right to present evidence before the 1891 Royal Commission, and was criticised afterwards for exceeding his mandate. Even establishing and varying the constitution of their organisation might proceed by rank and file competition; the Sydney lodge meeting 25 April 1864 for example, resolved 'it is the opinion of this lodge that it is desirable for the better working of this Institution that we offer three premiums of 5£ 3£ and 2£ for the three best codes of rules...[for]... the formation of a Central Committee, the Workings of Town and Country lodges.'

It was a rank and file organisation. Rule 6 determines an important role for shop-stewards, who were elected, where possible, by masons on site.<sup>226</sup> More than mere collectors of dues and enforcers of membership, Stewards held power to call job meetings when employers infringed upon the rules. Their role was to settle disputes amicably, avoiding 'extreme measures' and facilitated the 'interviewing' of the

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\* An eight-hour day still meant ten hours at work. This, in addition to walking time, left few if any daylight hours, especially during the winter months.

<sup>226</sup> This point could be contentious. For example the minutes of the West Maitland branch record a rowdy debate whether a steward should be appointed by the lodge or elected by the men. Election by the lodge won out. 29 November 1885.

offending boss by delegates from the lodge. Matters of policy were sorted out in the lodge, which met fortnightly to debate the general affairs of the trade, and set up organising committees to advance issues, or it directed important matters higher up to the Central Committee. Each step along the way proceeded by rules of debate, and motion and amendment – recorded in surprising detail. At peak, the Central Committee coordinated communication between the lodges – town and country members having equal voice - and checked against ‘extravagances’ and the ‘waste’ of Society funds and kept them ‘strictly within the pale of our laws.’ The Central Committee secretary was charged also with corresponding every three months with the Mason’s Societies of England, Scotland and the USA, and writing each month to the branches of adjacent Colonies.<sup>227</sup>

The Masons were very predatory in expanding their society. Where an area of work had opened up for construction, such as in Paddington, the Masons set up a lodge; standing placards, sending out circulars and deputations to talk to masons on the job. Even large country jobs, such as the Menangle bridge could expect a delegation.<sup>228</sup> But because they followed the job, their organisation was not systematic, with many areas untouched for great periods. As late as 1890 brothers Grant and Smith were told to ‘hold themselves in readiness’ to interview Mr Coutts, the contractor on the Paramatta asylum, if he did not reply to their correspondence respectfully outlining the eight-hour rule and pay rate – such being recognised by the Builders Association.<sup>229</sup>

Grant and Smith reported to a Special General Meeting on 9 June that Coutts appealed for Parramatta contractors to be given 12 months to comply. Coutts believed his employees were ‘satisfied with existing arrangements’, and a cut in hours would mean a cut in wages and he ‘could not entertain for one moment’ to pay 11 shillings per day, ‘unless under compulsion’. The Masons shed few tears and compelled him, appointing a steward for his job. Believing the Parramatta arrangement a ‘menace to wages throughout the colony’, they set about to bring it into line, organising the entire district. Authorising train fare for delegates they

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<sup>227</sup> 1887 rulebook Class IV cl.2, 7.

<sup>228</sup> Masons committee 29 October 1861.

<sup>229</sup> Masons Idg 26 May 1890.

convened a meeting of Masons in Tattersall's hotel and brother Donald Davidson was appointed on a mission 'of stirring up' Masons to attend.

The Operative Stonemasons of New South Wales trace their origins to 7 May 1853, but a mason's organisation had existed in Sydney in the forties.<sup>230</sup> The new organisation, however, was intent on surviving, looking to register their rules, and place their property on 'a more solid foundation', raising a building fund for Mason's Hall. There is little information on the numbers of masons belonging to the Society throughout the period, but according to Coolican, at their peak in the mid 1880s it was over 500, though normally ranged around 200-300.<sup>231</sup> That they cherished their institution, reputation and funds cannot be overstated. In their 1857 circular, Masons proclaim themselves an important body, holding 'an influential position amongst the various artisans of this City.' Always able to look after themselves, and being the strongest of unions, their help was often sought. The Stonemasons' relationship with other societies however differed greatly from time to time. As will be seen in the next chapter they helped form and guide other building trades unions through the eight-hour campaign. Further, they were involved in the short-time leagues, and, like the Bricklayers and Carpenters, were among those initiating the Sydney TLC. At other times their behaviour could be described as inward looking and frugal. They were very, very careful with society money. For example, when the TLC requested contributions towards a Grand Demonstration to raise funds for the Trades Hall, they ensured that, in the event a profit was made, their donation was returned.<sup>232</sup>

Assistance and generosity were always measured, forthcoming only on the basis of working class principle. They would not encroach on their funds to help Saw Millers striking for the eight-hour benefit in 1873, probably, as they prudently observed, they had not yet formed a society; and when the Drapers asked them to boycott

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<sup>230</sup> Rules 1887. Sydney Stonemasons organising in the 1840s, see Postgate, *op. Cit.*

<sup>231</sup> Coolican *op. Cit.* p 363

<sup>232</sup> Masons Idg13 December 1875. Like the carpenters, however, they raised subscriptions for the floods in France 23/8/75. Though in a sense it could be argued that the Masons sometimes wanted to separate totally from society, keeping their own library, looking after their own welfare, and their minutes even suggesting in the 90s that union Secretaries solemnise marriages and divorce. 19 January 1891.

establishments not adhering to the claims of the early closing movement, they gave it ‘animated discussion’ and, like the carpenters, told them to first join the TLC.<sup>233</sup>

To established groups fighting for the eight-hour principle, assistance was assured. In December 1856, after their own campaign for the eight-hour day had ended, they voted £25 to the building industry Short Time League. The Ironworkers received over £30 in 1861; and 10 years after, shortly before the Drapers went away empty handed, the Ironworkers were again presented with £20 ‘to assist them in their present struggle’, they having been locked out. From 1875 to 1890 the Masons’ donations were impressive. In November 1875 they gave £20 to the Sydney Labouring Mens’ Association ‘to enable them to hold out against the pressure brought to bear by the Sydney Merchants against the union.’ They supported the Curriers’ eight-hour strike with £20 in 1881, and £20 was donated to aid the Butchers also on strike for the eight-hours. In 1890 the Sydney lodge gave smaller amounts to the Lithgow potters who were locked out, and to omnibus employees discharged for endeavouring to form a union. The donation to the ‘great Maritime strike’ was carried on the voices: ‘£50 plus 10 weekly, withdrawn; £150 as preliminary, withdrawn; £200, unanimous’.<sup>234</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to ignore the divergence of ideas that existed within their organisation and, like the Progressives, hearty internal debate. Their minutes reveal tension between those wanting to grow the labour movement at large and those suspicious of broader political influences, worried as to how it may affect or diminish unity within the Society. Nothing proceeded without caution and debate. On the question of Labour Representation in Parliament they were typically considered, asking for more information, discussing it for a few months and then giving it qualified support.<sup>235</sup> But it was *their own* delegate Frank Dixon who had at ‘some

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<sup>233</sup> Masons Idg 19 November 1873. However they raised subscriptions on site, 19 November 1873. Drapers 29 July 1874.

<sup>234</sup> Masons Idge Building trades 4 December 1856, Iron workers 1 July 1861, 8 July 1861, 22 July 1861, 25 February 1874, Labourers 1 November 1875, Curriers, Masons’ Committee 5 May 1881. Butchers Masons’ Committee 15 November 1883, Potters Masons 12 May 1890, Maritime Masons Idg 1 September 1890, (another £100 27 October 1890).

<sup>235</sup> Masons Idg 17 July 1874 & 24 September 1874.

length' moved in Council they bring before the Societies the question of direct labour representation in the colony's Legislative Assembly.<sup>236</sup>

Likewise, it sometimes took several attempts for more altruistic members to achieve their ends. Brother Stephen Brown failed to have £50 voted to the Victorian Masons on strike in early 1859, but succeeded much later, in December. Similarly a request from the English society for funds to support striking Birmingham Masons in 1869 met with great debate, some wishing to pay £50 while others wishing to arrange voluntary subscriptions. Support for the Newcastle miners was similarly split.<sup>237</sup>

Thus the Masons as a body were not always of the same mind and there can be found as many examples of class-consciousness evident in their earlier period, as there are elitism in the later. We see for instance a distinct lack of prejudice by leading masons over less skilled workers when recommending Scabblers be admitted to the Mason's anniversary dinner in 1857.<sup>238</sup> Further, around 1890 we also see examples of class consciousness when the Sydney lodge praised Bros Thompson and Halliday for their 'manly and independent spirit' in upholding the 'rules of Unity' regarding supporting the United Labourers. We see it again when in reference to the Maritime dispute, Masons spoke of Monster demonstrations, banners and 'all the panoply of war'. But then again in the 1890s there were some much less principled. We find for instance, that Bro Dickinson, in 'orating' on trades unionism generally, 'reckoned that labourers were not sufficiently aristocratic to join the Building Trades Council' - which of course elicited an enlightened counter response.<sup>239</sup>

The circular of 1857 reveals how the Masons always imagined society could be perfected, and it is again worth noting that Mason ideology of the 1850s was bedded in Chartist tradition. W.E. Murphy, though speaking of the Victorian branch, claims that their leader James Stephens, referred to earlier, was as a young man involved in the Newport riots. He narrowly escaped capture, fled to London where, like Thomas

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<sup>236</sup> TLC 22 October 1873, Dixon was supported by other building representatives.

<sup>237</sup> Masons committee 15 October 1869. It appears they settled on a compulsory 2 and 6 levy the following month. Newcastle Masons committee 6 April 1882.

<sup>238</sup> Masons committee 21 July 1857.

<sup>239</sup> Masons Idg Special meeting 5 September 1890, Talk of monster demonstration and United labourers & Dickinson's elitist statement 23 December 1889. The statement is the only one of its kind to be found in Masons' minutes.

Vine, he associated with Lovett and other radicals. Stephens is said to have been removed from working on Windsor Castle when discovered to be a Chartist, and to have also worked on Parliament house and among those handing up 'the great petition'. There is no reason to doubt that the Sydney Masons were of the same stamp as their Victorian brothers.<sup>240</sup> We see further, that enlightened ideology influenced the Mason's thinking, expressing itself in small ways such as the Central Committee's password for the quarters October 1869 and January 1870, the humanist catch-cries 'Advance' and 'Progress'.<sup>241</sup>

A stand out feature of the Masons is the issue of education and literature. Throughout the decades the question of books and libraries was of central debate. The library must have been sizable, and well loved. Stephen Brown, who was often elected librarian in the early years, was congratulated in true Mason spirit: 'The Librarian having purchased some books which were brought to the lodge, it was unanimously resolved that the lodge approves of the selection made by the librarian.'<sup>242</sup> In November 1856 it was large enough to warrant a code for its governance and in February 1863, 300 catalogues were printed and the collection insured for £150 - a significant amount.<sup>243</sup>

The books were well used (45 rebound in December 1866), and were distributed to country lodges. However, by mid 1868 discussion began as to the disposal of the library<sup>244</sup> - a debate that took several years to conclude. Not all masons cared for such things and some wished that those 'who wish to reap the benefit of the said library' pay a penny per fortnight to use it.<sup>245</sup> The library was finally sold off in May 1870, but the matter of literature never really left them. They lobbied the government

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<sup>240</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p43, 44. According to Murphy, among those who met at the Parramatta Hotel, Sydney in 1855 to initiate the eight-hour movement, were some of the 'tramps' from Victoria, p40.

<sup>241</sup> Masons Cottee 13 May 1861. 'It was resolved that we have a pass word to be changed quarterly in order to prevent improper persons entering the lodge room during the hours of business...the pass word for the present quarter be Unity'. Advance 15 October 1869, Progress 21 January 1870.

<sup>242</sup> Masons ldg 6 November 1856.

<sup>243</sup> Masons ldg 16 February 1863, 31 March 1863.

<sup>244</sup> Masons ldg 27 July 1868.

<sup>245</sup> Masons ldg 3 September 1869.

to provide for public libraries, and while John Grant's proposal to create a circulating library was rejected, they nevertheless continued to fund the Literary Institute.<sup>246</sup>

The question of free and secular education was also of deep concern to the Masons. In September 1874 we see Frank Dixon share the public podium with persons of significance to colonial society – including barristers and clergy - on the issue of national, secular, compulsory, and free education. He announced to the crowd on behalf of working men that the 'Bishop and nine-tenths of the clergy were unpractical men', and where in religion they could gain his respect, but when they 'stepped in and wanted to interfere with their secular right he would object.' The majority of workers, he said, knew enough to educate their children, but others of vicious disposition, unwilling to work, unwilling and unable to find means to send their children to school – 'these people had their moral obligations blunted, and it would not do to allow them to neglect their duty in regard to the education of their children.' Dixon believed education was the 'dearest commodity' of the State, and that it ought to initiate night school of 'high character' for boys in the workshops. Even entrance to college and university should be a great deal easier according to Dixon.<sup>247</sup>

Our chapter on the Royal Commission speculates on the range of John Grant's reading and the influence of Owen, Paine, Bellamy and George on his thinking. Grant was not alone. Political literature was very important to the Masons and provided for lively debate. Discussion whether to welcome Henry George on his visit to Sydney is a very good illustration of this. Brother Cremin, while he admired the writings of George, really did not know enough about him, and threatened to withdraw his name from the Society and begin another union that dealt with trade issues alone, believing that nothing was more damaging to trades unionism than political discussions. Welcoming George, he said, 'would very likely terminate in disruption and disunion'. Brother Ashton agreed that it was a great mistake to 'interfere in political matters'. Besides, he maintained, the idea of Land Nationalisation originated with 'Carlyle and a previous writer',<sup>248</sup> and he further 'likened one or two members present unto

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<sup>246</sup> Masons Committee 7 April 1881, the Masons Committee has delegates wait upon the Colonial Secretary regarding a Public Library, Literary Institute Masons 9 December 1889, Circulating library Masons Idg 2 March 1891.

<sup>247</sup> *SMH* 22 September 1874.

<sup>248</sup> Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1834) was of course the radical son of a Scottish stonemason.

Demagogues' before resuming his seat. Brothers Thornton and Kelly supported the welcome believing George elevated the masses and upheld trades unionism, and his were 'fit to equal the works of the greatest writers of the age.' Brother Ware, thought George's ideas 'might ameliorate the condition of the working classes', but wanted politics kept out of the Society. The Lodge voted 14 to 10 to welcome George, 10 abstained.<sup>249</sup>

The Masons built a union with serious political, social and industrial objectives, and made decisions that mattered. Their banners recognise their major contribution to society, the eight-hour day, in which they imbue a spiritual quality. One standard is a giant eternal eight, pushing out of a golden background from between gates of paradise. It moves towards the viewer, from a past in the distance, to a point in the future.<sup>250</sup>

### *The Operative Society of Bricklayers*

Bricklayers are today and have always been hard men and tough to organise. Their 1883 rules dictate a severe penalty of up to £5 for 'Riotous Behaviour' and the 'assault by striking' of officers or members during lodge meetings or when conducting the business of the Society.<sup>251</sup> One can sympathise with the Bricklayers Secretary Thomas Bavister who we shall see later tell the Royal Commission that he evoked 'ire of the majority of Sydney bricklayers' in calling halt to industrial action. In this cut-throat industry bricklayers keep a watchful eye upon contracts and competitors and seek to win work keenly.

Their rules prove what a difficult task they had to maintain brotherhood and unity, challenged as it was by the relatively easy flow of labour into and around their trade. The threat which unskilled labour posed to their livelihood manifested in a fanatical adherence to the idea of craft. In 1883, rule number one strictly confined their membership to tradesmen: 'No person is eligible to become a member who is not by

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<sup>249</sup> Masons Idg 17 February 1890.

<sup>250</sup> See appendix.

<sup>251</sup> Bricklayers 1883 rule 36.

trade a Bricklayer.’ On lodge night they would raise accusations against incompetents and non-tradesmen.<sup>252</sup>

To prevent destructive ‘discord and animosity’ threatening ‘friendship and union’, members were advised in preamble, and indeed ordered by rule, against divulging the Society’s business or ‘the name, place, or abode of, or describe in any way, the member or members who spoke for or against any member or matter in question.’ The maintenance of unity and friendship was basic to their regulation of industry – they even took care to advertise the death of a brother and request attendance at his funeral. And they provide for a yearly reunion at the cost of £100 where members were expected, on pain of a pound, not to misbehave.

The Operative Bricklayers were a respectable organisation, and surveillance of miscreants is a common theme. Placed in very firm hand on the motion book of the Bricklayers 25 July 1878 reads: that the Demonstration Annual Picnic Committee ‘be empowered that if any member...should misbehave at the annual Picnic or cause others to obstruct the proceedings on the day in any shape whatsoever...to impose a penalty of no less than ...10/6 for each offence and not more than twenty one shillings.’<sup>253</sup> Meetings too were supposed to proceed with a modicum of decorum - it is noted in the minutes of 17 May 1870 that Brother Thomas Hilton received fines totalling 1/3 by order of the President for interrupting the meeting 3 times and swearing twice.<sup>254</sup>

Due to a paucity of records we cannot be certain of the date the Operative Bricklayers Society formed. Stonemason minutes reveal that in 1856 there was no bricklayers’ society at all, and it appears that no interested bricklayer attended the initial meetings called to campaign on the eight-hour question. It is however, safe to say they had established their organisation by the early sixties when the second round of

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<sup>252</sup> Eg NoM undated (probably 1882/3) Moved by Alfred Jackson and John Dillon ‘That Isaac Smith be expelled from this lodge he not being a competent Bricklayer’. By 1887 this point was dropped as a specific rule altogether, being replaced by one stipulating a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. The craft rule of course remained implicit throughout the regulations, and the issue was certainly alive in lodge meetings.

<sup>253</sup> Bricklayers NoM 25 July 1878.

<sup>254</sup> Moralising and scrutinising seems also to have extended to other unions - we see them write to the eight-hour league complaining of gambling and of tickets allegedly sold twice.’ Bricklayers 13 February 1872.

campaigning for the eight-hour day started. Accordingly, eight-hours work became a main plank to their industrial ideology. Their 1883 preamble exhorts they ‘employ every legitimate means to maintain the eight-hour system’, ‘resist injustice and repel attack, and ameliorate their condition’.

The Bricklayers have left little behind; rough minutes, but no banners,<sup>255</sup> no pamphlets or memoirs, and so it is difficult to move beyond speculation as to their attitude to politics, the economy and society, particularly for the fifties and the sixties. Certainly, like the Masons and Carpenters, they wanted full share of the wealth they were producing and claimed a right to leisure. To entrench their Saturday half-holiday rule they purchased a cricket set, no doubt to advertise to the public their right to the good things in life.<sup>256</sup> The closest we come to idealistic motives however, is an amendment to the 1887 rulebook where funds are to be donated to the Trades Hall and Literary Institute.<sup>257</sup>

During the seventies, the Bricklayers were often very cautious towards the broader initiatives of the newly established trades and labour council, being of the opinion in 1871 for example, that ‘it would be very injudicious on the part of the council to think of working a newspaper [and] in the event of their entering into such...are not to expect any support from this society into the matter.’<sup>258</sup> Nor did they ‘see the wisdom of entertaining the question of a Trades Hall’<sup>259</sup> (though they became more curious about it a few years later). The Bricklayers were not convinced to support a building society being promoted by the Engineers. Finally, they made no contribution to the Intercolonial Trades’ Union Congresses. On the other hand in 1875 they were much better disposed – one can even glean a little excitement - towards funding the TLC’s ‘arrangements for the ‘representation of the working classes in parliament.’<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> A description of their banner, costing around £100 appears in their Committee book c February 1872. It featured images of Rome, London, the Sydney railway and the eight-hour symbol.

<sup>256</sup> Bricklayers 28 October 1873 We see they went on a excursion to Balmoral, £30 being taken from the funds to provide members with free tickets for he and his wife or lady friend. Children over 5years sixpence. 8 July 1873.

<sup>257</sup> Rulebook 1887 rule 4.

<sup>258</sup> Bricklayers 27 June 1871.

<sup>259</sup> Bricklayers 15 August 1871.

<sup>260</sup> Engineers Bricklayers 2 December 1873, represent workers Bricklayers NoM 22 December 1874 (vote 19 January 1875).

However, although they were a quarrelsome and fractured workforce, and as we shall see later, fully consumed with the problems of enforcing their rules, the Bricklayers of Sydney were not inward looking. They had a good understanding of working class principles and of united struggle. For example they communicated with the Bricklayers in Melbourne, seeking not merely to know the state of trade and transfer benefits for travelling members, but, in the words of one of their more active and thoughtful members, David Jones, to 'foster good fellowship'.<sup>261</sup> It is also known that they regularly communicated with and gave practical support to local societies, especially through the eight-hour day and short hour activities. They were testy members of the Eight-Hour League, foundation members of the TLC, and through these forums appear always ready to help other societies in their struggle against the masters.

In relation to the Bakers, where the masters wished to 'break up' the union and reintroduce the long hour system, they carried a unanimous resolution to read a list of offending bakeries on lodge night for three months, and give 'all the moral support in their power'.<sup>262</sup> Minutes record that £10 was given to the iron trades short-time dispute in June 1872, and in December 1873 they donated £10 to sawyers on strike for the eight-hour day.<sup>263</sup> In 1874 they were willing to receive a subscription list for the relief of engineers on strike with some members proposing they donate up to £100; £50 is later suggested, though a more moderate £20 is finally agreed to.<sup>264</sup> However, in spite of these and many other examples of them supporting working class principles, the Bricklayers do not record political or social debate at all.

It would be unfair perhaps not to suggest an explanation for the absence of a stated political or social agenda for the Operative Bricklayers. One could argue that their society lacked a proper class agenda because it included contractors who were still on the tools though employing small teams. But such factors did not prevent the Masons and Carpenters, whose membership also included small employers, from conveying progressive aims. The more likely reason was an absolute necessity for them to focus

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<sup>261</sup> Bricklayers NoM 19 November 1878.

<sup>262</sup> Bricklayers 2 May 1873, 1 July 1873, 20 January 1874. They again support the Bakers, twice in 73 and in January 74.

<sup>263</sup> Bricklayers 23 July 1872, 2 December 1873.

<sup>264</sup> Bricklayers 23 July 1872, 2 December 1873, 3 February 1874.

their attention upon industrial matters. Of the three unions, the problem of industrial regulation was most intense to bricklayers, as the trade could easily be broken into subcontract crews and was therefore open to fierce competition – it is this basic aspect of the working class struggle that occupied a vast amount of their time on lodge night.

For this reasons Bricklayers did not step with the confidence of other Societies, and were careful not to bite off more than they could chew. Regional branches for example were not set up till later decades<sup>265</sup> and it was not assumed they would be able to maintain common standards. Their working rules would be founded ‘on the customs and wages of the trade in the locality at that time on the understanding that the members of the Branch use their utmost endeavours to make their hours of labour the same as those of the central lodge.’ The bricklayers could hardly control the city.

Suggestions came forward in the late 1870s for the election of a ‘walking delegate’ to visit sites and police society laws.<sup>266</sup> This delegate, forerunner to the modern organiser, appears in the rules as the Steward. His role was to investigate jobs where society and non-society men were found working together and bring charges against them. Later the rule was changed to checking on Society men alone for infringements. One can imagine fierce encounters to enforce rules across a site where bad members and non-Society men were working. One can also envisage pressure and resentment falling upon a diligent Steward, whose actions he must have hoped would not prejudice others against him for getting future work in the trade. While some Stewards were elected by the lodge, appointment by the President, as is prescribed in the regulations, may have been the only way to recruit for the position; there was a huge and rapid turnover. From February 1881 to 1889 it has been assessed that at least 30 were elected or appointed stewards, and 10 are recorded as having resigned.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> In a Bricklayers’ NoM 15 October 1878, David Jones suggested a name change from a Sydney to NSW operative bricklayers, allowing them to form branches throughout the colony, ‘In Order that our Principals may be as Wildley (sic) Known as Possible so that the Bricklayers of the Whole Colony Know what Good and Happy benefits they will Deliver by becoming members of such Society’.

<sup>266</sup> Bricklayers NoM 28 May 1878 ‘That we shall have a walking delegate for the Bricklayers Society at the rate of 3£ ‘12 per week to be elected by the members of the lodge’.

<sup>267</sup> Noel Butlin Archives Z534 Bricklayers Administrative History. This document does not reference sources and may be inaccurate.

The Bricklayers' Committee kept detailed minutes of site inspections, where workers endlessly inform on each other, providing flimsy excuses for flagrant breaches of rules, and all manner of skulduggery. The number of scoundrels pervading the industry frustrated the organisation, and we find complaints such as that against Ed Williamson who was in the habit of going on jobs where society men were working and leaving after a few days to avoid joining the Society, then going onto another – presumably picking up good union rates.<sup>268</sup> In short they were not able to enforce rules effectively and fines, strikes and deputations were very frequent business. Little wonder we see by the late 1880s bricklayer leaders like Tom Bavister so attuned to the need for settling matters with the builders, as will be shown later in our section on the 1891 Royal Commission.

The Bricklayers' rules also indicate internal distrust from top to bottom and are drafted to cater for the rogues that inhabited the trade. Whereas trade unions normally see their peak representative as a Corresponding Secretary, the Bricklayers' rules instead had three Secretaries acting as controllers, a Minute Secretary, a Check Secretary and most importantly, a Financial Secretary whose duties included keeping account of expenditure, placing receipts and arrears on member contribution cards and preparing balance sheets. The Treasurer was required to find a bond of £50 to fulfil his duties, the three trustees a bond of £300 each, and to live within 10 miles of the lodge. Other rules took care to cover general misappropriation of dues, fining members or office bearers neglecting to pay in subscriptions entrusted to them by fellow bricklayers. Finally, to keep tabs on members and their financial status, Union tickets of different colours were issued each year, to be shown when required.

Nevertheless, and probably due to aggressive tactics outlined above, the Bricklayers appeared to have a fair coverage of the trade. Coolican's assessment is that in 1878 they had 370 members at a time when their minutes record there were probably about 500 in the trade. If true they would have covered about 75 percent of eligible

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<sup>268</sup> 10 February 1874, 16 July 1872.

tradesmen.<sup>269</sup> By the eighties, however, the strain of recruitment in this aggressive manner was having strain on the organisation as the economy grew, a problem that affected the Stonemasons and the Carpenters, as we will see later in evidence to the Royal Commission. In the Bricklayers' minutes can be found a notice of motion from Brother William Jones who outlines the problem. He puts to the 'President & Members of the U.O.B.T.Soy.n.s.w' on 9 August 1881 that he wished the rule concerning working with non-society men amended. At the time the rule stated that no members shall be allowed to work with any bricklayer who is not a member of this Lodge or shall be fined five shillings per diem in each case'. His notice argues:

it has long been the rule in England & is the same to this day, also in the sister colonies that a member is eligible to work with a non-society man providing he is a qualified bricklayer, - that is one who has been brought up to the trade. And try to persuade him to join the lodge, instead of trying to force him to become a member, before he knows probably what he is joining, he never having seen the rules of our society

Moreover, he says

Members of the Lodge do not according to our rules get the advantages equivalent to non-society-men's for non-society Bricklayers can work on a job with society men according to rules now in force until the next lodge-night, & then pay one half crown, and leave the job and forfeit it...[and]...in my opinion,- & I think that a great many members are of the same opinion, that the advantages to be gained are on the side of the non-society men, who can go to work while the society man walks about looking for work.

The problem of unionisation was again raised in a Bricklayers' notice of motion 21 December 1883, this time by six members who wanted the lodge to consider altering the rules so it reads, 'that Society Bricklayers can work on non. Society Jobs with a view of getting such Jobs. made Society Jobs. But on no account shall a non society man work on Society Jobs. unless he is willing to become a member on the first regular meeting after starting with Society men.'<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Coolican *op. Cit.* p363. Bricklayers 26 April 1878. This seems too high a figure and is based on the assumption the Bricklayers' report of a possible 500 'belonging to the trade' does not mean belonging to the society.

<sup>270</sup> Bricklayers NoM of those dates. The Progressive carpenters' revised rules of 1884 also show they had had problems dealing with non-members see rule 31: 'Members of this Society are not prohibited

Turmoil in the Bricklaying industry in the 1870s and 1880s resulted from an expanding colonial economy and coming to terms with the problem of general contracting, and we see clearly how these pressures on traditional forms of regulation began to alter class relationships, revealing different interests between contractor members who employed trades and labour, and wage-workers. They were confounded by the problem. Their first response was to protect their rightful trade prerogative:

use all and every legitimate means within their power to bring the full interest of our trade into our own hands as Bricklayers. That is to say – to avoid subcontracts from other than Proprietors or Architects of work properly belonging to our trade. That we work day work only (under Carpenters. Crossed out) – unless the Bricklayers subcontracting find all materials which may be in connection with our trade.<sup>271</sup>

The second was to approach the Architects and Brickmakers for assistance. The Operatives were hopeful that contractual arrangements or specifications made by Architects and Brickmakers would enforce their rule against the ‘present evil system’ of piecework subcontracting. The Architects, though very supportive, determined that the ‘power’ was with bricklayers themselves.<sup>272</sup>

More than a year later the situation remained. The Bricklayers, under pressure to enforce the rule on members wanting to take labour only subcontract work attempted a third tactic, industrial pressure - finding common cause with the Labourers Union against bricklayers potentially moving out of the Society to take on labour only subcontracts. This forward-thinking initiative from the leadership group caused a negative backlash from rank and file traditionalists. The circumstances begin with the following committee meeting entry for 8 March 1872:

for the benefit of the trade there should be a letter sent to the labourers requesting their Co operation in the matter that is not to work with non society Bricklayers nor Bricklayers to work with non society labourers as

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from working with non-Society Carpenters and Joiners, but are expected by all fair and legitimate means to induce such persons to join the Society.’ 32,33 and 35.

<sup>271</sup> Bricklayers quarterly 17 May 1870.

<sup>272</sup> Deputation to Architects and Brickmakers elected 21 June 1870. Discuss architects response 9 August 1870.

we have passed a new rule in our society to do away with labour only shall lose confidence with some of our members

Although the lodge would not entertain the suggestions at first, committee members, independent of the Society, informally approached the Labourers with a proposal to unite.

Notwithstanding the initial lukewarm response to the suggestion, following a series of meetings the Bricklayers' lodge agreed to look at the proposal to combine with the labourers. In late July the committee wrote very respectfully to the labourers inviting their co-operation, suggesting they pay labourers who struck against non-society bricklayers, and, concluding in very humble, and probably accurate terms that, we 'can assert that our financial position is good and have members worthy of the name of OBS although admitting that some of us do not possess the real qualities of society men.'<sup>273</sup>

A series of joint committee meetings was held with the labourers in August and September where labourers took the opportunity to introduce into discussion a grievance they were working under. They felt too much was being asked of them and they sought to limit the number of trowels they should serve.<sup>274</sup> The deliberations concluded with the following main points:

- 1 The Protective Society of Labourers were invited to co-operate with the Operative Bricklayers; 'the object being to initiate an adjustment of the principles of Labour, also to remove certain disabilities we...contend with...' A labourer striking against non-society Bricklayers shall receive the sum of 5 shillings per day whilst out on strike. Bricklayers will advance £50 to defray labourer's claims.
- 2 No Society bricklayer to work with a non-society labourer.
- 3 That Labourers shall not serve more than two Journeyman Bricklayers on ordinary work on the ground floor. When the building reaches one story high, there shall be two labourers to three bricklayers and at three stories, one labourer would serve one

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<sup>273</sup> Bricklayers Committee, 8 March 1872, 19 July 1872. Lodge Minutes, 16 July 1872. Letter to Labourers 30 July 1872.

<sup>274</sup> Bricklayers committee 2 August 1872.

bricklayer. Further, labourers would be entitled to declare on the funds when unable to serve a bricklayer or employer in breach of this rule.<sup>275</sup>

During negotiations the Labourers were apprehensive as to whether rank and file bricklayers would accept the labour limit rule in good faith, and assuredly their concerns were correct. A summonsed meeting of the Bricklayers Lodge in September rejected the proposals. The Labourers took great umbrage. In response to a brief note from the Bricklayers rejecting the plan, the Labourers replied in terms a little more than terse: We 'as a body' they wrote 'are sorry the case should have met so little consideration at the hands of the Bricklayers – after initiating it...the labourers society deem it nothing short of an insult...the object sought to be obtained by them – 'vis', the better regulation of labour, they intend to put in force and carry out themselves.'<sup>276</sup> War between the Societies had broken out.

On 1 October 1872 Labourers announced their new rule 'regulating the number of Bricklayers they shall serve', coming into affect at the start of December. By 17 December the move seemed to be having an impact, the following motion appeared on the Bricklayers' notice books: 'no-members of this society, shall employ society labourers, as long as they work under the rule lately passed in their lodge, - stating how many bricklayers they shall serve, any member employing the said labourers shall be made a Penalty of 2/6 per day for each one they employ.' The matter was debated vigorously at a summonsed meeting on 14 January where a proposed amendment to resolve matters with the labourers was lost, and the meeting night 28 January 1873 confirmed for the next day that they shall 'refuse to work with society labourers under their new rule.' A delegation was elected to 'visit all workers where society bricklayers are employed – and to report next meeting night as to what labourers are employed'.

On 4 February this delegation provided a list of nine bricklayers working with offending labourers, including some who appear to be prominent members of the Bricklayers' Society. The following investigation on 11 February found them all

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<sup>275</sup> Bricklayers committee, 2 August 1872, 9 August 1872, 17 August 1872, 23 August 1872, 30 August 1872.

<sup>276</sup> Bricklayers lodge rejection 10 September 1872, copy of letter 17 September 1872.

guilty but, maybe due to the perversity of the situation, the committee passed responsibility of fining the men back to the lodge. The lodge too was indecisive, but eventually inflicted the fine. Seven more were later charged, including long-term members.

The situation could not last however, and on 25 February a special summonsed meeting of Bricklayers dropped fines and put on notice a motion rescinding the decision against the Labourers. This was carried 13/8 when, after a long discussion, it was successfully argued ‘that every employer should be free to employ what labour he chose, whether society, or non-society’. Though it resolved the problem, the framing of the resolution is curious, even if necessary, for accepting non-unionists was counter to their true position as trade unionists.

Of course, trouble lay with the Bricklayers allowing contractors and employers into the organisation. This issue – where contractors and employers sat in relationship with wages employees – was a problem for all nineteenth century trade unions and is the subject of our next section.

## **Industrial Relations, Co-operation and Class-Consciousness**

### ***Custom and Conflict: the relationship with employers***

Nineteenth century unions enrolled contractors and employers, sometimes specifically so, as can be seen in the minutes of the Bricklayers and Masons’ lodges.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, the Mason and Bricklayer rules did not seek to limit them participating in union affairs, though we do see the Masons in practice did not allow employers to hold office.<sup>278</sup> We find that the Carpenters made a rule to distinguish a permanent contractor from tradesmen who from time to time picked up small jobs and employed a few hands. Here they restricted voting rights, providing that ‘any member who contracts, finding labour and material for a period of twelve months

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<sup>277</sup> Bricklayers 31 December 1872 ‘The committee also recommended, that all employers ‘not belonging to this society be written to and solicited to become members.’ See also Stonemasons’ eg police court dispute below.

<sup>278</sup> Masons Cottee 15 December 1881 Bro Little becomes an employer and cannot therefore hold office.

shall be deemed a Contractor, and shall not be allowed to vote or speak...on any question of labour or wages, but may remain in the room until requested to retire'.<sup>279</sup>

Despite the accommodation of employers, evidence in the Bricklayer's minutes show how tension over the participation of employers in the Society was growing. In 1889 four rank and file Bricklayers proposed:

That this society shall be convened...on the 27<sup>th</sup> January to elect six members or more has this lodge shall Determinin to Revise the Present Rules of this society...any member that is considered to be [an] employer of Bricklayers shall not be Eligeable to be Elected on this committee or give any advice to the said committee That any Member Holding any office of this society shall not be Eligeable to be elected or to take any part in this committee...

Another Bricklayers' notice of motion is in the same vein:

That any Member or Members of this society that are Member or Members of the Builders association shall sever there connection with the operative Bricklayers Trade union of NS Wales and hold no office what so ever.<sup>280</sup>

The problem of allowing employers into the organisation was vexed. Unless an employer was caught within society rules, and obeyed them, by fine or by consent, the industry could not be controlled. Working-rules were often printed and circularised to employers or a rulebook given to them, or sold for a shilling.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, as will be seen in evidence before the Royal Commission, these rules were established, where possible, by agreement. Even the militant Masons sought consent; voting on a notice of motion in 1883 they resolve: 'That we take into consideration the advisability of electing a committee from this association with a view to

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<sup>279</sup> Masons rules 7 & 8 indicate employer membership, so too Carpenters' rules 23. The progressive's rule appears to be a compromise. An earlier NoM also regards changing the Carpenters' rules 6 September 1875 (later withdrawn, 18 October 1875) - 'that any members of this society becoming an employer of labour with the intention of continuing as such shall be asked to resign his position as subscribing member'.

<sup>280</sup> Bricklayers NoM 6 Jan 1880, 20 Jan 1880. Some words attributed here may not be totally accurate as the entries are roughly written. The meaning of the entries are, however, accurate.

<sup>281</sup> 200 copies of working rules printed sent by masons to employers, Masons Committee 7 January 1870.

establishing a mutual annual agreement with our employers for the better guidance of the trade'.<sup>282</sup>

Customary laws were also often readily accepted by those employers outside the society structure. Minutes record the Masons in 1871 searching for newspaper clippings from 1857 to show the contractors of St Johns College, which set out the working hours agreed between masters, builders and the men. According to the Masons' delegates, once the contractors, Mr Williams and his partner Mr Laving, saw these clippings, they 'disclaimed any intention of interfering with our established rules...determined not to attempt altering a rule so unanimously agreed to.'<sup>283</sup>

At times we see the co-operation between Societies and site management is better than with recalcitrant workers. In April 1872 Brothers Elliot and Marsh's endeavours to sign up bricklayers on the Goodlet and Smith Job were rebuffed on two occasions, even though they offered to partially forgive past fines. Treatment from the site inspector was different. The lodge minutes read: 'Bro Elliot being acquainted with the inspector of the job was most respectfully received and told him he was in favour of men being employed from our society and would try all that laid in his power to Benefit us with other matters thereto'.<sup>284</sup>

Naturally, not all in the industry accepted custom and practice as outlined above, nor did advances in, or maintenance of, wages and conditions occur without conflict. When Mason delegates, brothers Rutter and Riddle, approached Mr McDonald and his co-contractor Mr Finlay, working foreman on the Central Police Court foundations, to have them adjust their rates, they were told to 'do their worst', which they say they proceeded to do. They waited on each of the sixteen masons individually and obtained their willingness to 'come out' if necessary. Then, after the contractors refused their 'peaceful overtures', they decided to take 'the extreme measure', whereupon the tradesmen 'laid down their tools, and without demur, came out like men.' Following approaches to quarrymen to slow supply, and raising £40 strike pay to ensure their success, the matter settled on a tentative basis after only a

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<sup>282</sup> Masons committee 15 November 1883, Masons committee 27 December 1883.

<sup>283</sup> Masons committee 30 April 1871.

<sup>284</sup> Bricklayers 9 April 1872.

week.<sup>285</sup> The foreman George Finlay was made a lodge member the following meeting, and on 4 August the Secretary was requested to ask the men on the project to elect a shop steward. We see too the Bricklayers would aggressively insist their rates applied, for example, threatening Mr Donely who held the contract for the Horden Pavilion and who underpaid a member three shillings. A delegation warned Donely that men would be withdrawn from the job, so forcing him to pay-up.<sup>286</sup>

Notwithstanding a preparedness to fight, building unions would not support bad feeling being caused between masters and men. Carpenters provided a sanction against the promotion of discontent. Item eight of their working rules stipulated ‘Should any Member wilfully create ill-feeling between employers and the Members, such Member shall, upon conviction, be punished as the Committee or general body deem fit.’ The Masons too warn members that they will be financially supported by the association if ‘thrown out of employment’ as a consequence of following the working rule, provided the member has ‘used no abusive or threatening language to the employer or foreman.’ Of course the societies wanted to guard their resources by avoiding being drawn into disputes of this kind, but underlying these rules is an acknowledged respect for the Masters and of gentlemanly conduct.

The views of the employers appear to be reciprocal. There is no evidence that the builders, other than in response to specific issues like the eight-hour day, had ever organised against the men, though it is true that there are not many employer documents surviving from this period to shed much light on this issue. The MBA itself seems to have been founded principally to challenge the Architects, not their employees. Minutes of their first year, the only surviving records of the Association until the turn of the century, are almost exclusively concerned with inserting mediation procedures into a standardised contract. Moreover, the only reference to industrial matters, that of the Bricklayers’ Saturday hours, met with a degree of questioning within the builders organisation as to their role in dealing with labour matters, some believing such discussion to be beyond the scope of their group.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Masons ldg 24 July 1890, 30 July 1890.

<sup>286</sup> Bricklayers 9 July 1872.

<sup>287</sup> MBA 1 April 1874.

In reality, the views of masters, whether unionised or not, coincided with the men on many points, the primary position a belief in tradesmanship, which entitled the entire fraternity to their traditional work. The idea of craft had financial implications it is true, allowing them to limit access to the trade, but it was also genuine. We will see from Grant's testimony to the 1891 Royal Commission, Mason's relations with employers are good - if they were paid properly and if the employer was happy with their performance. MBA President Peter Dow we will see was as equal in his praise of quality work as he was in his loathing of 'Jerry builders'. Moreover, the idea of trade also resonated with Architects and Brickmakers and formed the basis of the Bricklayers' appeal to the government regarding projects such as the new sewer in 1877 that had been subcontracted out to 'unskilled labour' that made their own contractors uncompetitive.<sup>288</sup>

Occasionally, candid entries in society minutes show how duty to the trade was more than an industrial or economic matter. Comments demonstrate how tradesmanship was a quality that defined an operative's self-worth. When Brother Dummet was summonsed to the Masons lodge to be examined on the question of working piecework, he acknowledged the charge, saying in his defence he'd broken ribs and in this circumstance was not 'capable of doing his duty to his employers'. Again, George Foy, whose 'old age was coming on and was not able to do justice to whomever employed him' was granted permission by a special meeting to work piece-work.<sup>289</sup> Whatever the underlying motives of these Masons to make their labour marketable, they expressed their claims in the only terms they knew and which was comprehensible to the Society – Tradesmanship.

### ***Class-consciousness and class action***

In 1857 the Masons celebrated the eight-hour day by toasting the health of Queen Victoria. By the dinner of 1862, not only did they toast the Queen, but the Prince of Wales, the Governor, the army and navy, 'the land we live in', and a host of other

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<sup>288</sup> Bricklayers NoM 4 September 1877.

<sup>289</sup> Masons Idg 20 October 1875, 29 December 1875.

social institutions.<sup>290</sup> Moreover, notwithstanding an underlying wary militancy, we have seen throughout the period a distinct lack of hostility between masters and men. What does this say of class-consciousness? As identified in our literature review, some have argued the ideology of the tradesmen was intrinsically middle class. Others have argued there was a fundamental change in the nature of unionism where, especially for Stonemasons, class awareness only developed around the mid to late 1880s, typified as we shall see by the radical stance of John Grant in the Royal Commission; though even this has been described as borderline working class by Scates.

On the other hand we have seen that from the 50s, building operatives had a deep sense of class identity, and an identifiable class agenda of egalitarianism and freedom, education and progress, collective bargaining and of industrial regulation. How then can we explain the many obvious signs of working class consciousness and radical activism, existing with the often temperate relations with employers, and how do things like monarchism fit within their ideological framework?

As indicated earlier, the answer rests in the long and sometimes conflicting traditions of British radical working class ideology identified by E. P. Thompson. Nineteenth century political ideology in general was complicated. Tories like Disraeli could with sincerity champion the fundamental rights of the poor and oppressed against the revolution wrought by liberal economics. Conversely, tradesmen often found no inconsistency in accepting the foundations of British institutions and at the same time demanding democracy and liberty for the working class. The question is not whether operatives saw themselves as a class, for that point is certain. The question is how they viewed the relationship between classes and how social inequities could be mended. If economic circumstances had moved on from the appalling deprivation of the early eighteenth century, and with it a diminution of a fervent revolutionary mood, what remained was a class-consciousness nonetheless, and distress enough to demand change - ultimately it was a class society that they were against.

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<sup>290</sup> Bricklayers Committee minutes 4 August 1857, 6 May 1862 W.E. Murphy, notes in his *History of the Eight-hours Movement* that in establishing their Melbourne branch in 1850, they too saluted the Crown, p 24.

It is not argued that late nineteenth century workers in Australia were in general interested in a violent re-ordering of the fundamentals of society and the relationships within them. That debate was for a later time when industrialisation reached its peak. Theirs was not a conflict model for social change. As put to the ITCU, unionism in fact ameliorated violence and sedition. When workers were treated fairly and able to ventilate grievances, 'there would be no assassination of monarchs or massacres of aristocracy...in countries where such combinations were put down by the iron hand of tyranny other societies sprang up of a secret nature and of hellish character.'<sup>291</sup>

It is argued, however, that the experience of work, general contracting and of destructive competition gave building workers a clear understanding of the dynamics of class relationships that increasingly drew them to other trades, and enabled them to form a common agenda. Further, the enormously difficult job of regulating a growing and dynamic economy also drove them to seek consensus with employers, though at the same time it realised a growing conflict of interests between them.

Nineteenth century building unionism was diverse and contentious; not all operatives shared the same political view of their role in society, and ideas were far from static. We shall see in our chapter on the Royal Commission for example, that the mason John Grant's views, which would arguably find resonance in radical Jacobin or Owenite circles in early 1800s London, were not universally supported by his Society. Moreover, though this study does identify a change in union ideology and the way trade societies interacted and how they dealt with employers, it is not a clear or fundamental change. Up until the nineties pre-industrial forms of workplace regulation continued, and while some operatives wanted to embrace other unions in a common struggle, we have seen others adopt an isolationist and trade centred approach. Such an approach, however, was not about class, but how to regulate trade. Despite operatives arguing over the changing form of working class representation, including rules governing their industries the same underlying principle arose, a right to social equality and industrial democracy. The ideology of class was thus not being invented, it was transforming to accommodate the developing economy.

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<sup>291</sup> *Report of the First Intercolonial Trades Union Congress Sydney 1879* p 25. This is spoken by White, a bootmaker, representing the NSWTLU, but the builders would certainly have concurred with this point.

Notwithstanding an underlying conflict between employers and employed, many building tradesmen throughout the period identified a common interest between the classes. This interest, reminiscent of the Owenites, was that the modern capitalist industrial structure, indeed class structure, was deleterious to all society. In no way can this be interpreted as them seeking to become middle class, or holding middle class values. They were proud to be workers and their agenda dealt squarely with matters to do with work and its organisation. The subjects submitted to ITUC in 1879 show that tradesmen had developed a programme to deal with the problems of an unregulated industry, focusing on things that mattered to an operative, not to the aristocrat, the idle rich or middle class banker: machine and boiler safety, protection of trade funds, the eight hour day, immigration, and so on, most of which formed the basis of the various state ALP platforms from the 1890s.<sup>292</sup>

Further, like Potter's *Bee Hive*, the TLC's journal, *Workman*, was promoted as an initiative to advance a class agenda.<sup>293</sup> As framed by the Progressives:

this society of carpenters think that it is desirable there should be an Evening Newspaper to advocate the interest of the working men seeing that the mercantile community only are represented by the leading papers of Sydney the necessity for such a paper is acknowledged by hundreds.<sup>294</sup>

When finally published in 1875, the TLC secretary was directed 'to write to all the societies ...urging upon them the desirability of recommending and extending its

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<sup>292</sup> ITUC 1879 'Subjects submitted to the Congress: Immigration – both Asiatic and otherwise, eight-hour system – its extension and consolidation, Union legislation, Encouragement of Native Industries, Mercantile marine law, propriety of an Annual ITUC, Factory and workshop's Regulation Law. Co-operation, Education, Land-Boilers Inspection, Workers compensation for injury caused by negligence and deficient appliances. For ALP platforms See WG Spence *Australia's Awakening The Workers' Trustee*, Sydney 1909, p383ff.

<sup>293</sup> Like the Progressives the TLC appear to have received frequent copies of this journal.

<sup>294</sup> Prog 3 November 1873. Discussion of a paper seems to have generated from within the council and affiliates quite early, see Prog 3 July 1871 where it was opposed by GPJones. Speaker invited in re newspaper to represent the working classes interests Prog 6 November 1871. The progressives argued the paper should be organised on co-operative lines, TLC 26 November 1873. Bremmer advises affiliates of the need for an evening workingman's paper 'and stated that the progressive society of Carpenters and Joiners had passed a resolution to the above effect. The acting president supported the principle and reference was made to a co-operative paper styled the co-operative'.

circulation to the utmost of their ability in order that its position may be strengthened as an exponent of the principles of the working class.’<sup>295</sup>

The TLC itself was a manifestation of class goals, a forum to enable workers of all skills and all trades to form unions and unite. The formation of trade societies, and a formal commitment to each other was seen as the first step to working class representation. In fact, building industry affiliates insisted upon it; for instance, as noted, both the Progressives and the Masons told the Drapers that they would not assist them in their short hour campaign until they joined the council. Likewise in 1873, delegate Stephens, a mason, requested the council print an address aimed at the working class to organise themselves into respective organisations, a move that was supported by John Walker from the Carpenters.<sup>296</sup> Even the building of the Trades hall was couched in this way - to increase organisation among the working classes.<sup>297</sup> Moreover, as its title suggested, the council was open to labourers. Many examples exist where affiliates are unanimous in their resolution to assist labourers’ societies in their struggles against their employers, and TLC leadership were ‘hands-on’ in pressing their cause, such as when in November 1875 Frank Dixon, then council President, introduced the Labouring Men’s Association to a meeting of the Progressive Carpenters.<sup>298</sup>

Exclusivity and sectionalism in the early labour movement, it seems, was not about whether one was a gentlemanly artisan or unskilled impoverished labourer. It existed only in terms of a divide between those who would not or could not form trade societies and those that could and did so. On this particular point we see a growing divergence in the way unionists dealt with class politics, where ideas of isolated self reliance became to be seen as a less relevant tactic as the colonial economy and industry developed. Debate within the TLC reflected this change. In June 1880, William Roylance from the Masons introduced to the council affiliates

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<sup>295</sup> TLC 25 March 1875.

<sup>296</sup> TLC 26 November 1873.

<sup>297</sup> TLC 11 June 1873 ‘A long discussion then took place on the idea of a United Trades Hall and the condition of the various trades and the desirability of increased organisation among the working classes.’ TLC asks if Progs ‘...will support the movement to hire a house in an eligible spot where all trade societies could meet to conduct their affairs apart from Public Houses which is felt by the council to be anything but conducive to the well being of the working classes. Prog 26 June 1876

<sup>298</sup> Prog, 1 November 1875. White from the TLC introduces the labourers association 15 November 1875

correspondence from a worker at Darling Harbour complaining of low wages - six shillings per day and work hours from six to six. Roylance knew many other examples in the government sector of the same situation and 'pointed out they were [perfectly] helpless their employment was such a nature that any one could do it so there was not opportunity for any combination amongst them...[and]...He would that the secretary lay their case before the commissioner for railways'. Mr Jones, the bricklayer's representative, 'found that he had no sympathy with these men. He belonged to a trade society and along with others maintain that society and why could not these men do the same.' Other affiliates joined the debate, pointing to how the labourers were ill-used and the lack of skill working against their forming a union. Hayes, the other bricklayer delegate, taking a different position to Jones, criticised the regulations and hoped the council would take the matter up. Others objected to Jones directly, with Poole from the seamen protesting to his 'aristocratic notions', stating they ought to look after the class.<sup>299</sup>

The language and organisation of class had indeed modified to deal with the new environment but Jones, though clearly out of step with the modern idea of class representation, was perhaps dealt with a little unfairly. The issue was not one of the unskilled versus tradesmen; we have seen many examples where tradesmen, including bricklayers, were generous in their assistance to labourers. Jones' idea, however, fed into an old argument, that workers needed to take matters into their own hands and organise. The change in the way artisans saw class and class activism then, was really a matter of form rather than substance. Just as ideas of class and unionism were changing, over time the operatives' political, social and economic ideas also developed; but at this point the working class were, by and large, Co-operators.

### ***Co-operators***

The extent to which the idea of co-operation pervaded nineteenth century artisan unionism, and unionism generally, cannot be overstated. The co-operative movement is raised as a direct challenge to competitive capitalist forces many times throughout this study. We have seen it in Britain with Owen and the OBU in the eighteen thirties, and we will see it again raised in discussion before the Royal Commission in New

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<sup>299</sup> TLC 24 June 1880

South Wales in the nineties. However, as identified by Sidney Pollard, the idea of co-operation meant different things to different people, and it was this flexibility that made it so attractive.<sup>300</sup>

Pollard looks at both the earlier and later periods of the co-operative movement's development, from its idealistic Owenite days, when it was promoted as an alternative society, to a time when proponents began their shop-keeping enterprises. The establishment of these shops was originally meant as a mechanism to accumulate the funds to create the new co-operative communities. But co-operation often stopped here, many content to keep them as a system of prosperous community stores. Yet despite the relative conservatism of the later groups, underpinning the movement as a whole was a consistent anti-competitive and anti-capitalist philosophy and a demand that workers should receive the whole of the value of their labour. The movement took on the prevalent working class belief in self-help and taking matters into their own hands, and importantly, a belief in the fundamental working class idea of unity.

Co-operation could be used as an industrial tactic, such as in 1856 when, upon the urging of the Masons, operative builders set up a co-operative in order to save the eight-hour day,<sup>301</sup> and when in 1858 we see the Mason's organising committee deeming it 'indispensable that a system of co-operation be established for the preservation of the trade'.<sup>302</sup> But more importantly, co-operation was used in Australia as a social and political idea. It was a concept that allowed the working class to make sense of their industry and gave them a practical plan for social change and hope for the future. Co-operation was 'THE RIGHTS OF LABOUR' according to the Newcastle Co-operative Society;<sup>303</sup> but it was also a model for reform. William Roylance, a mason, active on the TLC and Secretary to the first Intercolonial Trades' Union Conference in Sydney, 1879, drew the co-operative programme in eloquent

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<sup>300</sup> Pollard, S. 'Nineteenth century Co-operation: from Community Building to Shopkeeping.' In *Essays in Labour History op. Cit.* pp74-112.

<sup>301</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p32 this was probably the failed co-operative that Gillespie from the builder's labourers told the Royal Commission he had helped established.

<sup>302</sup> Masons 2 December 1858. The Bakers also used a co-operative rather than strike against their masters in their short time struggle *Empire* 9 January 1861. The TLC also suggested to the Bootmakers to form a co-operative in their fight to get uniform wage rates. TLC 25 June 1874. Through the Rochdale system, the Newcastle Co-operative believed strike would be a thing of the past, *Empire* 22 October 1861.

<sup>303</sup> *Empire* 22 October 1861. This was established on the Rochdale principles.

terms. While Roylance acknowledged the grievous wrongs afflicted upon the artisan and labouring classes, a union's best response, he believed, was not of conflict. Unionism was a social movement, 'slowly working change in the fabric of society', and needs to observe due moderation taking care of the rights of 'neighbours'.<sup>304</sup>

Roylance began his discourse on co-operation by acknowledging the subordination of the 'industrial classes' and the lack of 'direct reciprocal relations which capital and enterprise rightfully bear towards labour.' However, he also gratefully acknowledged 'the noble and humane utterances that have from time to time been made by men of the judicial sentiment and natural love of fairness...such as the late Lord Brougham'.<sup>305</sup> He spoke well of the Consort of glorious Queen Victoria, 'the originator of international exhibitions', and declared to the Russian Emperor 'that labour is under the deepest obligations, for the humanity that suggested, and the courage sustained, his determination to gradually relieve labour of the social shackles which in his wide dominions degraded it.'<sup>306</sup>

Notwithstanding praise for those freeing slaves and serfs, Roylance concludes that in respect of profit, and of consideration and political influence, 'labour is not on its due and natural footing.' Society is anomalous, and the interests of industry and enterprise are injured, workers are not honoured and do not receive their 'pecuniary and social dues.' And while the state rightfully tempers suffering and the bondage of poverty it remains his hope, through co-operation,

of raising our own to that standard which could secure for us individually the full fruits of our industry, to our vocations the social consideration which rightfully pertain to them, and to our families the degree of regard and protection we conceive to be attainable, under an order of things more in accordance with the essentially democratic principles of the Christian religion, and the idea of a perfect civilisation.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> ITUC 1879 preface to the Report, p 3,4.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid* p64. Brougham, whose activities, not universally supported by British radicals by any means, did include slave emancipation, legal reforms, the 1832 reform act and the defence of Queen Caroline. For an interesting account of the radical working class agitation surrounding Queen Caroline's return to England in the 1820s see Prothero *op. Cit.* chapter 7.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid* p65.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*

Roylance continues

Many of the miseries of existence in every age, and in every civilised land, are traceable to the unnatural and inequitable distribution of wealth...The State might with equal profit to the nation and the individual encourage and ultimately enforce... the principles of co-operation between employer and employed in many of the leading industries... strikes would be unknown, because unnecessary, and indissoluble solidarity of interest would unite employer and employed; one would belong to the other as the limbs to the hand...Society might then be spared half its evils, civilised life denuded of one of its greatest drawbacks...the kernel of wealth sustained at the life-cost of a surrounding matrix of poverty...co-operation between employers and employed would exercise an influence on industrial development similar to that which cultivation produces on wild fruit...Doubtless, the influence of custom and...the individual sense of interests...may retard the day when labour and capital will co-exist in amicable and equitable co-partnership; but the friends of humanity and the believers in the social perfectibility of mankind, have reason to hope<sup>308</sup>

Delegates following Roylance spoke of the Rochdale pioneers, and the successes of the co-operative movement in Britain. Dooley of the Masons referred to Owen in particular, who, he believed, was ‘almost compelled to fly to America by religious bigots’.<sup>309</sup> The co-operative dream, an end to strikes, ‘THE RIGHTS OF LABOUR’, the perfect society, were sentiments carried wholeheartedly by the congress.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter, in raising aspects of the life, home, work and ideology of nineteenth century operative builders seeks to challenge the prejudice in history’s characterisation of tradesmen. Though their blemishes have not been hidden, nor the occasional wayward notion, it has been demonstrated that these workers and their organisations were more rich, principled and progressive than is generally proposed, and their foibles understandable in terms of the challenges they faced.

No less than we saw occurring to British building unionists in our earlier chapter, general contracting in Australia took industrial control from traditional groupings of independent operators. It caused a re-ordering of industrial relations and a recasting

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<sup>308</sup> *ibid* p66, 67.

<sup>309</sup> ICTU p68 ff.

of working class ideology. But whatever the case in Britain leading to the industrial traumas of the thirties, in Australia, with its smaller economy and population, it was not a sudden or critical change. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, custom and practice continued to be significant, despite the 'logic' of general contracting introducing competition into industry, altering and dividing the interests of workers, small employers and builders. In response to market forces, the idea of co-operation, not conflict, pervaded building industry ideology. It guided workers' interaction with employers at the job front, and it helped them construct their understanding of society and economy. There was a fight against capitalism, not employers *per se*, allowing the disparate ideas that made-up British working class radicalism to flourish; what E.P. Thompson may refer to as rights of the freeborn Englishman.

Working class ideology may have changed from the 1850s to the 1890s as the Australian economy developed, but in one particular aspect it remained consistent. As put by the Currier's delegate Donald Johnson to the ITCU, they were practical men, and thus, 'of more benefit to the community than the man of theory.' As practical men, they would fix the problem of society, taking matters firmly into their own hands.<sup>310</sup> And the way building operatives fought to gain and maintain the central tenet of their industrial and social reform, the eight-hour day, is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>310</sup> *ibid* p 69.

## CHAPTER FIVE, THE STRUGGLE FOR THE EIGHT-HOUR DAY

On 27 March 1871 the Progressive Carpenters minute a delegate's report regarding the Eight Hours Protection Committee: Mr Walker stated that it had 'all but failed the non society men having all withdrawn it was not desirable to carry on any further and he returned the amount of £2/1/0 being the balance left from the money voted from th[e] society.' One senses his frustration, for, after a decade or more cajoling and appealing to building workers outside the societies to have them support the union's most fundamental rule, officials had failed. The eight-hour law was not universal, and their hard-earned gain would continue on corrupted - transgressed and undermined on all fronts.

This chapter re-examines the struggle for the eight-hour day in the context of the nineteenth century's 'deregulated' industrial relations system, arguing that the boon was never really won, not in the sense that workers of later periods won concessions and had them entrenched through legislation and awards as common rule. The struggle for the eight-hour day was an all consuming and continual campaign. Where it succeeded it did so, not merely by hard-edged industrial action, though this was absolutely necessary, but also by maintaining a degree of consent and co-operation with employers in the organised sector, who, as we have argued throughout, were not intrinsically opposed to improvements in labour, and who accepted industrial control provided by the societies, to which they often belonged. When it failed, it did so due to a lack of unity within the trade. It was then a partial victory which heightened tension throughout industry.

Over time, many employers, and indeed society at large, came to accept eight-hours of work as a standard of civilisation; but this does not mean it was a conservative measure, nor in any way a natural consequence of modern industry. On the contrary it was a rough fight and counter to contemporary *laissez faire* ideals. As with British building operatives from the 1830s, the short-hours movement was a social movement, a reaction against a capitalist economy that placed no worth in community, education, health or welfare of the working classes. If the progress of humanity was an ideal held by certain middle class activists, concurrence with the principle did not make workers middle class.

Many have recognised the importance of the struggle for the eight-hour day in creating class unity and building unionism. This chapter expands on the point. The eight-hour campaign built the labour movement and gave it life. Eight-hours was central to union strategy and to its world-view. It was the foundation for the ‘perfect civilisation’ - aspired to by those who trusted in co-operative production, and hoped for its inevitability. Moreover, it drew the public in through lectures, debate and parades. It was primary to the idea of regulation, stimulating inter-union leagues, congresses, and the Trades and Labour Council. These in turn led to broader class endeavours - a newspaper, a trades hall, parliamentary political activity – all of which allowed the early unionists a means to express political and class views, in unity and with effect. And behind all of this were the leaders of the building trades’ unions.

### **The Short- Hour Movement.**

In late August 1855, within a year of Eureka, the struggle for the Eight-hour day in Australia had begun with a meeting of Operative Stonemasons in Sydney.<sup>311</sup> Eureka is the symbol of rebellion and of democracy and of country. The eight-hour day, however, is normally viewed as an industrial achievement, granted to a few urban tradesmen advantaged by demand for their labour. But both events were about rights and about class – matters that spilt over from decades of agitation in Europe. For the tradesmen, it was especially about claiming part of, and being part of, modern progress.

In examining why the campaign took place, we are again assisted by the memoirs of GP Jones who was in the 1850’s a very young worker, too young yet to be enrolled as a brother of the Carpenters Society. Jones’ account is compelling, the eight-hour question profound to his development. Though writing in his conservative twilight

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<sup>311</sup> This study will avoid controversy surrounding the date the 8-hours was first worked, focusing rather upon its social and political aspects, and the struggle to make it universal. It nevertheless accepts the initiation date as 18 August 1855 as suggested by EW O’Sullivan *Telegraph* 30 September 1905. O’Sullivan, reporting some 50 years after the event, cites no direct authority for the 18<sup>th</sup> but it corresponds with six months notice to the industry of change, and a quick start to the campaign on or about 18 February and a celebratory dinner on that date, possibly to commemorate the anniversary of the Trinity church concession 1856. Also noted is the *Empire* 12 August 1856 reporting the Masons’ resolution that 18 August 1856 is the date the new principle will be adopted by masons working 10 hours - perhaps its anniversary.

age, and despite all the achievements of his long career, it is the recollections of the 1850's struggle for the eight-hour day that sparkle:

The agitation re the reduction of hours of labour from 10 to 8 hours per day was quite at fever heat...Although my youth prevented me being enrolled as a member, there were very few who took a more profound interest in the movement. I was hungering and thirsting for knowledge, and saw it dangling in my sight on all hands, but I had no time to pluck the fruit for myself.

As I sit now in the quiet evening of retired life, and with review of its battles, struggles, eager anxieties, hopes and fears, there is none that took such a vital grip of my very existence as this question of the eight-hour system at its inception.

To me [its introduction] was a great and glorious day, the brightest day of my existence. It was big with great promise of better days to come, and the opening up of better things socially, intellectually, and religiously.

[A]lthough only an apprentice, I had evidenced so great an interest that by common consent I was permitted at 4 o'clock to take the hammer to ring the knock-off time.

I have been called upon to perform some ceremonies since. None, however, has eclipsed the pride I felt as I selected a good, hard knot on the bench-top and with my might brought down the hammer 1,2,3,rat-a-tat-tat, 1,2,3,holding my cap in my left hand, the hammer in my right, singing 'Rule Britannia (sic), Britons never, never shall be slaves, and death to 10 hours as a day's labour.'<sup>312</sup>

Jones had a distinguished career as an employer, President of the Master Builders Association and Mayor of Paddington, yet this recollection is alive. Jones was a democrat, no revolutionary, and so his candid recollections perhaps speak best for the aspirations of a typical building worker of the era - the drive for knowledge and the determination to take control over his working life. Workers rebelling against a system that pushed them and robbed them of their time was hardly surprising:

We went to work at 6 am., breakfast between 9 and 10, dinner 1 to 2 p.m., then we had two hours each day to discuss matters, beside many a hurried quarter of an hour at the coffee shop on the way to work. If by dint of oversleeping a few minutes we had to forego our morning coffee, we felt the punishment keenly, especially in winter, amongst the growing boys and young men.

To be up and about by five in the morning, and not reach home again till seven at night in the winter was real drudgery. Every little domestic

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<sup>312</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p 27, 28, 29.

duty had to be performed by candle light, and only to see one's home once a week by daylight...  
Just fancy, home at seven p.m., get tea, and then start chopping great logs of hardwood sufficiently small for mother and the girls to handle, then tackle two buckets with a hoop between and a boy in the middle trudging to the nearest public standpipe or pump for water;  
On the night before washing day it was a mighty long job!  
Add to all this going a few messages, cleaning the boots for the family, sweeping the yard ...  
What time had the working man or boy to read, or in any way improve himself? Is there any wonder the bulk of the men of the last generation were so deficient of education, when they only had time to get it before they went to work.<sup>313</sup>

Public meetings also raised vigorous arguments about rights, education and civilisation, but they in addition raised issues of parenthood and of a moral Christian life – 'what could be looked upon [by the public] as nothing else than the result of the enlightened progress of the age.'<sup>314</sup>

The operatives knew they were producing the riches of modern society, all of its wants and luxuries; they understood they lived in an age of improvement and invention and asked 'what is man's chief end?'

Was it that he might from 6 o'clock in the morning to 6 or 8 o'clock at night from one year's end to another, from 12 year's old, to work till he reached the grave? Was he to do nothing but hammer iron, carry mortar, break stones, and cut wood? Was he, in short, nothing more than a machine for the production of wealth?<sup>315</sup>

One should not, however, discount the argument that the eight-hour campaign was founded early in Australia because of the extreme heat and sun, and also to level out fluctuations in the supply of work in a tiny but rapidly growing economy. Jones himself raises these points to explain motivation for the Masons' agitation, where because of scarcity of jobs and the burden of raising unemployment levies, they deemed it wiser for them to share work rather than wages. Besides, he says, 'it was beginning to dawn on the stone cutters that long hours in the hot sun and wind and

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<sup>313</sup> *Ibid* p16.

<sup>314</sup> Said GP Jones' elder brother William to a cheering crowd, *Empire* 21 October 1856.

<sup>315</sup> *Empire* *ibid*.

rain in winter were detrimental to their health.<sup>316</sup> Consistent with this, we see in the press reports of industry meetings repeated reference to the effects of climate on a man's constitution. A mason wrote in hope to the *Herald* that not one of their body will soon be 'working under the burning sun of Australia.'<sup>317</sup> That Australia was new added to their arguments, long hours being unnecessary here. 'Advance Australia was the motto of the colony, and let it be the motto of the working men', said Hugh Landreth of the Masons.<sup>318</sup>

To many, the economic argument was also plain: 'If the natural tendency of long days was to reduce the value of labour, short time would increase it'.<sup>319</sup> Sacrificing pay to accommodate the reduced hours was acknowledged as a controversial issue by operatives. Stephen Gleddall, a mason representing the Labour League (later an employer) endeavoured to assure a lukewarm audience of plasterers in November 1856 that gold and the laws of supply and demand regulated wages, and 'in a very short time wages would be quite as high for the eight hours work per day as they now are for ten hours'<sup>320</sup> – a proposition also made by a critic of the movement known as 'subscriber' to the *Empire*.<sup>321</sup> Arguments over unemployment were used by stonemasons, and by carpenters who reasoned if 800 of 1000 of their number as were currently employed, 'the remaining two hundred would immediately find employment' if hours were reduced. Moreover, carpenter Henry Holland added,

if they took a retrospect of the past, it would be found that they did not on the average work more than eight hour per day. They were sometimes employed for three or four weeks consecutive, then thrown out of employ for a week. The effect of the eight hours system would tend to regulate their work...He found, and he believed it would be admitted by all present, that when a person was out of employ, and looking around for a job, although he might have a great deal of time on his hands, he was too uneasy in his mind to be able to settle down to a book. (Hear, hear.)<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p 27.

<sup>317</sup> *SMH* 26 February 1856.

<sup>318</sup> *Empire* 26 September 1856, 18 November 1856, 23 June 1857.

<sup>319</sup> *Empire* 4 November 1856 Labour league meeting.

<sup>320</sup> *Empire* 10 November 1856.

<sup>321</sup> *Empire* 25 August 1856.

<sup>322</sup> *Empire* 16 September 1856 As another carpenter explained work and education, 'Experience had taught him that after he had laboured for ten hours in the day he was totally unfitted for any mental exertion, and if he ventured to take up a book, he would be sure to fall asleep in a very short time.'

Holland's comment here is very telling of the way operatives recognised the links between industry and society. There is no doubt tradesmen were very aware of issues of supply and demand, and certainly the effect of climate was on their minds – but these matters cannot ever be separated from social and political considerations. Ultimately, as has been suggested, the claim for time was part of a long industrial, social and economic campaign spanning back to the early effects of general contracting onto the trade in Britain, and the links between these motivations are inseparable, and no mere adjunct to the immediate concerns of inclemency or to fluctuations of the colonial economy.

Twenty years later, workers' arguments for the eight-hour day had broadened out to most Australian unions, but they had not changed. In the 1879 ITUC, John Atkinson from the Shipwrights argued that under the ten-hour system a man was no better than a slave: 'a man went to work in the dark and returned in the dark, and only saw the faces of his wife and children in the sunlight about once a week.' Davies from the Hunter District Mines thought it no wonder that under long-hours men became 'butalized, and the underground savages the papers said they were.' Edmunds from the Progressives said many men, 'were wanting in education because they had been crushed down by long hours of labour.' Summing up the matter best perhaps is James Dooley from the Masons who reasoned that excess labour was a concern to the entire community and asked 'why should the people who produced the whole wealth of the world have such a small share in the enjoyments of the world, or the recreation which was necessary for their health? Why should their whole lives be made up of eating, sleeping, and work?' <sup>323</sup>

### **The Early Industrial campaigns for the eight-hour day**

Stonemasons struck on the building of Holy Trinity Church at Miller's Point in Sydney on 18 August 1855, winning the eight-hour concession. <sup>324</sup> It was a significant achievement, being the first time the benefit was won perhaps world-wide,

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<sup>323</sup> ITUC *op. Cit.* p14,15,16,18,19.

<sup>324</sup> O'Sullivan *op. Cit.*

and from it sprang the campaign across the Sydney building trades.<sup>325</sup> As seen in chapter three, the short hour concession had been sought by unionists in the old country for years, and when the nine-hour campaign was re-ignited among the London masons in 1853 it floundered, despite other building unions, particularly the Progressive Carpenters, eventually joining them. The London movement organised lectures and discussions to generate popular support, and they sent delegations to employers to secure the benefit industrially. The campaign strategy in Australia was no different, but where the British unions met brute force, in the colonies, building workers succeeded within a year in having their eight-hours demand recognised as legitimate for a day's work, at least for the Victorian building unions and the Sydney Masons – at least in the regulated end of the market.

In Sydney, on 18 January 1856, a public meeting of 100 masons announced by acclamation that the agitation for an eight-hour day, a question already sometime before them, would begin in earnest. The measure, they were certain, would be of benefit to the community and would require 'reasonable sacrifice' and unity among the masons, whom they called to join the Society. The Masons' organising committee accordingly set to convene a meeting of the principal employers of Sydney, to discuss the short time movement.<sup>326</sup>

The first months of the campaign must have filled masons with optimism. Despite 100 attending the initial meeting it was not the bulk of the trade - 500 handbills having been printed for the event – but it was certainly a significant number, and thereafter momentum gathered. Employers were either supportive of, or benign to, the measure. The principal employers who were invited to speak with the Committee on 29 January are said to have been agreeable to the proposal, but deferred the matter to a larger meeting of their colleagues. Only eight employers attended the subsequent conference however, and the report of it was 'so vague that the committee did not dwell on it'. Masons therefore, acting with resolve, called an industry meeting for 16

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<sup>325</sup> It is generally acknowledged that the 8-hour day was worked first in Otago NZ in 1848. But this was not a result of industrial campaigns as is the case in Australia. The eight-hour day in NZ was mandated by the Scottish Free Church who organised the settlement, though it must be said that the colonists fought to retain the benefit when it was threatened to be done away with. See Murphy *op. Cit.* p13-16.

<sup>326</sup> The reasonable sacrifice was spelt out more clearly after the said meeting with principal employers - being a 2/6 reduction in pay. See Mason Committee 24 January 1856, 29 January 1856.

February to 'bring the short hour movement to a close.' The Committee reports this meeting was well attended, upwards of 200 masons, and, again by acclamation, they moved strong resolutions indicating victory: a vote of admiration for the conduct of jobs already working the short hours and their thanks to the Committee for bringing the system into operation. In turn the Committee thanked committee member Richard Hayton in particular for promoting the principle and 'being the cause of it being started into operation.'<sup>327</sup>

Six months notice from Trinity Church was fulfilled - the well-known dispute at Tooths' Brewery appears to be the only formal resistance made against the initial campaign. Workers leaving Tooths' job, according to Murphy, were immediately taken-up by Mr Reynolds, the contractor for the new Parramatta waterworks.<sup>328</sup> In late February, Stonemasons report they acquainted the architects of their movement, an interview they claimed was highly successful. By 25 February the Tooths dispute notwithstanding, where they feared 'men mean enough' would carry on the work, the minutes note pleasure to see 'the prospect of Eight hours per day becoming the regular working day.' Finally, on 11 March, they wrote to the English Society advising them of the good progress they had made in the eight-hour campaign, and named 'those individuals who have disgraced our society and cause' - no-doubt those working on Tooths job.<sup>329</sup>

Murphy claims that 'in less than a fortnight all opposition was withdrawn by the employers of Sydney'.<sup>330</sup> But what is recorded as having been achieved easily by Murphy, was really only the winning of an opinion amongst the majority of trade (several employers included), and a determination by the operatives to push the benefit throughout industry and across an economy that was inimical to such regulation. It was a *movement* that had been achieved and, in reality, if one regards the Stonemasons as having won the eight-hour struggle, it was true only in a very fragile sense. They soon looked to the other building trades for support, advancing unity and a sense of class interest in the process. In May 1856 the Masons'

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<sup>327</sup> Masons committee 29 January 1856, 13 February 1856, 18 February 1856. See *Empire* 7 February 1856 where master masons are generally favourable, but seek a meeting with builders.

<sup>328</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p 41.

<sup>329</sup> Masons Committee 13 February 1856, 18 February 1856, 20 February 1856, 22 February 1856.

<sup>330</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p 42.

Committee resolved to wait upon the other building trades ‘for the purposes of Co-operating with them in carrying out the 8 hours movement’.<sup>331</sup>

As noted earlier, co-operative networks between trade societies were an established practice in the nineteenth century British unionism; it was a class unity based on practical assistance. Almost certainly many masons would have been concerned that if they remained isolated, the benefit would be taken from them. They must also have believed that by joining the other trades to the cause would help them convince masons not yet working the system to support the campaign. But perhaps the decision bring the other trades into the fold was also due to the Masons’ egalitarian spirit, because there was no need for outside support in the initial stages, and in fact there is no evidence that the employers began to challenge them in an organised way until much later in the year. Moreover, it was only after carpenters began their agitation around August that unfavourable press comments about the eight-hour campaign began to appear.

Whether it was a sense of necessity, fraternal spirit, or both that led Masons to agitate the issue among the other building trades, the fact remains it required a considerable effort, with many believing it a waste of time - carpenters, bricklayers and others were either unorganised or uninterested. Mason delegates initially found only plasterers to speak to, and, moreover, they, along with the bricklayers, had no society yet. The Masons proposed therefore to convene a combined building industry delegates meeting, advertised for the Odd Fellows Hall on the evening of 11 June. Stonemason minutes reveal that only the Carpenters bothered to send delegates to this meeting, though there was a ‘good sprinkling’ of plasterers and other interested carpenters. Bricklayers, it notes, did not think fit to attend. Though a Committee of carpenters, plasterers and masons was formed, only the Masons attended subsequent planned meetings, leading the Committee to recommended that the ‘masons alone would forward the movement’. The lodge rejected this and other similar suggestions from the Committee to act independently.

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<sup>331</sup> Masons committee 16 May 1856.

Due to the Lodge's insistence, the rest of the year was spent trying to organise fellow building operatives. In June and July, foreshadowing a general building industry meeting, the committee contacted 'the leading men of Sydney' seeking their opinion on the objective, and to discover their willingness to address the forum.<sup>332</sup> Though some were said to be unfavourable, some were supportive, including the bishop of Sydney. Only Henry Parkes assured he would attend the general meeting of trades (discussed below). By the end of July, however, although momentum appears to have been gathering in certain quarters, it was the opinion of the Masons' Committee that the other trades were still not ready for a public meeting.<sup>333</sup>

Alone the Masons were making progress. As noted by Jones, they were engaged in large groups, and this work organisation made it easier for them to settle affairs among themselves, especially on large jobs like the University.<sup>334</sup> Again, this was not achieved without a great deal of organisational effort, and still the eight-hour rule was far from being universally recognised. On 11 August the Masons called a public meeting of the trade to consider the 'final accomplishment of the eight-hour question'. During this meeting they called for greater unity to secure the 'noble' cause, and they acknowledged a number were working ten hours, impressing upon them to accept the new system.<sup>335</sup> The Committee organised the printing of 50 copies of these resolutions to be circularised around sites.

By August, perhaps due to the Mason's successful initiatives beginning to influence the other trades, a backlash against them occurred. On 18 August the Masons' Committee minutes, although they are again positive about the success of the movement, also record further disputation. A delegation of three waited upon Messrs Melville and Dingwall's men to convince them they were 'doing wrong'; but having convinced the men to accept the rule, the employers declared they would not let them

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<sup>332</sup> Masons Committee 24 June 1856, 8 July 1856.

<sup>333</sup> Masons Committee 16 May 1856, 27 May 1856, 16 June 1856, 24 June 1856, 22 July 1856. Bricklayers on the whole were never really committed to the cause in the 1850s, one bricklayer activist, George Smith, confessed to the 'backwardness of his fellow craftsmen, the bricklayers (who nearly all did work by measure, and therefore were not necessitated to work ten hours,) in adhering to the short time principle.' *Empire* 4 November 1856. Bricklayers (more so the Plasterers) as a body continued to be soft on the issue during the 1850s campaign, see *Empire* 10 November 1856 where meetings were not well attended.

<sup>334</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p 27.

<sup>335</sup> Masons committee 7 August 1856. This meeting framed the resolutions carried on the 11<sup>th</sup> and reported *Empire* 12 August 1856. 'Final accomplishment' *Empire* 11 August 1856.

work unless they conceded the 10 hours. It seems that at this point the employers and builders had resolved to take the workers head on, throwing eight-hour men off the job. The Committee records employers 'meeting together for the purpose of crushing our movement', Melville and Dingwall included.<sup>336</sup>

The Mason's response was quick and hard. On 20 August a 'large and enthusiastic' meeting of over 200 masons was held and determined to carry the campaign on, supporting those put out of work. Two hundred subscription sheets were printed affirming their resolutions and sent round the jobs. Further, a deputation was sent to the architects for approval of their position against the builders. The *Empire* reported that the meeting had identified only a 'few' masters wanting to 'crush' the movement and also that their Victorian 'friends' would render them assistance if required. Moreover, the Masons raised the possibility of forming a co-operative to take on contracts, a matter under discussion already for six or seven months, which could be speedily brought in motion against the few masters holding out.<sup>337</sup>

The strong reaction of the Masons appears to have quelled insurgence, though it is not certain how great a dispute it became as the Committee minutes end at this point, unfortunately only resuming in 1857. We do see that the Masons advertised 23 August for those who had been discharged over the eight-hours demand to attend Mr Dishington's Oddfellows hall, presumably to collect pay. Notices in the press indicate only a few weeks of unrest. Another meeting of operatives was called on 30 August and, on 3 September, a meeting was called for 'employers of masons and others' believing themselves to be injured by the eight-hour principle now agitated by 'the workmen'. The deliberations of this later gathering, though signalling the employers' capitulation so soon after their challenge to the men, raised an ominous spectre that would one day undermine the eight-hour principle. It was suggested in this meeting that pay should be by the hour and not the day, 'whether they might work three or twelve hours...[provided]...those men who might choose to work ten hours per diem were not in any way to be interfered with by those who preferred working for a shorter period.'<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Masons committee 21 August 1856.

<sup>337</sup> *Empire* 22 August 1856. See Masons committee 21 August 1856, 23 August 1856.

<sup>338</sup> *Empire* 23 August 1856, 30 August 1856, 3 September 1856.

Meanwhile, a section of Carpenters, encouraged directly by the Masons, and no doubt indirectly by their progress, began their short day agitation in mid 1856; but in contrast to stonemasons, carpenters' ranks remained split on the question throughout the 1850s. Jones remarks of the Carpenters that 'the number of squads were more numerous, their movements were far more erratic, and consequently the confidence in each other were not so solid.'<sup>339</sup> It was not until late in 1856 that the campaign became earnest, at which time the Carpenters' Short Time Committee (STC) began to arrange a series of public meetings.

According to the *Empire*, at 8pm on 29 September, by order of their STC, around two or three hundred carpenters and joiners gathered in bad weather in the 'Old Assembly Rooms' on King Street. In similar terms to the masons, the carpenters agreed to agitate for the movement and forego payment to compensate a reduction in hours. They met, however, with stiffer opposition from the outset, their action falling on the back of the Masons' dispute in August. A meeting of master builders in the London Tavern on 8 October considered the carpenters' movement injurious to the men, employers and the public and resolved, 'in their mutual interest', to employ only those carpenters working the ten-hour system, and, along with their individual names, the builders printed a resolution to that effect in the press.<sup>340</sup>

Three or four hundred carpenters met on 13 October – it is said with great enthusiasm - to reaffirm the campaign and subscriptions were quickly raised to support the men locked off jobs.<sup>341</sup> The meeting claimed that opposition was confined to some smaller masters and that the larger ones were in agreement with the eight-hour principle; but compared with the masons, the carpenter's troubles were huge. Many men were affected, and they were having problems reaching unity. On 21 October, again in the old rooms, 300 carpenters gathered to assess the campaign. They noted that 133 carpenters were working the system (of which 131 were 'actually favourable') and that 82 men were on strike. The press reported that seventy-two were against the new system, and 20 would be guided by the majority.

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<sup>339</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p28.

<sup>340</sup> *Empire* 10 October 1856.

<sup>341</sup> *Empire* 14 October 1856.

The meeting on 21 October reveals that upwards of £100 strike pay was in hand and masons in attendance promised the carpenters a large amount of aid to their cause, which raised cheers from the crowd. The Stonemason delegates who attended the meeting also suggested, as they had to their own trade in August, that the operatives form a co-operative association and take on contracts themselves.<sup>342</sup>

According to E. W. O'Sullivan, who in giving specific figures appears to have had access to records now lost, when the carpenters began their agitation, for a time 286 men were out and only 200 working the eight-hour system. He claims that in a few weeks the loss of wages had amounted to £1672 10s, and the men on strike held out, supported financially by men still in work.<sup>343</sup> 'Ultimately the men won', O'Sullivan says,<sup>344</sup> but as we shall see later, gains to entrench the system, even winning it as an idea among the trade, were illusory.

The October meeting had nonetheless settled the eight-hour question for the Carpenters for a while at least, and finally the Stonemasons could take back a favourable account to their lodge. A subsequent deputation of carpenters waiting on the Masons expressed a wish 'that some kind of union be formed by the Masons and themselves for the purpose of firmly establishing the eight hour movement'.<sup>345</sup>

Following the carpenters' decision to agitate for the eight-hour day, building workers from the other trades became more active. On 4 November a large and lively public meeting of general building operatives, so many months in the making, assembled in the School of Arts to form a labour league. Comprising bricklayers, plasterers, carpenters and masons, the meeting noted the success of the Victorian eight-hour movement and the disunited state of the trades in Sydney. It acknowledged they could 'do nothing' without such an affiliation. Sentiments expressed at the November meeting were overwhelmingly in support of unity and fraternity and a sense of shared working class interest, not necessarily with respect to building operatives but indeed

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<sup>342</sup> *Empire* 26 September 1856, 21 October 1856.

<sup>343</sup> O'Sullivan *op. Cit.*

<sup>344</sup> O'Sullivan *op. Cit.*

<sup>345</sup> *Masons Idg* 9 October 1856, 28 October 1856.

of all trades. In Victoria, one speaker said, the mason ‘took the carpenter by the hand...and formed a phalanx which resisted all attack.’<sup>346</sup>

The operatives and the community at large were fully aware of the success of the campaign in Melbourne where they saw the capitalist and the worker in agreement over the eight-hour principle and where demonstrations that had been staged against the initiative were a total failure.<sup>347</sup> Before moving further then, it is worth considering the situation in Melbourne where, as the tradesmen suggested, the success of the movement contrasted with the problem facing operatives in Sydney. The Victorian building trades eight-hour campaign in 1856 was united from the outset. A labour league was quickly established between February, March and April. Many trades also formed societies at the time.<sup>348</sup>

Competition in the Victorian building industry it seems was not entrenched and both building employers and employees shared an interest in the eight-hour day. The operatives’ campaign was marked by very little direct action and in co-operation with the employers, although Murphy does note that the Stonemasons applied ‘what might appear a little mild intimidation’.<sup>349</sup> Resolutions from the various meetings and forums such as at the Queen’s Theatre, determined that hours of work ‘shall be for both Men *and their Masters*’. Murphy explains the level of co-operation between employers and employees in this way:

The employers...limited in number, were all men who had risen from the ranks of labour, and were equally anxious with the operatives to lay the axe at the root of old-world prejudices and abuses, while yet the demon of ruthless blood-imbibing competition had not begun to unfold its hideous and contaminating visage in the sunny south...The time and the men were equally suited to the circumstance; ten years later and the problem would have become Utopian.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> *Empire* 4 November 1856 (Jones says 3<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>347</sup> *Empire* 2 August 1856.

<sup>348</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p55ff, Progressive Carpenters est. 16<sup>th</sup> April 1856.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid* p 49 Murphy’s history of the eight-hour movement, cited here, is a firm and detailed rendition of the situation in Melbourne. Notwithstanding he is writing some 40 years after the event, and his history rather celebratory, he was active in the movement and knew leading figures of the 50s campaign. Accordingly we should accept the basic framework of his account. As noted earlier, Murphy had good knowledge of the movement in Victoria, though not in NSW, concerning which he concedes he found little direct evidence.

<sup>350</sup> Murphy *ibid* p 55 & fn, italics mine.

Industry meetings in Melbourne were attended and even chaired by leading builders such as Abraham Linacre, elected with strong applause. Murphy says that building workers and employers closed the bargain with an equitable spirit, 'from which dates the industrial harmony that has been ever since a marked characteristic in the relations between employers and workmen in the building trades of Victoria.' He notes, '[i]t is even now common to see many of our foremost builders and contractors seated in the four-in-hand drags which convey the Pioneers to the festival on each recurring celebration.'<sup>351</sup>

The Victorian movement was also very successful in securing public support, including that of the colonial intelligentsia. The Melbourne Labour Leagues' Prize essay on the eight-hour and early closing questions, established under the award of the University was addressed to: 'The capitalists and workers of Victoria', and was read to a public meeting of noted dignitaries, presided over by the worshipful Mayor.<sup>352</sup>

While Murphy notes some 'slight misgivings' from a few employers to the concession, there appears to have been only one brief incident of industrial dislocation. On 21 April a great procession of 800 operatives initiating the new rule, when passing the parliament house job and finding operatives still at work, called them down off their tools, where they happily joined the demonstration to rousing cheers. Proceedings for the day concluded with a breakfast banquet at the Belvedere Hotel, 'attended by a goodly company of legislators, members of council, including...the Mayor...professional gentlemen of all grades of society, employers and workmen.'<sup>353</sup>

Murphy paints an idyll, 'intense manifestations of joy', picnics, building workers cheering employers, shaking of hands and congratulations all round.<sup>354</sup> Perhaps one must approach Murphy with a little caution because of the celebratory nature of his history. But whatever lies beneath his account, one takes his point that unity and co-

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<sup>351</sup> *Ibid* p 49

<sup>352</sup> Aldwell, J.A. *Prise essay of the Melbourne Labour League on the Eight Hour and Early Closing Question* under the Award of the University of Melbourne, 1856.

<sup>353</sup> Murphy *op. Cit.* p61, 63.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid* p53.

operative relations between employers and employees necessarily won the benefit easily for the Victorians.

Whatever the successes in Melbourne, in Sydney the operatives had a hard time of it, despite them applying the same tactics. The NSW campaign did not lack in effort to secure the good will of employers and the public. In November 1856, as promised, Henry Parkes, presided over a public meeting to forward the movement. The wily Parkes, already an MP for about two years, took pains to inform a 'large and enthusiastic' crowd of his artisan beginnings. Though a long way from his chartist radical youth, Parkes' belief in educational improvement and social progress had remained consistent, and he gave the cause good coverage in the *Empire*, of which he was proprietor and editor until 1857. Parkes could be among the men himself.

This meeting must contain, Parks told them,

the heart and the soul, the genuine manly feeling, and the genuine self-cultivated intellect of the working classes...I am well aware that among the men assembled here this evening, must be concentrated much of the strength, much of the intelligence, much of that feeling of self-reliance upon which society itself rests for everything that is dear and ornamental to it.<sup>355</sup>

To the cheering 'seven or eight hundred respectable working men, of various trades', he announced he would not think that this meeting should take on a political character, nor did he believe it a 'combination against the just requirements' of employers. He would never countenance the meeting if by any possibility it created division between operatives 'any other class of the community.' And so on Parkes lectured to great applause on the great benefit and right of the working class to education and improvement, and the history of progress in industry, art, literature and poetry, science, astronomy and philosophy, that sprung from the working classes.<sup>356</sup>

Parkes typified the enlightened liberal element in Australian society and this aspect of social liberalism certainly agreed with the free-thinking tradesmen. But he, like the several other 'community leaders' called upon by the tradesmen to legitimise and

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<sup>355</sup> *Empire* 18 November 1856.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

entrench their eight-hour standard among the public, could not prevent the effect of market forces on the building industry. No more could sympathetic employers, and there were many of these. Maybe the level of competition which Murphy regards as relatively absent in the Melbourne economy was greater in Sydney, perhaps indeed making the claim in New South Wales utopian.

At the outset, the Masons informed fellow citizens that ‘they had no intention or wish to injure their employers in the least; they wish to act in perfect harmony with them’, willing to reduce their wage proportionately. Moreover, they assured people they were not political; in one meeting they told the crowd that, in forming the Labour League they, ‘instead of being political agitators, or persons actuated against the Government, had merely to discuss their own affairs.’<sup>357</sup>

Employer sentiments were often supportive. A published letter from an employer of quarrymen noted potential flow-on from the campaign into his own area and its effect on wages, but nevertheless stated that he could not see ‘what right the employers have to try to coerce the masons to work the number of hours which they find to be so oppressive in this very warm climate – considering the masons sacrifice the money for the time.’<sup>358</sup> Further, in September 1856, a report in the *Empire* concerning the University building project speaks also of a consensus between masters and men: ‘that though the introduction of the system did not meet with the approbation of the contractors, yet that, having given it a fair trial, they found it to work well...[and]...our informants expressed themselves in terms of entire satisfaction with the workings of the eight-hours system.’ A week later the journal reported, ‘It is creditable alike to the master-masons and their men that little or no ill-feeling has been generated by the late movement.’<sup>359</sup>

Press coverage of industry meetings also testifies to a growing acceptance of the principle by certain employers, but their reports shows consensus was sometimes built on religious and co-operative grounds, not necessarily liberal ideology. We see

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<sup>357</sup> *Empire* 4 November 1856 (Jones says 3<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>358</sup> *Empire* 25 August 1856.

<sup>359</sup> *Empire* 11 September 1856, 15 September 1856. One must however bear in mind Parkes’ bias.

for example the following contributions of employers Rhodes and Row to the November public meeting:

Mr. RHODES said he had been thirty years a mason, fifteen a journeyman, and the remainder an employer...He was bound to call the movement a good one, and would support it. He had attended the meeting of employers at the London Tavern; but there were only from six to nine present, which he thought argued well.

Rhodes was willing to take a contract in wood, brick, or stone, with men and work the system. In the same meeting, Mr Row, who was a small builder employing a few carpenters and bricklayers, also supported the movement, but gave a varying account of the London Tavern meeting on 8 October. He said he was the only one there in favour of the eight-hour principle. 'He did not wish to oppose so large a body of employers, but he did not raise his hand to give his sanction to the ten hours movement, neither did he wish to have had his name published in the papers amongst the employers as assenting to the ten hours.' Though it hurt him, he supported the movement, and holding a strong religious conviction believed, if it was successful,

churches and chapels would be crowded with worshipers...his conscience told him the men had opportunity for noble advancement, and for no gain whatever would he suffer his name to be tarnished through having crushed so great a lever to elevate his fellow men. He now felt inclined to take his men on to-morrow that left him in the morning. (Tremendous cheers)

Mr Row received three more cheers at the conclusion of the meeting, along with three for the Labour League.<sup>360</sup>

Despite these contributions, other employers remained strongly opposed. Though the number of objectors was constantly referred to as a few, from the amount of agitation building tradesmen engaged in, one senses that this was far from true, builders and employers were at best divided. Jones recalls that joiners had gained the support of several employers and started the system on 6 October 1856, but that, as an industry,

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<sup>360</sup> *Empire* 4 November 1856. Rowe [assume Row] later testifies to the sincerity of workers wishing to learn and expand horizons. The *Empire* 2 December 1856 reports that Row spoke to the Secretary of the School of Arts who told him 'that since the eight hours movement had commenced, upwards of 300 members had joined from the working classes.'

the battle waxed furiously. He ‘never found a reason for such persistent and dogged opposition’, and he testifies he was unemployed and blacklisted for supporting the initiative.<sup>361</sup>

Jones says he knows not why such bitterness existed, given the operatives’ willingness to forgo pay for the benefit. But the eight-hour day was not about money, it was about power, control and market competition, and the bitterness was a class bitterness. A subscriber to the *Empire* decried in August 1856, that ‘[t]hey would soon see that the employers of Sydney will not be dictated to by a few selfish and dissatisfied masons.’<sup>362</sup> Another, known as ‘Freeholder’ called the masons ‘dictators-general to the trades of the southern empire’, their unjust claim foisted on the public.<sup>363</sup> The Masons picked up the argument, ‘Freeholder would be Slaveholder’, holding the ‘tyrannical and oppressive notions which are the companion of the 10-hours system.’ For the operatives to surrender, the correspondent claims, would be to acknowledge ‘the principle of involuntary servitude for themselves and their children’, and he writes, the few employers in opposition appear ‘utterly ignorant of the fact that they are attempting to break down a great moral principle of free society.’ Freedom is the heart of the radical working class tradition, and accordingly the correspondent rails against unjust slavery which he saw was opposed,

to the spirit of British institutions. Again, what right have a few employers to combine and conspire to either starve or coerce men to work a number of hours which they have proved to be injurious to the development of those powers which God created them with, and which progress demands should be cultivated

The correspondence is signed ‘EIGHT HOURS AND NOT SLAVERY’<sup>364</sup>

After about twelve months of campaigning the Masons appear to have achieved a measured success. When their Committee minutes resume in 24 April 1857, discussions had moved on to how the eight-hour day would begin at a later time in winter months. Moreover we see the Mason Lodge minutes in October 1856 suggest

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<sup>361</sup> Jones *op. Cit.* p 29.

<sup>362</sup> *Empire* 25 August 1856.

<sup>363</sup> *Empire* 21 August 1856.

<sup>364</sup> *Empire* 28 August 1856.

success by confirming that masons who had worked against the rule, and whose names had been erased from the book were allowed readmission to the society. Further, twenty-two pounds that remained in the fighting fund was donated to the library in February 1857.<sup>365</sup> Their dispute was clearly over and the benefit was established, as best it could have been, in the context of a deregulated industry.

The same cannot be said for the other building workers. We have no information on the bricklayers but assume they had failed to achieve the benefit to any meaningful level. As for the carpenters, who seemed to have approached a broad consensus in October and November, they were again divided on the issue in late December 1856, where strict eight-hour men broke away from the Friendly Society to form the Progressive Society.<sup>366</sup> The carpenters battled on for six months into 1857, their Short Time Committee became the Short Time Association (STA) in late February, perhaps to accommodate both the Progressives and those remaining with the Friendly Society who worked the eight-hours.<sup>367</sup> The STA, still aided morally and financially by the Masons, continued the campaign, but reports of their meetings read lacklustre. From about July 1857 we hear of them no more.<sup>368</sup>

One positive aspect of the early campaign worth noting, and which set the pattern for future relationships among tradesmen, is how the eight-hour initiative drew the building trades together. It is remarkable how union leaders, masons, carpenters and bricklayers, had addressed workers of all trades via the League, as a united group under a determined principle. Well before the industrialisation of the Australian economy, and without direct stimulus of hunger and poverty often regarded as the impetus for radical agitation, we see building operatives acting as a class.

### **The campaigns of the sixties and seventies and beyond**

Perhaps the years 1855-57 were, as Parkes inferred, those of ‘genuine manly feeling’, where operatives, indeed enlightened minds of all classes it was believed, must

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<sup>365</sup> Masons Idg 26 February 1857.

<sup>366</sup> *Empire* 24 December 1856.

<sup>367</sup> *Empire* 26 February 1857.

<sup>368</sup> The association appears to have strong links with the church, see a report of what is probably the Association’s last public meeting in June, which also shows the issue becoming staid. *Empire* 23 June 1857.

accept the rationality and natural justice of an eight-hour day. But in the sixties came an understanding that however noble the measure, however much the principle was accepted by certain masters, it would not be achieved by merely dealing with employers 'man to man'. The pressure of a growing market and the swelling population that fed it was overwhelming, threatening all aspects of work organisation. By the seventies, building tradesmen looked to broader class unity and parliamentary organisation to improve their circumstance and further their central goal of a universal eight-hour day.

Building operatives, by trying to solve industrial problems from outside the trade society, were clearly changing tactics, but the idea was far from new. Workers in Britain were used to broad coalitions and they traditionally appealed to government to regulate industry. The breakdown of Elizabethan labour laws earlier in the century coincided with radical and Chartist objectives for political enfranchisement and social reform through legislation, and it coincided with broad union alliances such as Gast's 'Philanthropic Hercules'. Moreover, agitating for legislation to fix labour hours can be seen in the long and arduous campaign for the ten-hour day.

As discussed earlier, by the end of the 1850s, the Carpenters' struggle for the short hours was very shaky. Only Masons could claim to have won the benefit although, as argued above, this really meant only acceptance of the principle by workers and employers in the organised sector, and was constantly under threat. Lodge minutes allow us to qualify the extent of the masons' success. While it was claimed the eight-hours became the norm for masons on all major jobs,<sup>369</sup> there had always been a reactive element in the trade. As a mason informed the press at the beginning of the movement, there existed some against the advance, those 'who are so acquisitive that they would work from day break until dark...content to labour on for the sake of a few extra shillings'.<sup>370</sup>

The Masons' minutes show that the survival of the eight-hour day required their constant attention. Throughout 1857 and beyond we see that non-adherence to the rule continued to be of concern to the lodge. In May of that year appeared a notice of

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<sup>369</sup> See Jones *op. Cit.* p 28.

<sup>370</sup> *SMH* 26 February 1856.

motion to keep a book of masons not working the system, and a request that this list be sent to other towns where lodges exist. It was discussed in lodge meetings that a black-book be kept that included masons and employers of masons 'as may endeavour to abolish the 8 hours system by working in opposition to it or endeavouring to coerce others the same.'<sup>371</sup> In October 1857, and again in May 1859 they waited upon Mr Daniel Cooper, building a mansion and intending to use piecework, to acquaint him with the eight-hour rule. In November 1858 they proposed a committee be formed to 'adopt measures for the better consolidation of the eight hours principle.' In April 1860 they discussed throwing Brother Matthew Medway out of the Society, he being employed as foreman on the Tooths' Brewery where masons worked the 10 hours. In October 1861, following a delegation from the iron trades advising them of difficulties they faced in their eight-hour campaign, the Masons themselves raised problems in their own trade, particularly in the north shore region and in Balmain where 10 hours was often being worked. They decided to send a delegation to Balmain 'and use their best endeavours to get the masons now working ten hours to work only eight hours per day.' The issue of piecework, which implicitly knows no hours, began to arise as a serious contention in 1862. In February 1865, 10 years after its introduction in that precinct, a delegation of two were sent to a job in Miller's Point, to enquire if the Masons intended to work 10 hours per day and 'if so to try and persuade them to return to the 8 hours system.' Masons working in Newcastle in 1870 were 'violating our laws by working ten hours per day' requiring the Secretary of the Central Committee to inform them they could not be permitted to remain in the Society.<sup>372</sup> Finally, as noted earlier, in the late eighties, even the large town of Parramatta was not working the system.

However far the other building operatives succeeded in their initial campaign to spread the short-hours principle across the trade, the concession seems to have been entirely lost through the downturn of the late fifties. The campaign revived in 1861, at which time permanent organisations of Bricklayers, Carpenters and Builders' Labourers were founded. In April 1862 the Carpenters, now officially known as the Progressive Society, had regrouped to reintroduce the system publishing their

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<sup>371</sup> Masons Idg 7 May 1857.

<sup>372</sup> Masons Idg 7 May 1857, 21 May 1857, 18 August 1857, 15 November 1858, 11 May 1859, 30 April 1860, 28 October 1861, 12 May 1862, 27 February 1865, Masons Cottee 4 March 1870.

intentions in the press to send four delegates to ‘wait upon the employers in the trade, and ascertain their views upon the eight hours question.’<sup>373</sup>

Due to an absence of records we have no information concerning this aspect of the campaign – how it was carried out and if the benefit was achieved without serious conflict. However, though the Bricklayers and Carpenters certainly obtained the concession at this point, they, like the Masons, were ever having their rules transgressed. The discussion of Bricklayers in the last chapter shows their trade to seemingly reduce to brawling on a constant basis over working conditions, and the Carpenters were also frustrated in their attempts to control the trade. We have mentioned already that the Progressives’ failed efforts to organise the non-society men behind the idea in 1871, and we see also in that year that they too discuss expelling and black-listing members in breach of the eight-hour rule.<sup>374</sup> In April 1874 their records show they still found ‘old hands’ in favour of working the long hours, requiring them to draw up a memorial to their employer ‘not to depart from the Eight hour System now in force.’<sup>375</sup>

The sixties were a very bad time for the working classes, of high unemployment and of soup-kitchens, and unions appealed to the colonial government to halt assisted passage. They also corresponded with Britain to advise workers of the poor state of trade.<sup>376</sup> But notwithstanding the economic downturn, the building workers still campaigned for the short hours and claimed them as the standard days work. Other trades outside the building industry began actions in this period too. In the 1860s the bakers sought to reduce their hours from the obscene 16-18 hours a day, to a mere 12 with no work on Sunday, by forming a co-operative on the Rochdale system.<sup>377</sup> The ironworkers also initiated their short-hour campaign during this period. Both of these groups of workers received support from the operative builders, particularly the Masons, who we see assisting the ironworkers by making weekly subscriptions to them for the duration of their struggle. As the eight-hour campaign forged ahead,

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<sup>373</sup> *Empire* 24 April 1862.

<sup>374</sup> Prog 6 November 1871. See John Walker’s comment above.

<sup>375</sup> Prog 21 April 1874.

<sup>376</sup> Coghlan, *Labour and Industry op. Cit.* p1018 ff. See also the Stonemason records of the time which indicate this concern, most other operative building society records from this period do not appear to exist.

<sup>377</sup> See reports *Empire* 7 August 1860, 9 January 1861.

permanent relations between tradesmen of Sydney grew, especially the Carpenters and Masons who attended each other's eight-hour dinners and picnics.<sup>378</sup>

The sixties also saw the Carpenters and Masons unite on other regulatory matters, with the Carpenters suggesting they correspond with each other, and with the other colonies and the UK in relation to trade and immigration.<sup>379</sup> Other than these matters, though there was obviously communication occurring, not much detail is known of inter-union affairs and the eight-hour movement until the very end of the decade when the eight-hour league was established.

The Eight-Hour Extension and General Short Hour League was established in August 1869, with the aim being to regulate the eight-hour day by legislation. It began its agitation immediately by drawing up a memorial to be signed by workers across the colony. This petition was to be adopted at a 'monster public meeting' and presented to Parliament.<sup>380</sup> The league's initial membership appears to have been made up exclusively of the building trades. In addition to Masons, Bricklayers and Carpenters, the minutes of 12 August 1869 record Labourers, Plasterers and Painters as original affiliates. From the outset the league intended to expand its membership moving that the secretary contact 'all recognised trade societies inviting their co-operation with this movement', and two delegates were sent to wait on each union.<sup>381</sup>

Many significant unions joined the league. These workers came from old and new industries, the bakers, engineers, plumbers and galvanised ironworkers, and quarrymen. Over the life of the league there was continued pressure to attract members of other societies, and members even suggested, unsuccessfully, calling meetings of the non-society trades to assist them form eight-hour Associations.<sup>382</sup> In this way the league both gathered established trade societies around an organising

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<sup>378</sup> Iron trades, Masons committee 3 July 1861, see also Masons 1 July 1861, 8 July 1861, 22 July 1861. Celebrations eg Masons committee 23 July 1862 'Two tickets to be sent to each of the four societies that is working the Eight hours namely the Carpenters, Bricklayers, Plasterers and Labourers'. Masons 19 February 1864 'Bros Brown and Noble to attend carpenters dinner.' Minutes generally show close ties in particular between Masons and Carpenters.

<sup>379</sup> eg Masons ldg 8 October 1866.

<sup>380</sup> Short Hour Extension League (SHXL) 12 August 1869.

<sup>381</sup> SHXL 19 August 1869.

<sup>382</sup> This last proposal was rejected. 21 October 1869, 28 October 1869, but may be the origin of the Eight-hour Protection Committee attended by John Walker of the Progressives above.

principle and also allowed motivated workers to initiate societies within their own industries, which is what occurred with the Quarrymen.<sup>383</sup> Within a couple of months the League also offered to co-operate with the retail industry's Saturday Half Holiday and Early Closing Association<sup>384</sup> and was in communication with eight-hour leagues in Maitland, Newcastle and Grafton and with various carpenter's groups throughout the colony. Significantly, perhaps indicating the movement was a joint effort with the Victorian movement, the League maintained contact with the Melbourne societies who were preparing their own draft legislation to introduce a short hour bill into parliament. In Victoria the tradesmen it seems aimed to form a National Short Hour League.<sup>385</sup>

Not only was legislation necessary to protect the eight-hour system from the effects of a growing colonial economy, too quick and vast to be regulated through trade societies, a more difficult problem was the large government sector that locked eight-hour men out of prime infrastructure jobs working a ten-hour system. The League's petition included asking the Government to make eight-hours a standard days work in their enterprises.<sup>386</sup>

Despite the huge logistical effort in circulating the petition around countryside NSW, the league brought in at least 5663 signatures.<sup>387</sup> But the exercise was a failure; though unions endeavoured, as they had in the 1850s, to attract 'leading public figures' to the cause, including Parkes, and amended their ambitions from a monster rally to a public meeting, no bill was passed.<sup>388</sup> However, although they did not achieve their immediate end, the League provided a great opportunity to develop a broader class agenda. Affiliates discussed the establishment of working-men's clubs

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<sup>383</sup> SHXL 21 October 1869. The Bricklayers withdrew towards the end for reasons not clear, they maintained associations with the movement.

<sup>384</sup> SHXL 21 October 1869.

<sup>385</sup> SHXL 31 March 1870.

<sup>386</sup> SHXL 9 December 1869 This provision, according to Bricklayers minutes, was the 2nd resolution voted upon at the league's public meeting to support the 8-hour bill, 12 October 1870, at Seal's Square and Compass hotel, it wished: 'to bring before the notice of the Assembly the fact that its petitioners were excluded from employment on any of the works that might be under the immediate control of the Executive Government, or the various municipalities, in consequence of their adherence to the old system of ten hours per day. The Bricklayer's meeting was addressed by Dixon from the Stonemasons and Gillespie from the Labourers. Public meetings were held for the same purpose 21 September 1870, Stonemasons 29 September 1870, Carpenters 3 October 1870 and the United Labourers 14 October 1870.

<sup>387</sup> SHXL 8 August 1870.

<sup>388</sup> Coghlan, *op. Cit.* vol II p 1032.

‘for the moral and intellectual advancement of the working classes’ and the establishment of a trades hall.<sup>389</sup> It also allowed unions to act as a movement, to mature their understanding of the various levels of government, and to consolidate a position on colonial industry policy, which they corresponded to unions and worker organisations in Britain through national and regional journals like *The Times*, *Beehive*, *Glasgow Sentinel*, and the *Liverpool Mercury*.<sup>390</sup> Advising Britons of the state of trade in the colony was obviously to prevent excess labour flowing into a fragile labour market. But ultimately, the league was not a big enough forum for the plans that many tradesmen had for the movement. On the 13 October, Frank Dixon from the Masons stated that ‘in the event of another election in Sydney it would be highly necessary that the conference should be prepared to act in any part that it might be called upon, and he very much wished to see a better organisation in the form of A Trades Council.’<sup>391</sup>

The TLC was formed in early 1871. Though not exclusively a building trades initiative, building unions formed the most significant proportion of its affiliates, and building industry leaders played a very active role during its formative years in determining its agenda. The council advanced class-consciousness, organised workers, issued progressive literature and provided a forum for working class political debate.<sup>392</sup> Arguably, the primary motivation of the TLC, especially to building operatives, was the securing of the eight-hour day for all workers by legislation.

Of course the TLC was not established merely to pursue parliamentary objectives; it never ceased to assist other unions gain the short hour benefit by industrial means,

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<sup>389</sup> SHXL 16 June 1870. ‘Politically [a club] would be of great importance while socially its benefits would be incalculable’ The builders labourers were against the proposal for a club and while the bricklayers delegate was favourable and would do all he could to bring it about, he feared there was not enough interest taken ‘in the cause of union’. SHXL 23 June 1870.

<sup>390</sup> SHXL 19 May 1870.

<sup>391</sup> SHXL 13 October 1870.

<sup>392</sup> A text by Ray Markey studies the history the council which has been relatively ignored. Markey, R. *In Case of Oppression: the life and times of the Labour Council of NSW* Pluto 1994. Not only do the Building trades comprise about half of participating unions in the initial meetings, their delegates carry much of the debate. Moreover, the building industry officials appear in fact to have very broad expectations of the early Council as a forum to resolve industrial settlements between them, a matter that would normally occur within the trades group itself. When the issue of standardising start/finish times arose in the industry, Mr Baker of the plasterers was told by the other building unions to ask the TLC to assist resolve the problem. 9 December 1873. The council thought this unsuitable and a building committee was appointed to settle the issue.

either in old industries, like baking and shoemaking, or in newer ones, like the railways and engineering. But consistent with the aims of the League, a significant amount of Council's early debate concerned the political representation of the working class and mandating the eight-hour day on government projects.<sup>393</sup>

The building trades in particular were determined to extend the benefit through the public sector, and agitated for this throughout 1872. In December the Progressives proposed that all political candidates for vacancies in Sydney hamlets be questioned as to their opinion on the matter.<sup>394</sup> Earlier, in May, on the motion of Stephens from the Masons and Munn of the Bricklayers, a poster was issued from the TLC which read: 'Corporation Employees, study your own interests and that of you wives and families by agitating for the eight hour system.'<sup>395</sup> Working class political representation was also discussed in various TLC meetings that year and in November, the council spoke of taking 'an active part' in upcoming council elections with respect to influencing the vote in Macquarie ward. Introduced into this meeting was a gentleman intending to stand as the 'workingman's candidate', promising the corporation would adopt an eight-hour day,<sup>396</sup> By the end of the 1880s, the Bricklayers, still agitating on the issue, put a motion on notice that TLC delegates interview the minister for works, impressing upon him the need to stipulate eight-hours as a days work in government contracts.<sup>397</sup>

The campaign to elect Angus Cameron in November and December 1874, cannot be seen outside the context of the struggle for the eight hour day, though it is true that beyond such matters of industrial regulation and time away from work, more broad social issues had become equally important. Cameron did not merely stand as a 'friend of the workers', like many would-be representatives hustling for support; he was a candidate from the Trades and Labour Council and he received payment from them. Upon his successful election in West Sydney, relations between Cameron and the TLC were reciprocal. The Council Secretary was instructed to invite Cameron, as parliamentary representative, to attend all council meetings and 'also to comply with

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<sup>393</sup> TLC 1 May 1872.

<sup>394</sup> Prog 2 December 1872.

<sup>395</sup> TLC 15 May 1872.

<sup>396</sup> TLC 27 November 1872.

<sup>397</sup> TLC 5 August 1880.

[his] request made for a copy of Laws of all societies affiliated under the council.’ A notice of motion also suggests the TLC rules be amended so that the parliamentary representative become an honorary member of the council.<sup>398</sup>

However long it sat in the wings, the campaign to put a worker into parliament was a quick affair. In June 1874, Frank Dixon expressed a view to council that a direct representative in parliament was ‘expedient and highly desirable’, and in this meeting Cameron himself, spoke eloquently and at some length in support of it.<sup>399</sup> Though it was long before he was chosen candidate, Cameron spoke with confidence and in the old radical style - of the working-man helping himself, and the needed to ‘get at those men outside of the trade unions.’<sup>400</sup> Whether Cameron here is speaking of fundraising from the non-union sector, which was an issue during the campaign, or whether he was identifying the problem of extending the eight-hour benefit across jobs or industries not represented by unions is unclear.<sup>401</sup>

Cameron definitely avoided being portrayed as a class representative. During the campaign, Cameron told electors that though he was a union man, as parliamentary representative he would serve all classes and not promote conflict. To the electors of East Sydney, where he first endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to win a seat, he wrote: though long connected with the cause of labour, he would ‘depreciate any movement concocted for the purpose of giving predominance to any one class of the community at the expense of the public good.’<sup>402</sup> Nevertheless, he stood before them, ‘whatever political principles he might advocate – as an earnest and bona fide advocate for the rights of labour.’<sup>403</sup> He was a ‘bona-fide manual labourer’ though independent and not a representative of any class – he was a representative of the working man.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> TLC 12 February 1875.

<sup>399</sup> TLC 10 June 1874. Cameron however, though active in promoting the idea of parliamentary representation was not selected as candidate by his society until November 74, responding to TLC correspondence that the Progressives nominate a candidate, Prog 2 November 1874.

<sup>400</sup> TLC 25 June 1874.

<sup>401</sup> TLC 25 June 1874.

<sup>402</sup> *SMH* 4 December 1874.

<sup>403</sup> *SMH* 5 December 1874.

<sup>404</sup> *SMH* 8 December 1874.

Even so, a week later, he advised workers of West Sydney, who elected him, not to think of him as their delegate; that he would not benefit one class above another.<sup>405</sup>

Perhaps his moderation was to allay the fears of the public or to gain electoral appeal, but whatever may be speculated as to his claim of independence, his statements were consistent with the ideology of the 'enlightened' working class, of progress and co-operation, not conflict. The newspaper reports of his policies show that at base he remained consistent with the trade culture - a promotion of free and secular education, of union rights, and of legislation to entrench the eight-hour day. No child would go to school with the 'badge of poverty on his brow'. He said that it was not in the interests of the community to work labouring men to such an extent as to deprive them of mental energy, and he would object to the type of bill that would fine a workman conspiring to raise wages or any other 'species of class legislation intended to restrict the free action of men who banded together to protect their mutual rights'.<sup>406</sup>

To cite Cameron's public statements regarding both workingman's credentials and disdain for a class based approach as proof of his political opportunism is perhaps a little unfair. His position, one feels, was genuine, and there is no evidence of criticism from the council that he was speaking out of turn. Nineteenth century trade philosophy itself, its utopianism, its willingness to accept all views equally under the notion of progress, made Cameron's failure as an effective union and worker representative certain. His fall from grace came quickly and somewhat aptly, over the issue of regulation - the Agreements Validating Bill. Council and affiliates believed this Bill was the direct antithesis of their long campaign to control industry. It sought to formalise the work agreements of new arrivals that were made in other countries, a measure which would potentially undermine the Australian eight-hour principle and, one imagines, defy regulation by trade unions.<sup>407</sup> Cameron agreed to respect the Council's unanimous resolution that he abstain from voting on the Bill, but within months he decided that the 'council should not control him, but he should speak and

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<sup>405</sup> *SMH* 15 December 1874 see also victory speech that carries the same ambivalence to his obligations *SMH* 17 December 1874.

<sup>406</sup> *SMH* 5 December 1874 see also his victory speech.

<sup>407</sup> For discussion of the Bill and Cameron's position - that he regarded it a positive move to regulate against exploitation of workers brought into the colony see *SMH* February 1876.

vote as his conscience dictated.<sup>408</sup> Cameron, despite his protestations, had been the TLC's man, and the disappointment with him was profound. Within his own union, his position caused great consternation and argument.<sup>409</sup> He had represented the labour movement a little more than a year.

While Cameron at this time told the council he depreciated class legislation, to many carpenters and bricklayers the matter was clear; it was class action. Bricklayers seemed particularly animated by the prospect, agreeing to contribute 'Quarterly from the funds of this Society a sum of money 'equivalent to a Levy of one penny per week, per member' to assist the council carrying out their arrangements for the 'representation of the working Classes in Parliament'.<sup>410</sup> On this point the TLC perhaps also saw class in broader terms than just the union structure. In November 1874 the council debated how to devise an extended scheme to 'embrace in its operations non-society men in such a manner as to enable them to co-operate in conjunction with members belonging to societies...in promoting the success of this movement so as not to be depending solely upon such societies for success in this struggle.'<sup>411</sup>

Even at Cameron's demise, unionists remained fixed upon proper parliamentary representation of the working class, some suggesting that they continue collecting funds so they could elect 'a better man.'<sup>412</sup> The trade union movement, despite those within it opposed to political activism, could not ignore State power, and council affiliates did not at all forego the idea of parliamentary representation. In 1880, in the wake of the 1879 ITUC that declared parliamentary representation necessary, the Council sought to promote another candidate for election. William Roylance from the stonemasons was suggested, his views being for free, compulsory and secular education, in favour of land reform, he was neither a staunch free trader nor

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<sup>408</sup> TLC 17 February 1876, 13 April 1876, 20 April 1876.

<sup>409</sup> Prog 20 March 1876 'viewing the unsatisfactory nature of Mr Angus Cameron's Political Career this society feel compelled to draw the attention of the Trade and Labour Council to the same and beg to suggest that some specific action be taken with reference to same' carried (with some dissent).

<sup>410</sup> Bricklayers NoM 22 December 1874 'The above Motion was Discussed and Carried' 19 January 1875 Underlining here has probably been added later. See also the Progressive minutes of the Aug.-Sept. 1874 period, which refer to parliamentary representation of the working man and working class, and which also show the matter was very contentious.

<sup>411</sup> TLC 25 November 1874.

<sup>412</sup> TLC 20 April 1876.

protectionist.<sup>413</sup> Though unwilling to support Roylance financially or indeed support ‘any particular member of the council’, the Progressive Carpenters agreed that a Council affiliate should be nominated for a seat in parliament. This principle resonated within Council. As put by Pool from the Seamen and backed by the Bricklayer’s delegate, ‘it was time the scattered policies of the working classes was brought together and united and a better representation of our own class obtained in parliament.’<sup>414</sup> Affiliates carried the resolution unanimously.

In sum, by the 1880s the political and legislative struggle to make the eight-hour day universal had not yet succeeded. Notwithstanding that the working class’s collective action and agenda had broadened from the eight-hour day campaign where it began, to industrial and social reform generally, we see in each and every intercolonial trade union congress throughout the eighties that the eight-hours issue remained a central component. Moreover, among the social and regulatory measures contemplated by the 1890s labour platform across Australia it stood there still: eight-hours as a day’s labour across all industries.<sup>415</sup>

### **Picnics and Parades**

The question of the eight-hour celebrations returns us to a core problem of this study, how did workers in a pre-award system promote and maintain their industrial conditions? Industrial action had ensured some success, but however far it spread across industry it was continually white-anted by market forces. Further, securing regulatory laws, as we have seen, was hard to achieve and attempts to do so had not been successful. Yet for all this, the eight-hour day was being worked and its claim to be an industry standard was not publicly or officially challenged. It was entrenched in people’s minds through celebration and spectacle. Building unions, the League, the Council and Congresses were always aware of how these festive devices would help establish the correctness of the eight-hour principle in the culture of the trade, for both employers and employed, and indeed for the public, whom they believed would ultimately benefit.

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<sup>413</sup> Prog 2 February 1880.

<sup>414</sup> Prog 10 May 1880, 4 July 1880. TLC 13 May 1880, 22 July 1880.

<sup>415</sup> Spence *Australia’s Awakening op. Cit.* annexures

As noted, eight-hour celebrations had forged close industrial ties between the Carpenters and Masons very early on, where they each invited delegations from the other to society dinners and picnics. These events were important in coalescing the Societies around regulatory principles, and in imbuing their rules with a sense of permanence. However, while a significant industrial achievement, the eight-hour day was not portrayed as threatening to society. It is worthwhile considering the benign way in which the Societies promoted the celebrations. The last chapter referred to the Masons' annual dinners, where they toasted the eight-hour principle into legitimacy by evoking the Queen and public institutions. An even more quaint picture comes from the Progressive Carpenters who we see publish in the *Herald* a very wholesome poem advertising a 'GRAND EXCURSION' by ferry, to Balmoral Gardens in May 1865:

He, who spread the meads with verdure,  
And dotted them with varied flowers,  
Meant that we, though born to labour,  
Should enjoy some cheering hours.

The affair was promoted as a follow-on to the previous year's public demonstration – grateful for victory over an old machine-like 10-hour day by the 'young and glorious system of Eight-Hours.' It was a sumptuous event, cricketing, dancing, bands and amusements – though the ticket is marked 'no Gambling'.<sup>416</sup>

It is worth remarking upon the style of this notice, which appears unusually large in the press – bold and taking up 40 rather than the 4 lines typically required by union notices. The notice not only tells of the solidity of the Carpenters' movement, but in displaying its poetry, dance and sport, the gentility of the workforce. It shows the public, and themselves, that they could have what they craved, what they saw as the wealth of civilisation.

The picnics and dinners of the NSW building trades during the sixties eventually grew to larger public affairs, evolving into an eight-hour day demonstration in 1871 which

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<sup>416</sup> This advertisement appears in the *SMH* 22 May 1865. However, perhaps the event was repeated the following year, inclusive of poem, see Prog Eight Hour Commemoration Committee Minute Book May 7-21<sup>st</sup> 1866. 300 cards also printed with this poem.

involved the four unions who were working the eight-hour system.<sup>417</sup> As we have seen in our literature review historians like Bruce Scates often compare the eight-hour day celebrations unfavourably with May Day. One is seen as exclusive, the other inclusive. To the extent that the eight-hour day was only open to those who had ‘taken matters into their own hands’, and who had organised themselves, this is true. For example, hard working delegate for the Progressives, J Walker moved in 1877 ‘That this society delegates take no part in the 8 hour Demonstration unless it be confined to the selling of Tickets to members and their families of the different 8 hour societies’<sup>418</sup> But that the eight-hour celebration was exclusive – nothing was further from the truth.

Tradesmen tried very hard to attract as many other societies, artisan or labour, to the event – it was not only a celebration of an achievement, it was an organising tool, a symbolic rallying-point. The Masons’ delegate, Stephens, put to the TLC in October 1873 that ‘it would be advisable for the purpose of consolidating the Eight hour system for the whole of the societies enjoying the short hours or favourable to the same’ to adopt a common day to celebrate it, procuring banners for the purpose.<sup>419</sup> Further, during the iron trades eight-hours strike, Hartwell and Walker from the Progressives successfully moved on society night that ‘delegates should use their influence on committee to endeavour to take the Iron workers down free if on strike when the picnic is held that is all that stand in need and wish it.’<sup>420</sup>

The seriousness of the eight-hour festivities is also apparent; the Carpenters and Bricklayers minutes often comment on the failure of other societies to make proper contributions to the day and apply class pressure on them to do so. For instance, the Progressives ask that, ‘as the Shipwrights Society has not taken action in response to the Annual Eight Hour Picnic the secretary be requested to write to them and ask them what action they intended to take in the matter as the time is short’, where in consequence two delegates from the Shipwrights wait upon them at the following meeting.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> See Villiers, L.J. *The War on the Workers* the Workers’ Press Melb. (for the Tramways and Omnibus Union) 1919 p60.

<sup>418</sup> TLC 13 August 1877.

<sup>419</sup> TLC 22 October 1873.

<sup>420</sup> Prog 23 February 1874.

<sup>421</sup> Prog 29 December 1873, 12 January 1874.

One should not underestimate the purpose of marches, picnics and celebrations as public statement. It was a show of strength and commitment. As Cameron's notice on motion to the Progressives reads, 'delegates from the Carpenters and Joiners [should] try to affect a change whereby the 8 hr demonstration not take place on Manly Beach but either at the Exhibition Building or on the railway line to bring it prominently under the notice of the public.'<sup>422</sup> The ITUC in 1879 also placed great weight on initiating a national day to honour the reform. They move that all colonies 'should, as far as practicable, adopt one simultaneous date for the celebration of the establishment of the eight hours' system.'<sup>423</sup>

After decades of struggle, the movement in the Australian colonies had in a sense achieved its goal, the parades created an almost universal social acceptance of the principle - regardless of the actual practice on the ground. As put by the *Age* in Melbourne in April 1877, 21 years after builders there adopted the eight-hour day, 'the parade was more than a demonstration of the honour of establishment of 'a fair day's work for a fair day's wage''. The procession and its banners and regalia are 'the outward and visible signs of the recognition of a labor system which may be said to have become legalised by custom, if not by law.' The *Age* believed that a spectator would be favourably impressed with the march - a 'mass of people celebrating with order and joyous decorum'. It was testament to the way in which colonial Australia came to adopt the new civil society aspired to by immigrant labour, Noted is the fact that the parade was not marked by 'communistic agitators', 'King Mob or the lord of Misrule'.

The well dressed mechanics, the comfortable looking artisans, and all the unclassified sons of toil who, with their wives and families, gave themselves up to legitimate enjoyment...The working man of Victoria has something at stake in the country of his adoption... He has no need of concealed weapons; he wars not with matchlock and firebrand, but with right on his side and the opinion of his country at his back, he fights fair, and does his duty to himself and his neighbour in that state of life that he has been placed.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Prog 13 August 1877.

<sup>423</sup> ICTU p13.

<sup>424</sup> *Age* 22 April 1877 cited in Reid, J. Arbuckle, *The Australian Reader: selections from Leading Journals on MEMORABLE EVENTS* Melb. J Whitelaw and Son, Carlton 1882 Chapter X.

Through public spectacle, the short hours movement became a point of pride and achievement for the colonies. A writer, J.A. Reid, in 1882, citing the above journal article with approval, illustrates how the eight-hour movement came to be expressed favourably in popular literature. He notes that the tendency of public opinion in all countries has also been to shorten the hours of labour, and further notes that ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ was preventing the privilege spreading outside the mechanics and artisans to the unfortunate men, women, boys and girls who for long weary hours were ‘cooped up like birds in cages’. But in this new country it had been achieved. Although he was a Victorian, we may imagine him also speaking of the Sydney parade when he says:

Reforms of any description, seldom or never, come easily, and the pride of the handful of men, who, in 1856, overcame many difficulties, and inaugurated the new principle, may well be pardoned as they gaze on the vast crowds of people assembled on the streets of Melbourne – on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April each year – to witness the gorgeous procession of banners and bands, with which the anniversary of the ‘eight hours’ system is celebrated.<sup>425</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how the movement to secure the eight-hour day progressed from the Stonemason’s actions in 1855, the carpenters soon thereafter, to other building trades in the early sixties, extending outwards, by each step building unity among the developing union organisations of colonial Sydney.

It is not possible to overestimate the importance of the eight-hour day movement to Australian working class organisation. The eight-hour day, that came to be seen in the twentieth century as a normal condition of industry, was, in the nineteenth, a new and bold initiative – a means to allow the working class time to educate and improve, and grasp the wealth of the civilisation they were creating. To achieve their just claim for time, workers challenged the fundamental idea of market economics, and attempted to seize control over their industry. They united with others, building a progressive and active working class movement and laying foundations to support the remarkable growth of unionism in the eighties.

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<sup>425</sup> Reid *ibid.*

The eight-hour day was not something that was challenged by society in general or even by most employers. Rather, it was challenged by the logic of capitalism itself and those that revelled in a belief in the market above the community. When building operatives clearly saw their rules were unable to adequately control the industry they looked to Parliament to protect their interests by legislation, just as in Britain throughout the eighteen hundreds. It is here, in the matter of industrial regulation, that the seeds of working class political representation in Australia were sown, well before the disputes of the 1890s.

Though tactics had altered throughout the decades with changing economic circumstance, the fundamental nature of working class ideology from 1850 to 1890 remained largely consistent. Whether through union, parliament or parade, the goals of tradesmen were utopian; they wanted the fruits of modern society, and the operative builders imagined this could be done by mere effort, by honest work, by intelligence and dedication, just as their strength, skill and minds put together great buildings and towns.

## CHAPTER SIX, THE 1891 NSW ROYAL COMMISSION INTO STRIKES

The aim of this thesis is to understand how building workers organised their industries before standard wages and conditions became underpinned by the Award system – the effect that unfettered market forces had on the form and culture of nineteenth century trade unionism. The New South Wales Royal Commission on Strikes acts as a convenient end date for the study of this problem. It was appointed in late November 1890 and can therefore be seen as a pause to reflect on industrial relations in a pre-arbitration economy. It was of course a forum established in the wake of the great maritime dispute to understand the causes of strikes and to investigate how industries across New South Wales managed relations between masters and men.<sup>426</sup> The facts elicited from the enquiry argued for the regulation of colonial workplaces that had not been effectively or comprehensively achieved through traditional means of trade union rules, political appeal, picnics or parades. The Commission drew from the evidence a case for state intervention in industrial relations via conciliation and arbitration that lasted a century. Unionists from the building sector in particular were examined as to the function and success of a conciliation board that they had established to settle disputes in their trade. This chapter shows the various mechanisms initiated by building workers and their masters for industrial relations management. It will also show their political ideology, and the extent to which the two relate.

Through the Royal Commission we will note a continuation of political and industrial themes raised in earlier chapters, but from the optimism of previous decades we find a more sober outlook. One feels that building industry industrial relations were on the brink of collapse because testimony to the Commission shows a very fractured picture, with unionists and employers only just holding to the pieces. By the 1890s, the NSW building industry had arrived at a point where traditional forms of trade

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<sup>426</sup> Of the 55 witnesses giving evidence before the commission five were representing the building industry, including one building employer. For convenience Q&A numbers used by the commission are utilised, not page numbers. We note at the outset that the tenor of this Commission was investigative, not like recent Royal Commissions, especially those into the building industry, which have been punitive and political. There is, therefore, no reason for witnesses to misrepresent the truth. Certainly those giving evidence, even the militant John Grant, would present their arguments in the best light, but this thesis holds that the views expressed by them are a candid reflection of their position.

regulation through established prerogatives and union organisation – though the operatives still held to them religiously – were clearly failing. The building industry was unbalanced; customary forms of industrial regulation could not bear the full force of untrammelled market power. A growing number of employers no longer universally accepted union rule. If relations remained good and if operatives were paid standard rates and conditions, it was due to both union militancy and compromise; and it occurred in only the smaller part of the trade. Moreover, new systems of bargaining and conciliation developed by the operatives and the masters were equally inadequate to control market forces that undermined industrial order. While some unionists and master builders cooperated for mutual self-interest, around them were many more who breached industry regulations and, further, these elements - the ‘jerry builders’ and anti-unionists - were winning contracts and jobs.

The building sites of 1890 were lawless, and industrial relations were infused with militancy, radicalism and idealism, while at the same time driven by a sincere effort to create order in a broken and deregulated market. This thesis does not argue that political ideologies and industrial tactics of individual building trade organisations or their members were identical, or consistent. There was no Nicene Creed setting uniform policy. Nevertheless, though intellectually loose, there was a broad consistency in the ideology that had been reiterated from the 1850s - all unionists had little problem in understanding how capitalism and market forces worked. They had no love of it; but how to deal with it, and how to vary their industrial relations accordingly, led them to test various streams of progressive thought.

The dominant belief permeating building industry unionism in 1890 was that of co-operation in the Owenite sense. This view was expressed to the Commission by Thomas Bavister of the Operative Bricklayers. As has been argued, co-operative principles were antipathetic to class conflict, and allowed workers to accept a conciliatory position with employers, though this did not mean they lacked class-consciousness. Through the Commission we also see that a more vigorous political outlook had arisen. Stonemason representative John Grant articulated a position of class action, power and conflict, far more in keeping with the modern rhetoric of building industry unionism, though his ideas too incorporated high levels of industrial stability.

The testimonies of Grant and Bavister shall be relied upon primarily, as each illustrates clearly how ideas of industrial conflict, co-operation and radicalism co-existed. We shall see that beyond certain distinctions however, that the relentless force of the market dictated a very similar industrial attitude from both unionists and an equally strong class identity. Supplementing and supporting their evidence is Henry Wilkinson, secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners,<sup>427</sup> as well as William Gillespie from the builder's labourers ('at present labouring in the plastering trade'). Reference will also be made to the evidence of Mr Peter Dow, President of the Master Builders' Association (MBA), which provides a context for the testimony of the Unionists.

We shall begin by introducing our witnesses.

John Grant of the Operative Stonemason's Society was an emigrant stonemason. He had been in the colony for eleven years and 'connected' with unionism for about eight. He had held various executive positions with the Society and was selected by the Masons to state their case.<sup>428</sup> Grant was of an evangelical type, a militant and very politically motivated, and his account ought to be read by all aspiring union rebels.

Thomas Bavister spoke for the Operative Bricklayers and the recently formed Building Trades Council (BTC). His evidence gives excellent detail on how industrial relations operated in the 1880's building industry, from the customary craft union strategies to enforce control over the workforce and the industry, to the newer conciliation process formed with the MBA. His evidence pictures how both new and

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<sup>427</sup> Though this study has hitherto focused on the Progressive Society of Carpenters & Joiners, they made no appearance before the Commission. Perhaps they were not called in order to avoid repetitive testimony from representatives of the same trade. At this stage the rival carpenter's unions appear to be working co-operatively at various forums, and they probably shared the same views on strikes, conciliation and arbitration. It may be safe to say the basic tenets the ASC&J stand proxy for the Progressives.

<sup>428</sup> The minutes of the egalitarian Masons reveal Grant was elected to represent them after reading his submission at a special meeting on 20 February 1891. Unsurprisingly given Grant's flamboyant testimony, the eyebrows of certain brethren were raised. A Notice of Motion in a special meeting 1/6/91 foreshadowed a resolution 'that the society repudiate several statements made by Brother John Grant...beyond those expressed in his report to the society.' Unfortunately debate on the matter ends here. Grant did not show-up to the following meeting and no more is heard of it. The incident proves the lively and divergent policy debate existing within the trade union movement.

old systems remained in place, but it displays too the severe limitation of both methods of regulation.

Bavister had been associated with trade unions from the day he set foot in the colony, a little more than eight years prior to the Commission. He was an entirely different sort to the rebel stonemason, positing no grand march to Utopia. The Commission shows Bavister to be very statesmanlike and considered, enmeshed in dispute settlement and the day-to-day affairs of unionism. He would fit most historians' mould of 'labour aristocrat', but he is more than this. His motivation is based on the ideals of justice and concern not merely for his trade but for the working class as a whole. He understands class politics and the malicious role of the State, and his careful answers clearly speak in terms of class and with class interests in mind.

At the time of the Commission Peter Dow had been President of the MBA for two years. He had been a unionist in the old country. In fact he had been President of the largest Union of his trade in Manchester.<sup>429</sup> Henry Wilkinson had been in the colony for about twelve years and supplied the Commission with important information regarding the development of industrial relations practice in Britain.<sup>430</sup> Finally, William Gillespie, a stalwart for the United Labourers Protective Society had been in the colony 42 years and was connected with 'trades-unionism' for thirty. The Labourers Society had in fact been in existence from 1861 making him a founding member. Gillespie had held every official post in his union other than treasurer and so was very well qualified to speak on behalf of builder's labourers. Indeed the Labourers Society was no 'new' union but functioned in much the same way as craft societies and, for this reason, much of what Gillespie has to say is of relevance to tradesmen's organisations generally.<sup>431</sup>

Bavister's evidence will serve as a guide throughout the rest of this chapter, which will be broken into the following subsections or areas: customary industrial relations; Class collaboration, conciliation with employers, and its shortcomings; and, lastly, an

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<sup>429</sup> 8986. It isn't stated but he was most likely a carpenter.

<sup>430</sup> 11277.

<sup>431</sup> The evidence of the labourers can be used as an example of the building trades as a whole. Gillespie notes that there is a greater connection between the building trades' labourer and the tradesman than in other industries. 'We come into more immediate intercourse with each other, such as with painters, bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters, &c.' 10625.

assessment of class politics. Ultimately we will discover that a free market industrial relations system suited neither masters nor men.

### **Customary Industrial Relations of the 1880's Building Unions.**

Craft unionism of the 1880s had not forsaken tried and true methods of industrial regulation spanning back to the early industrial revolution and before. Society men held unyieldingly to traditional custom and practice, and these prerogatives were enforced and legitimised in a variety of ways. Naturally, unions sought to regulate the numbers of skilled labour entering their trade, as well as keeping secure the idea of craftsmanship itself. Rules could be enforced by strike, protracted or of short duration, known as 'strike in detail'. Regulation also required insistence upon union membership and exercising discipline over members to observe the rules. Whether part of a long tradition or a newer benefit, such as the eight-hour day, the rules were decided collectively and enforced democratically. Principles were elevated to ideal status and often described as 'for the good of the trade'.

Importantly, in hand with industrial militancy and the enforcement of rules was an alliance that formed with sectors of the employing class with whom unionists reached agreement. This alliance, moreover, was necessary to both masters and men - masters because they sought protection from competition that undercut them, men because they had no option. It was a system, however, that was subject to increasing pressure in the market economy of late colonial Australia.

### ***Respectful relations.***

The picture painted by both unionists and reputable employers of the nineteenth century building industry is one of a willing co-operation, a strict system - unsympathetic and blind to the needs of individuals - where rules were applied by consent rather than enforced through legislation such as the Master and Servant Act. Industrial relations held together on something stronger than written agreements - personal integrity. Bavister was extremely adamant as to the Union's position in this respect: 'I defy any person to bring forward proof of a single instance where we have attempted to evade our agreement.' The MBA was also very firm that when unionists

gave their word they would abide by it, 'What is a man but his word!' said Peter Dow the President.<sup>432</sup>

The idea of written agreements for the industry appears to have been novel; only one having ever been signed. The Commission questioned witnesses extensively on this point and Bavister explains that, 'The usage in the trade has been, not to rely on agreements [signed written agreements], but on customs which have been mutually recognised as just and right, and which have rendered agreements unnecessary.' Without consent, he says, 'it is simply warfare from the first. Agreements must be recognised, and it is in the interests of workmen to keep to their agreements.'<sup>433</sup>

Likewise, Dow did not see written agreements between the building trades as feasible, practical or necessary. His business had been able to 'get through' without them.<sup>434</sup> Through Dow we see MBA builders express a degree of independence, though rulemaking was far from unilateral:

Q: I understand you to say that under freedom of contract the employer should have the right to employ whom he likes, at what rate he likes, and any number of hours he likes?

A: That is freedom of contract; but you must not class such questions as those relating to the number of hours and the rate of wages with the question of whom the employer shall employ, because, by underpaying non-Unionists, the employer would be breaking a contract he had already entered into with the Union, still more so because we have a standard rate of wages. I think he ought to be able to employ whom he thinks proper. If I pay a high rate of wages, I think I should be at liberty to employ anybody I like at that rate.<sup>435</sup>

Dow saw he had a stake in the system. He was asked, 'who regulates the wages?' and answers, 'We, as employers, and the trade.' Bavister also makes it clear that custom and practice are by consent of both masters and men, 'mutually established and carried out by both parties for a number of years.'<sup>436</sup> Henry Wilkinson of the ASC&J agreed. Wilkinson spoke of an agreement existing between carpenters and the master

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<sup>432</sup> 8896, 9056.

<sup>433</sup> 8899, 8925, 8900.

<sup>434</sup> 9058.

<sup>435</sup> 9195.

<sup>436</sup> 9196, 8894.

builders based on common understanding. They had ‘very amicable relations’, with ‘no trouble at present.’<sup>437</sup>

Relationships between unions and the master builders, however, ought not be portrayed as a cosy conspiracy of interests as is suggested by authors cited in our literature review. It was about policy without fear or favour. Although it would have been tempting to assist certain *bona fide* employers with whom he held good relationships and who may have been of immediate interest to unionists, Bavister, when asked, ‘Will not the workman be willing to make an agreement with an employer who has a big contract, to see him through?’ responded, ‘No; he is only one employer, and we could not bind ourselves to see him through his difficulties, should his interests be interfered with, since we should be assisting him in tying down the wages of every man in the colony, and placing him in unfair competition with other employers.’ ‘The Union cannot make one set of rules for one employer and another set for another.’<sup>438</sup> Notwithstanding this policy, as we shall see in the Australia Hotel strike, they were in fact driven to such a position.

***Restricting entry to the trade: apprenticeship and artisan culture.***

Apprenticeship rules and the general exclusion of others entering the trade were fundamental to nineteenth century unionism. Restriction had two aspects, control over numbers and control over skill. Tradesmen had only their expertise to offer employers, and limiting the supply of artisans allowed building unions to bargain comparatively well in the nineteenth century economy. However, control over supply should not be regarded merely as an attack against others of the working class trying to gain better jobs and skills. It was an economic device against the employers.

The tactic of supply and demand is an obvious one. As noted by Grant (rather dismissively) regulating apprentice numbers ‘is one of those tinkering expedients [other trades] resort to in order to limit competition’. The Masons generally imported

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<sup>437</sup> 11277.

<sup>438</sup> 8919, 8920.

their tradesmen, Grant claiming that ‘space is too valuable in our trade’ for apprentices or improvers.<sup>439</sup>

It is true that the core of trade restriction was to hold up the value of labour, but it would be wrong to dismiss the tradesmen’s sincere belief in the value of their trade and the calling of their craft. It was not the employing class but the unionists themselves who took steps to ensure its continuance. Bavister claims that it was seldom that the employers took an interest in a lad who ‘is left to pick-up what he can from the workmen on the scaffold.’ In contrast, in what must have fostered great loyalty to his organisation, Bavister informed the Commission that, not only had the unions established technical education for apprentices, the Bricklayers Society had paid the fees of their junior members for the last 18 months, and hoped with proper theory and practical instruction ‘thoroughly good workmen would be turned out.’<sup>440</sup>

Obviously, by training the lads and ensuring the production of quality employees the unionists were preventing the growth of a substandard group who would place downward pressure on their wages. At the same time, however, it would be difficult to dismiss the honest concern of Bavister to the development of his trade. Complaining about the overuse of apprentices, he objected ‘still more to the employer not taking the trouble to make the apprentice a good workman.’<sup>441</sup>

However, the old principle of controlling skill was beginning to work against the system itself. Craft exclusivity was allowing a pool of unskilled labour to be engaged outside their society. Bavister was asked:

Q: Is it not the fact that a number of non-unionists who are asking lower rates of wages than those demanded by Union men are such workmen as you would not have in your Union?

A: That is correct. On various occasions applicants have been refused admission for that very reason.

But they were caught within the logic of their system.

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<sup>439</sup> 9837, 9823, 8922.

<sup>440</sup> 8822, 8836.

<sup>441</sup> 8825.

Q: Have you any fear of their undertaking those cheaper jobs?

A: No. They will make themselves competent men if they mean business, but until they are competent the officers of the Society and its members cannot afford to prejudice the interests of those who are in already by admitting inferior men.<sup>442</sup>

Grant appeared more cognisant of the problem. Strict apprenticeship and exclusion rules which limited access to the trade, would 'ensure severe competition to get into it', and he concedes his examiner's point that by keeping unskilled labourers out and increasing their ranks, tradesmen create a 'class more dangerous than a great number of apprentices.'<sup>443</sup> Craft unionism that controlled industry primarily through consent of a close community of members was certainly not geared to handle the vast numbers of labour required by industrialisation.

### *Strikes*

Militancy of course was fundamental to traditional rule enforcement. Protracted strikes had not been common since the short time campaigns of 25 years earlier. But as told by Grant, strikes in detail, where men walked off the job to defend their rules, were usual. According to Grant, these strikes were resolved quite simply: 'By the contractors agreeing to comply'. Bavister's testimony was no different, reporting that serious strikes had not been frequent, 'but strikes of two or three men do often take place. I should strike work to-morrow morning if my employer put to work opposite me a lad who had been two years in the trade, and not apprenticed.'<sup>444</sup>

A traditional strike was not one that sought to interrupt the flow of business and create anarchy, but was rather to maintain order across industry. Peter Dow confirms that disputes in the building industry were very rare and were caused by intemperate young unmarried men of 'venturesome spirit': 'Yes they have no thought beyond the temporary excitement...the more experience a man gets the less he likes to strike'. Dow directs much of his annoyance to this element: 'having been in strikes myself, these men who do most to agitate a strike are, as a rule, the worst mechanics. Their function seems to be to irritate the young and inexperienced who are in want of

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<sup>442</sup> 8793,4, 8893.

<sup>443</sup> 9839,40.

<sup>444</sup> 8953.

excitement.’ In Bavister’s view, the Union had a positive effect on workers in unsettled times, the majority of their labours, ‘has been exerted on the side of moderation.’ According to Bavister, the actions of officials was ‘to restrain [the men] from action that might not be hasty, but might be the outcome of years of belief that they were not being fairly done by, and they were suffering from injustice’.<sup>445</sup>

Unsurprisingly, controlling industrial agitation caused friction between the leadership group and the rank and file. Bavister claims that officials used the whole of their influence to secure a settlement with employers rather than strike, and in a particular case, a dispute on the Australia Hotel, discussed below, ‘the officers incurred the ill-will almost all of the Bricklayer’s Society because they advised the men to put up with a breach of agreement on the part of one of the first builders of this city rather than have a strike.’<sup>446</sup>

There was no question that Bavister knew that his actions in controlling the rank and file were appreciated by the employer class. He claimed to have had ‘occasion to interview employers in Sydney at various times, and on more than one or two occasions during the last two or three years they have stated they could deal better with the bricklayers as a society than they could with individual men. It gives them greater reliance as to future operations.’ Dow reinforced Bavister’s position very directly; in answer to the question, ‘Although you are the President of an association of employers, you are a thorough Unionist in principle?’, he says, ‘In principle I am. It is almost necessary to control the work.’ Further, he comments: ‘I say there is no society of men that ought to resort to a strike until it was the very last stage to be reached, and I think that is the opinion of the officers of the Societies themselves’.<sup>447</sup> Moreover, Bavister, when asked if he knew officers of the union had been designated ‘professional agitators’, states Union officers are ‘chiefly directed to prevent strikes’, and ‘nine cases out of ten’ know nothing of a dispute until it is brought to them.<sup>448</sup>

Gillespie, speaking for the labourers, also hoped to avoid conflict and industrial unrest, agreeing that union officials used their good judgement to avert strikes. ‘As a

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<sup>445</sup> 9208, 9121, 8856, 8857.

<sup>446</sup> 8816.

<sup>447</sup> 8858, 9169, 9046.

<sup>448</sup> 8816,7,8.

rule' he said, 'our employers are of the opinion that the Union men are the best men, and their sympathies are with us so long as we are moderate and reasonable from their standpoint.' He believed employers also benefited from the harmony that unionism brings and says 'during that long period we have never had any friction with our employers. Collectively we have not; individually we have.'<sup>449</sup>

Although strikes were necessary, there is no sense in the evidence of witnesses that their use was effective or desirable for either party. Dow, recalling involvement in serious disputes as an employer in the UK remarked they 'do not pay',<sup>450</sup> and the evidence of Grant tells of how, in spite of a walk out on a major job, Jennings the builder, was able to complete the project using non-union labour. It seems that not only were the old tactics of industrial militancy traumatic and undesirable, but they were often failing to do the job of regulating the trade.

### ***Unionism, Authority and Rule Making.***

As noted above, unionists traditionally walked off the job rather than work alongside non-unionists. Enforced membership was not to bolster numbers or secure funding but was a means to an end - adherence to common rule, vital in a deregulated industry. This too, like other aspects of traditional control, was in a state of uncertainty. The United Labourers Protective Society, which we have observed functioned the same way as the other building trades organisations, gives the best account of how rules requiring unionists to work only with other unionists, were a major factor in union density. William Gillespie addressed the Commission on this point:

I may explain that during twenty-five years we had a rule prohibiting us from working with any but Society men. That was repealed about 5 years ago, and when it was repealed it was the opinion of a number of our members that there would be such a large accession of strength we should never regret it; but the reverse was the case, as from 500 we dwindled to 150, but in the last nine months we restored the rule to its original position, and now we number 600 members.

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<sup>449</sup> 10554,5, 10597, 10550.

<sup>450</sup> 9127.

Further, Gillespie gave a good account of the customary way unions ‘enrolled’ others into their group: ‘If a man who is not a member of the Union comes on to a job where we are working, we give him till Saturday night to make up his mind whether he will join or not, working with him in the meantime, and then if he says he will not join the employer has the privilege of selecting whether the man shall stay or we shall go.’<sup>451</sup>

Members were expected to uphold the rules of their society. Joining a society was to place oneself into a strict order and within a strict moral code. Leadership, authority and respect, moreover, had value within their organisations. Bavister made a point that no employer would keep him at work if his society called him out:

because I do not think a number of intelligent men would call out their fellow Unionists unless they had sufficient grounds. I should go out if advised by the responsible officers of the Union, because I have always seen only men of character and honourable men elected to these positions, and unless grounds existed for calling the men out, they would not be called out.<sup>452</sup>

Further, officials of the building unions saw their societies as providing a moral and uplifting value to members, not a forum to agitate for industrial disruption. Bavister said to the Commission: ‘I am convinced that [members] have improved both morally and socially, inasmuch as drinking practices, which have been rather too common among workmen, are discouraged in their meetings.’<sup>453</sup> Gillespie, from the labourers, was also convinced as to the positive effects of unionism on the working class, especially as the Commissioners put it ‘in his rank in life where many of the men are rough and uneducated.’ Gillespie remarked that unionism ‘disciplines them to obedience, and infuses into them a spirit of better principle’. In short it made them better citizens.<sup>454</sup>

The concept of fraternity was not a term without meaning. Nor were frequent terms such as ‘trade calling’, or ‘for the good of the trade’. Discipline did not merely rest in the placing of fines on offending members but moral sanctions were applied and

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<sup>451</sup> 10550.

<sup>452</sup> 8902, 8904.

<sup>453</sup> This in itself would be a monumental task, especially on meeting nights where the bricklayers convened at the Swan with Two Necks Hotel in George Street, Sydney; a venue incidentally, used to hold meetings by the Progressive Carpenters and the ASC&J.

<sup>454</sup> 8854, 10600,1,2,3.

ultimately, the threat of ostracism. Whether or not penalties or exclusion from membership was a common occurrence (or for that matter whether bad debts resulting from fines were forgiven) these sanctions were taken seriously. Exclusion had the potential to deny workers access to large and better-paid jobs. On this point Bavister said that if a worker applied to rejoin his association, but had previously broken the rules and was subject to a fine, the society would not consider the matter unless he paid up, 'and even then would refuse him if they thought right.'<sup>455</sup>

As indicated by Gillespie, by the 1880s the issue of compulsory unionism was an important question to the Society men. Insistence on compulsory union membership varied according to each trade society – some were more determined than others. Grant testifies that Stonemason members work with non-unionists, though were given a pretty 'warm time of it' until they joined.<sup>456</sup> Even where the Masons acknowledged non-unionism, universal obedience was unquestioned; they imposed fines for breaching the rules on both members and non-members alike. The Operative Masons appeared to operate on the assumption that they would eventually 'enrol' recalcitrant non-members into their ranks, or at least intimate to non-members who may seek to breach their rules, that justice would await them should they ever be put into a position to join. Working rule 12 indicates not merely that members would be fined the sum of two pounds for 'working in opposition to the rules, on strike jobs', it also says, 'Non-members working in opposition shall pay an entrance fee of Two pounds (£2) each', and non-members are expected not to work on jobs stopped by the Society for non-payment of wages to masons. Again the penalty on joining for breaching this rule is £2.<sup>457</sup>

The other unions were less effective in upholding their customary rules. The Operative Bricklayers, as we have seen in earlier chapters, by the late 1880s distinguished between society jobs and non-society jobs, insisting on the rule

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<sup>455</sup> 8890.

<sup>456</sup> 9820.

<sup>457</sup> Rule 12 states that masons working on strike jobs, shall be fined the sum of £2 each. Non-members working in opposition shall pay an entrance fee of £2 each. Rule 17 says 'should any employer fail to pay through becoming insolvent or any other cause, and the job is stopped in consequence, no member of this Society shall be allowed to work on such job until all claims for wages have been paid in full. Members and non-members so offending shall be dealt with according to Rule 12 of this class'. From the literary appendix of the Commission p 144.

enforcing union membership in the former case only.<sup>458</sup> According to Bavister, by the 1880s what is mandatory is that the non-unionists work within certain primary union rules; ‘the only condition where we consent to work with non-unionists [is] provided the 8 hour principle was not infringed, and also provided that the apprentice rule was not infringed.’ The Amalgamated Carpenters were the most flexible in working with non-unionists. They did not declare a job society or non-society, though, they, like the Bricklayers, distinguished between independent men who adhered to the rules and those that broke them.<sup>459</sup>

Dow agreed that unionists had not often asked him to discharge non-unionists, ‘only in cases where work has been done as the ‘labour only’ principle.’<sup>460</sup> Dow claimed not to know which of his men are unionists or not and judges them only on the quality of their work. He ‘never would’ enquire. ‘We might as well ask him what religion he belonged to, as to ask him if he belonged to a Society or not.’ Nor would he ever be dictated to by the men on the issue. Other than with the labourers, he says that unionists had never given him difficulty over the matter.<sup>461</sup>

Importantly, master builders in NSW had not as an organised group sought to de-unionise sites, as had historically been the case in Britain where, as previous chapters have shown, the ‘document’ was issued on occasions of great industrial upheaval. Nineteenth century building employers like Dow had quite often been society-men themselves. Despite his holding high a principle for the right to employ whomever he pleased, Dow’s actual position regarding trade unionism belies such indifference. We see that he clearly preferred unionists, and regarded both they and their rules as beneficial. Here we note the following exchange:

Q: Does it come within your experience that these Unions simplify arrangements by having a certain line of procedure laid down that the men

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<sup>458</sup> Rule 26 entitled ‘Trade Protection Rule’ says ‘no member shall be allowed to work on a Society job with any bricklayer who is not a member of this Society, or such member or members shall be fined 5s per day in each case, unless such non-Society men are willing to become member of this Society. From the Literary appendix of the Commission. P 145

<sup>459</sup> The Royal Commission reports that their ‘practice varies as to allowing members to work with non-Unionists according as to whether they are blacklegs or simply non-unionists.’ The commission also notes that the Progressive carpenters provided no information on this point. P 145.

<sup>460</sup> 8792, 8886, 9713

<sup>461</sup> 8995,6, 8998, 9001,2, 9017,8.

are to work under, or, to put it another way, is it not easier to deal with an organised body?

A: Certainly. Organisation is a very good thing for both parties. I should prefer it myself if all the men were in Unions.<sup>462</sup>

Dow further agrees competition from non-unionists is a serious danger to the building trades.<sup>463</sup>

Tradesmen accepting or acknowledging non-unionists ultimately reveals an inability to enforce membership. What is clear from all these accounts is that the unions' tactics of enrolling members and thus controlling the trade had become ineffective and perhaps, one could suggest, to a degree less necessary. It could be argued that by the 1890s there was a tacit understanding between some in the union sector and certain builders that the relaxation of the membership rule, freeing up skilled labour, had been traded off on the condition that working rules prevailed.

One may question why certain employers like Dow were either benign or supported unionism, normally held to be against their interests or the interests of *laissez faire*. As will be explained below, the reputable employers relied on the union enforcing their rules against competitors who undercut industry standards. Dow believed he kept his end of the bargain and was critical where he saw union members breaking the rules and undermining industrial order. In reality reputable builders saw freedom of contract as meaning everything other than the question of pay-rates and conditions.

### ***Common Rule v Laissez Faire: MBA v 'Jerry Built'***

Remarkable upon above was how the MBA and the trade societies accepted industry rules, but the truth of the matter is that only a minority of workers and employers stuck to the Union system. It was of course an unfair industrial relations system with inequality structured into it and as such challenged both masters and men in the organised sector. Grant spoke of toil and slavery, and of cheap pay rates prevailing in the industry. Bavister raised the matter of youth exploitation – lads brought into the trade as cheap labour. '[O]ne of the greatest troubles, so far as apprenticeship is

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<sup>462</sup> 9028.

<sup>463</sup> 9095. Gillespie also notes that he has been engaged by the same family business for 20 years and testifies that his employer would also prefer to hire union men. 10624.

concerned... is that a number of irresponsible employers who take piece-work secure apprentices, not with the idea of teaching them a trade, but simply to get a boy they can use as an errand boy', Bavister complained. He noted employers took them on and dismissed them once a job was done, to take any other work or starve, but vouches: 'The well established builders or contractors never lend themselves to such thing.'<sup>464</sup>

Wilkinson highlighted how many employers defrauded workers' injury insurance, forcibly collecting money from the workers to cover the cost. He is asked '[h]ave you known cases where men had to pay the insurance or clear out?' 'As a rule the builders will not do that, but you are discharged; it is much the same thing. If you do not submit to the reduction you get the 'sack'... We go around and get a job on a Monday morning, and insurance is not mentioned, but when it comes to pay-day my 6d. or 8d. is deducted.'<sup>465</sup> Further, employers often asked injured workers 'to sign a paper to take £10 or £5, or whatever it may be, and then they get out of paying him his £2 per week, which is the contract entered into by his employer; the man would be afraid not to take it, for fear that the claim being disputed and delayed, though the injury may hang on to him for six months.' According to Wilkinson, all of his past employers in Australia deducted pay, 'I can say a dozen, at least.'<sup>466</sup> Wilkinson agrees that negotiations with MBA members would probably resolve the insurance problem but, with some pessimism he says, 'the builders outside the Association, who outnumber them ten to one, would not be parties to any agreement we might arrive at with the Association.'<sup>467</sup>

Unionists, then, note two sorts of employers, those who were reputable and who maintained decent relations with organised labour, and those that offered unfair competition and sought to profit from the breaking down of established custom and practice. The latter group far outnumbered *bona fide* builders, and Bavister states it was against these builders, standing outside the 'Builders and Contractors Association' that the Union struck most often.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> 8826,7,8, 8862,3. Grant also testifies to employers bringing into the trade those he calls 'improvers' or 'apprentices' and will pay them 'under-money' – 'till we find it out.' 9822.

<sup>465</sup> 11271,2,3,4,5, 11278, 11280.

<sup>466</sup> *ibid.*, 11331.

<sup>467</sup> 11329.

<sup>468</sup> 8785.

Wilkinson was asked: 'have you ever known a case where contracts have been sub-let, and the sub-let portions have been sub-let over and over again until it has come down to the individual man trying to get wages out of it?' He replied 'Yes, it is a very common practice...It is very injurious to the trade, and shuts Trade Unionists entirely out of these jobs...[and] ...being a practical man, knowing practical men, and what work ought to be, I consider they get it [the job] done very roughly.' Moreover 'jerry' quality work was a problem for bone fide employers: 'Mr Dow could have told you that. He is shut out of half these jobs.'<sup>469</sup>

From Dow we see the interests of reputable masters and men actually converged over the issue of pyramid subcontracting. 'It is detrimental to the workman, to the employer, and to the proprietor, who has to suffer at last.' Dow's aim was to promote a sustainable and ordered industry by adherence to established agreements. Peter Dow, having looked at the labour question 'from both points of view', claims he still sympathised with workmen. He says he is against sub-letting and for paying the standard rate of pay. He is happy with the eight-hour day, agreeing that it was a better system for both sides. He further expresses complete satisfaction with the productivity of carpenters, bricklayers and plumbers, seeing they do a fair day's work. He is proud of the fact that on his jobs bricklayers will 'not lay over 600 a day.' He seeks first class work.<sup>470</sup>

Distinguishing both himself and his associates from their disreputable competitors, Dow complained, 'I know that there are unscrupulous employers who take advantage of the necessities of the men, and screw them down to a rate they can hardly exist at.' A good employer would not use his power to make it impossible for them to make a decent living. 'He would not do that in the light of day, if he was established in anything like a respectable way. He would have to be one of those little 'jerry' employers who can do anything outside any Association or Institution. It would not happen in our line of business with anyone belonging to the Association.'<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> 11283,4,5,6.

<sup>470</sup> 9179, 9062, 9071, 9079, 9080,1,2,3.

<sup>471</sup> 920, 9202, 9184.

Dow confirmed the existence of exploitation and expressed contempt for it: 'Is it within your experience in your own trade that work has been sublet to a carpenter, and he again has employed men to do piecework – that is the 'sweating system?' 'Yes; and that is what we want to put down. I believe in freedom of contract, but not in freedom of contract that is to work an injury' <sup>472</sup> However, in recognising the irregularity of the market place, Dow blamed the workers themselves. In his view they could be the means of controlling the industry:

Q: Do you think the Unions here are strong enough to resist any reduction of their wages at any time?

A: I can scarcely say; but I do not think that any employer would attempt such a thing. It is the men themselves who bring that about, by working for employers they can have no confidence in... It is the unscrupulous employers, offering rates of wages below the ruling rates, which the men are foolish enough to accept. They ought not to accept them in their own interest. These employers will take work at considerably less prices than we can do it at. <sup>473</sup>

Dow, proud in upholding his end of the bargain, pointed the finger at the men themselves when the system and rates fell. Whether Dow's criticism of unionists is correct or not, the traditional system of Society regulation was obviously not working. Disreputable contractors thrived. Bavister is asked: 'Have you known any slum-work buildings to be knocked up round Sydney?' His reply: 'I could not point to any part of Sydney where you could not find them.' Society-men, he confessed, found that they had little choice but to make their living on piecework jobs along-side lower skilled workers. He further regretted that his members had to work with 'piecework contractors' who employed inferior workmen and youths, 'who have work perhaps, for six months, and no established place of business, and no material, who simply live out of the profit that they can make on the labour they employ.'<sup>474</sup>

Substandard practices appear to be a growing problem in the late 1880s, even extending into the government sphere. Both employers and employees looked to the government sector to enforce agreed rules on government work. Here Bavister recalls

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<sup>472</sup> 9033.

<sup>473</sup> 9085,6.

<sup>474</sup> 8881, 8924.

being part of a deputation meeting the Premier and heads of government over the issue, with Dow apparently also in attendance.<sup>475</sup>

Henry Wilkinson sums up the complaint: Government jobs were being done under the ‘sweating system’ - the railway station at Erskineville, the station at Auburn, the Coast Hospital, the Public School at Rockdale, the Railway Institute, a building at Cowper’s wharf, and several others. He notes ‘*bona fide* contractors have not the chance of competing with these men who take it out of the labour’. Inadequate responses from the colonial government led Wilkinson to remark how authorities in the UK currently enforced union rates and conditions. In this context Wilkinson, foreshadows the entry of the labour movement in to representative government:

the workers [need] men in the Assembly, and in the Municipal Councils, who are in touch with them, and can sympathise with a tradesman, who, having served his five or seven years to a trade, fitted himself with a good kit of tools, thinking to be able to obtain standard wages as recognised in the trade, has to walk the streets in search of work at a fair price, or sell himself for what is offered by unscrupulous contractors.<sup>476</sup>

Indeed it appears that the industry was having great difficulty regulating itself.

### **‘Class collaboration’**

As noted in our literature review, Engels in the *Condition of the Working Class* argued that craft unions collaborated with major employers to eliminate their smaller competitors. While this is certainly the case, this study explains the phenomenon differently: if the Societies let certain larger, more benign builders go to the wall under the enormous pressure of unfair competition - piecework, ‘under-wages’ abuse of apprentices - then they too would be forced into the hands of builders who conducted affairs entirely outside union rules, custom and practice.

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<sup>475</sup> 8802, 9178. We see the Masons also send a deputation to wait on the Colonial Architect regarding piecework on the Central Police Court Foundations ‘contrary to clauses laid down in Government Contracts’. Masons Idg 20 January 1890 See also delegation to the minister of works and architect for public schools asking his assistance to ‘eradicate the present obnoxious system’. Special meeting Masons Idg 7 February 1890.

<sup>476</sup> 11281.

A union leader may well agitate against an exploitative social system, but he has also to make sure his members are paid and looked after. Also rare would be to find members of a Society prepared to move from a secure job and secure wages, where they had some self-respect and a little workplace control, into the world of wage theft and the ensuing perpetual industrial warfare. What must have seemed necessary was to strike against offending builders, yet settle disputes with others - to conciliate and to accommodate, rather than engage in destructive industrial action, which they and their society could ill-afford and could probably not sustain. In reality, however, market stability was a common goal for employers as well as employed. As Bavister claims, 'members of the Master Builders' Association are as anxious to see this subletting and piece-work put an end to as the workmen are themselves'.<sup>477</sup> To this extent and in this context 'class-collaboration' existed.

### ***Common Cause with Employer- the Conciliation Board***

The formation of a conciliation board with the employers had its costs, but the Master Builders and the building unions, with the notable exception of the Stonemasons, were very excited about the system. Dow was more than convinced of the positive benefits of conciliation. Before the board was established, builders had always to look 'a long way ahead, and see how things are going to be.' The Board now allowed them to tender for big contracts with certainty and security as they had more protection against the risk of strike and 'aggressiveness of the unions'. He considered that the builder's board was working '[f]irst class. Of course we have not had very difficult questions to settle; but I think it is a system which ought to be adopted in all branches of trade' Dow agrees that where reasonable men are involved, 95 per cent of cases can be resolved and that the board was getting on 'without serious quarrels'. The board he said gave them favourable decisions unless things were really wrong, and any demand unions may make, and builders do not concede, has to go before it.<sup>478</sup>

On his part, Bavister said the conciliation board had done some 'very useful work'. Bavister described the board as comprising an equal number of employers and workers elected from each trade, six on each side, with a chairman, an employer,

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<sup>477</sup> 8810.

<sup>478</sup> 9045, 9109, 9110, 9111, 9114, 9115, 9119, 9117.

selected by mutual agreement. Illustrating the optimism of the group, or perhaps signalling the very high regard existing between board members, no provision had been made for a casting vote. The Board was not however a complete abrogation of the democratic processes of the lodge, for Bavister indicates they would not be prepared to go from conciliation to arbitration.<sup>479</sup>

Unlike Bavister, the Masons were dead-set against it. Grant's position was forthright – a Court of Conciliation would be 'useless to affect any permanent good' and would be 'a good thing for those who charge us for living on the face of the earth.' For this reason he further exclaims his Society 'would have nothing whatever to do with the Building Trades Council.' Again, when questioned as to a proposal between the employers union and the Labour Council to establish a conciliation board he says: 'One of the principle reasons we affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council was to be able to assist in preventing the adoption of that scheme by the Council.'<sup>480</sup> Nevertheless, Mason policy was in practice not far distant from the other building trades. Though they would not be locked into decisions, they were happy to send their delegates - and if necessary authorise other delegates from the Trades and Labour council - to meet and resolve disagreements but: 'if we cannot get the terms we want, see if we cannot get as good terms elsewhere.'<sup>481</sup> Our next subsection arguably justifies the policy of the Stonemasons' Society, for beyond optimistic words, the building industry conciliation system was inadequate to the task. Ultimately, it could not in itself solve problems confronting the building industry.

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<sup>479</sup> 8811, 8971,2,3,4,5, 9877.

<sup>480</sup> 9803, 9817, 8933, 8936. Grant's position may here may not be totally representative of the Masons in general. Lodge minutes indicate they withdrew from the BTC due to the expense of being on two councils. 9 for 4 against 28 April 1890. Moreover, the TLC, which the Masons played a central role in establishing, and a primary role in developing policy throughout its formative years, had conciliatory forms of collective bargaining as one of its primary objects. We see for example in the Boot trade dispute in '72, while recognising the 'oppressive and unprincipled combination' of some employers by introducing cheap boy labour against the tradesmen agitating for 'just' claims, the TLC sought a satisfactory arrangement to resolve 'misunderstandings' between employers and employed, appealing to their 'mutual interest'. In another dispute they sent a deputation to Iron trade masters seeking compromise. And among other examples, the painters union, approaching the TLC for support in a wage claim was sent back with advice to avoid a strike and to try harder to conciliate with their employers. When that failed were told to give it another go TLC 4/3/1872, 26/7/1874, 22/7/1874, 18/8/74.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.* It must be noted however that the Stonemasons in late 1883 sought to establish a forum for 'mutual annual agreements' with their employers. (see chapter five, p115)

### *The strike on the Australia Hotel*

Conciliation to resolve the strike on the Australia Hotel site was a failure which, nonetheless, allows us to view the dynamics between builders, union leadership and their rank and file, as well as the workings of customary rule conflicting with the new system of industrial regulation. Ultimately it shows the impotence of a system where democratic processes control labour but market forces control capital.

The Australia Hotel was a large brick structure begun in 1889. The builder was Mr Dean, a leading member of the Master Builders. The structure of the building was deep, and in consequence light failed to penetrate its interior in the winter months until late in the day, causing productive work to begin later than usual. Dean sought unilaterally to change the work hours accordingly, giving 24 hours notice to the men of a later start, and altering meal times to the 'one-break' system. The bricklayers, to protect their customary hours, a system of more than 20 years, took the necessary action of walking-off the job. This included unionists and two non-unionists who immediately joined the Society. Dean gave the men their notice and there existed potential for a strike 'of some magnitude'. The union wrote to the MBA and the board was set up, which unanimously decided that Dean's action was unjustifiable - four days were lost in the process. The board recommended reinstating the men and giving them seven days notice for their 'favourable consideration' to change the times due to exceptional circumstances.

Dean agreed, but instead of giving seven days gave 48 hours notice. Bavister says 'The representatives of the bricklayers at the meeting of conciliation gave their word that they would use every means in their power to prevent the dispute, even if the contractor did not fulfil the whole terms of the agreement'. The bricklayers were 'aggrieved' that Dean had broken his word, however, and were not inclined to go back to work. Officials 'used all the influence they possessed to induce the men to continue work...saying it was so important to have conciliation that the workmen should not place any obstacles in the way'. The men insisted Dean sign an agreement with them, which he again broke within six months. The men, however, did not strike. Through this process Bavister reports that the officers incurred the ill-will of

almost the entire Bricklayer's Society because they advised the men to put up with the breach by one of the first builders of this city rather than have a strike'<sup>482</sup>

Several things here tell us that by the late 1880s, traditional industrial relations in the building industry had altered. The board acknowledged the importance of custom and practice, and that the men ought to be consulted regarding the exceptional changes, but this held little sway with Dean who broke the deal. Then, for the first time, it was deemed necessary to go beyond a gentleman's word and have an agreement signed, though Dean could not have been prevented from walking away from the agreement anyway. It shows another important point: the officials were determined to control the men to save the system, despite Dean's breach of faith.

It is this last matter that is worth considering. What must have been the arguments put by Bavister and other elected officials to the angry brickies? While builders had no mechanism to control their members, unionists had their old system of rules and punishments and maybe these were used. Perhaps workers were threatened with not being picked up on the next job, such things being possible where social networks are central to industries like bricklaying – and especially with the depression of the 1890s pressing upon them. On the other hand some may have returned, however disgruntled, because, as we have seen, leadership, authority and democratic process were important to industrial order, and, as Bavister claimed, he had only ever seen men of principle and character elected to leadership in the union. He himself would acquiesce to the direction of leadership.

Whatever the reason, the episode demonstrates the messy state of industrial relations prior to the introduction of the Australian conciliation and arbitration system, where problems were not easily fixed by either new or old methods of industrial regulation. The job proceeded regardless of rules and sentiment. For what was the alternative? Unionists were committed to the viability of *bona fide* builders, desperate to maintain order, with good and secure wages, at any cost. In the end they had given their word to follow a conciliatory process and were determined to keep to it.

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<sup>482</sup> 8954,5,6,7,8, 8816.

### **Class-consciousness, Politics and Power.**

We have shown that building workers and their employers agreed on many fronts - acceptance of work rules, unionism, appealing to government to control sites, and for many a need for conciliation rather than strike action. Further, employers and most trade unionists believed officials controlled men and sought to avoid industrial conflict. What does this say of their political ideology and their understanding of, and loyalty to, their class? Previous chapters have argued that Australian trade unionists had from the 1850s understood society in terms of class structure, though certainly, their understanding of relations between the classes was different from the way that most unionists in the twentieth century understood it. As we will see, even Grant, whose ideas most reflected the militant radicalism typical of unionism at the turn of the century accepted a need to maintain relationships with *bona fide* employers. Likewise, Bavister, though actively working with employers to quell industrial unrest and spontaneous rank and file militancy was no less conscious than Grant of how state power was historically used against workers. A believer in the co-operative movement, however, Bavister's concern was with rights and equality and gradual social progress rather than conflict and revolution.

### ***The State, Class and Power***

The working class, it has been noted, had an established tradition of appealing to the parliament, to the law, and to executive government to regulate industry, but they were not blind to the potential for these forces to crush their movement. When the Royal Commission questioned the unionists regarding state intervention into their affairs, we see a clearer picture of the craft unionists' view of power. Bavister responded warily to the suggestion that the state become involved in conciliation and arbitration. It was proposed that the government appoint a chairman to sit on a board with assessors for each side who were able to act as a court and make an award. He retorted, 'Yes I do object', the working classes have no faith in appointments of that kind. Later he confirmed, 'I am prejudiced against to operation of the state; I doubt its impartiality.' Bavister remarked that the proposal is similar to the current situation with Justices and Magistrates as arbiters 'and I think we have slightly too much proof as to how they would act.' Nor would he countenance judges of the Supreme Court

becoming involved. To Bavister dispute settlement hinges on good will from both parties ‘and unless it is obtained, I think all force is comparatively useless.’<sup>483</sup>

Government involvement in conciliation and arbitration was possibly acceptable to Bavister only if industry parties remain in control of the trade. A voluntary elected chairman, rather than a government appointee would be ‘more serviceable’. Bavister does however agree with the idea of compulsory awards, ‘If...each party has one assessor and the chairman is mutually agreed upon, I think the awards should be compulsory.’ He accepted that a breach of compulsory awards should result in imprisonment for breaches, only if offending employers are also to be put in gaol.<sup>484</sup>

The matter of fairness - equal rights - stands out in Bavister’s testimony. He protested against the inherent unfairness of the law regarding ‘freedom of contract’ and the operation of the Master and Servant Act, which was administered by magistrates. Freedom is all one sided he said, and he suggests ‘freedom of contract, as now carried out in Court, should be supplemented by freedom being extended to the workman to cease working when he likes.’ Bavister cites an example where a member of the Bricklayers Society was imprisoned for a fortnight for being absent from work due to a pay dispute. He ‘was employed at 1s. 6d. an hour, if it rained 20 minutes 9d. was deducted from him’ Despite protesting against being underpaid, he was sentenced nonetheless under the Master & Servants Act, despite there being no work agreement – ‘written or verbal.’<sup>485</sup>

Wilkinson’s view is similar. He states that he is ‘thoroughly’ in favour of conciliation and had no problem with arbitrated decisions being binding on the parties. However Wilkinson also says: ‘I do not believe much in Government interference. My idea is that the Chairman should be elected from the Board of Conciliation.’ He goes on to say that he would not have a problem with the government submitting names to be selected by the board. As with Bavister above it seems that suspicion of government

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<sup>483</sup> 8812,3, 8976, 8978.

<sup>484</sup> 8814, 8965, 8967.

<sup>485</sup> 8937, 8950,1,2.

ran deep with the tradesmen. Wilkinson agrees the government should be able to be unbiased but he can't express much faith that they would be.<sup>486</sup>

It is the labourer Gillespie who is most in favour of industrial regulation through conciliation and arbitration and unlike the tradesmen raises no opposition to the idea of Government involvement. He even suggests that a Supreme Court Judge should be elected as the president of a board. He is favourable to the idea that a Court could make awards, but suggests that only peer pressure from other societies in the trade would encourage them to accept those awards.<sup>487</sup>

Dow, for the builders, is far from equivocal about the prospect of government intervention into the affairs of his trade, or the prospect of legal force in dispute resolution. Questioned about Government involvement in the setting up of a Board of Conciliation, and appointing the chair, with the powers to make an Award, he replies: 'If you mean you would pass an Act of parliament to that effect, I would be in favour of it.' Dow believes that the parties should meet to resolve problems, as per the system in England. However, 'if they failed, let the government step in.' Dow's view that the Award should be binding stops short at the suggestion that parties refusing to adopt awards should be punished or imprisoned. 'I don't know about that', he wisely said.<sup>488</sup>

While decent relations and even personal respect had arisen between masters and men, there is no case to say that Bavister's commitment to the working class was not absolute, or that he accepted any aspect of capitalist ideology. As noted, Bavister had faith in the co-operative movement: 'It is possible and necessary, and ultimately will be accomplished' he said, and though '[i]t is very slow in its movement intellectually...in the old country I have seen...men work it successfully when driven to it by a strike.'<sup>489</sup> Wilkinson and Gillespie shared this belief, the later informing us he had at an earlier time become involved in a co-operative company which failed.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> 11290,1,3,4,5,6.

<sup>487</sup> 10560,1,2,3.

<sup>488</sup> 9047,8, 9054.

<sup>489</sup> 8938,8939

<sup>490</sup> 11306 10606,7 10614, 10617.

Moreover, it would be wrong to ignore Bavister's solidarity with other unions. Though the Bricklayers' Society was not called out in the maritime strike - nor did various other unions think it appropriate - they did participate on the Labour Defence Committee. Further, as we have seen over many decades their Society made great efforts to support fellow unionists both inside and outside the building industry.<sup>491</sup>

The extent of Bavister's loyalty to his class is also demonstrated by his willingness to breach his agreement despite the importance of his word, which, as we have seen, being a fundamental aspect of his integrity. He is pressured on this point and in answer one can almost feel his gritted teeth:

Q: Then you consider the call of your Union superior to any agreement?

A: Yes.

Q: Presuming...a misunderstanding took place in Victoria, or in the Western parts of this colony, in another trade...and they called the bricklayers of Sydney out, would you break the compact you had entered into?

A: That is a question that I hardly feel disposed to answer. I fail to see the necessity of their being called out. Instead of that they would be required to work, and transmit funds to the greatest extent.

Q: That is not a reply to me...?

A: You are asking me to give an answer about an agreement as to which I know nothing. Is it fair you should expect me to bind myself to a definite reply?

Q: If we make an agreement now which has not been broken by either party, can anything outside come to interfere with it; that is, can the Union call you out, and would you obey them outside the agreement?

A: I think you are asking rather more than what appears on the surface...If the workmen thought their employers were supporting the other employers who were working against our principles, we would break it.<sup>492</sup>

One may yet be unconvinced as to the commitment of Thomas Bavister to his class and to his union, but consider that for his perseverance in the most fraught of industries, attendances at evening meetings and responsibility for wage justice of his membership, he received for his efforts after a days toil – as a leader and Secretary of

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<sup>491</sup> 8943,4. For example, note the Royal Commission literary appendix, p45 which records the Council of the Federated Societies Engaged in the Building Trades of New South Wales. This body was comprised of Painters, Amalgamated Carpenters, Bricklayers, Masons, Plasterers, Plumbers, Gasfitters, Galvanized Ironworkers, Progressive Carpenters, and Slaters. The group was formed in 1886 and was registered in May 1887. The Objects included: Prevention and settlement of strikes by friendly conference with employers; afford advise, assistance, and support for affiliated Societies; and to prevent if possible the working of more than eight hours on one day

<sup>492</sup> 8901,2,3, 8907, 8909, 8915

the Building Trades Council, the sum of 15 shillings per six-month stint, less than a day and a half's pay.<sup>493</sup>

The last word in our discussion on the State, class and power, the Royal Commission, and indeed this history, is given to the mason John Grant. This is not only because his testimony is by far the most lively and dynamic, but also because his views portray so well the contradictions inherent in the industrial relations of the building industry - how radicalism, conflict and cooperation were melded. Grant's views will be transcribed at some length, and as far as possible in his own words. The reader can decide if our subject is class traitor or class hero, a force for class unity or an elitist 'aristocrat of labour'.<sup>494</sup>

As stated earlier, Grant was a rebel. Before the panel had its opportunity to ask *him* questions, he insisted they need hear *his* analysis of the causes of strikes and almost any other topic politic. Grant saw society in class terms; a struggle between 'toilers' and 'earth owners'. Compromise was no option: 'The favourite and most effective modern methods of ending strikes are for other bodies of workers, if necessary to support the strikers...until employers concede...or for the party in power to over-awe the strikers by displays of civil and military force.' An easy method is to use non-unionists and starve workers to accept terms. There will be the 'phenomena of strikes' and there can be no 'permanency of industrial peace' where monopolists can refuse toilers 'liberty to produce wealth' or where 'workers realise that any part of the produce of their labours is legally annexed by others'. No-one should 'be legally empowered to exact tribute from another for existing or working on the earth; or to intercept any portion of the fruits of the exertions of other men'.

The root of grief, social inequity, slum dwelling, and human misery was the private ownership of land. Reforms to society had been palliative with benefits gobbled up in rent. Free trade, protection, restrictions, taxes and the 'thousand other nostrums' were fruitless, and conciliation and arbitration was also pointless. The result is that 'those who toil only just manage to exist, while those who do no work lead an existence surrounded by all the luxuries of civilisation'. Equally, co-operatives were the

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<sup>493</sup> 8819

<sup>494</sup> The following is a paraphrase of Grant's testimony found 8900/01

solution of ‘superficial thinkers’ and ‘[t]he aims and objects of Trades Unions should be more political than industrial’.

Fortunately the Stonemasons had considered the problem thoroughly and so, accordingly, had a plan. They must form at haste ‘labour electoral leagues in every district or ward throughout the colony’ allowing ‘the slaves’, even with their limited power, to enact ‘equitable and beneficial legislation.’ Naturally, the ‘army of aristocrats, thieves, loafers and the various species of legalised robbers who are empowered to collect tribute from the toilers would take some uprooting.’ However, ‘bettering the conditions of the slaves by revolutionary methods does not, in their present disorganised, undisciplined and unarmed condition seem possible’. It should be an orderly process, ‘slow and careful’, ‘of course, always within constitutional means.’

Grant’s vision was to ensure ‘every slave’ has ‘every publicity given to the wrongs imposed upon him’. Libraries must stock a ‘plentiful supply’ of books advocating his cause. Sunday evening lectures, normally the ‘hunting ground’ of priests and parsons, should be instituted and the public education system reformed, where ‘radical and equitable ideas [can be] systematically drilled into youth and remain there unshiftable throughout life.’ Grant observed that these tactics had worked well for religious orders that spared no expense in this regard. Moreover an efficient and ‘thoroughly democratic labour newspaper’ must be of the ‘very first importance’.

It is worth noting how much Grant speaks of ‘toil’ and ‘exertion’ rather than of work. He says workers must first realise they are ‘wealth creating machines’, ‘virtual slaves’ for the ‘earth owners’. He is conscious of the ‘aristocrats’ and ‘loafers’, the idle rich who, with their abundant time, can thwart the struggle for true change, ‘they having so much leisure, and so much voting power, and, consequently, the enacting and repealing of laws’.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> There can be some reservations over whether Grant is fully representing the Masons’ point of view on all matters. Minutes of the Sydney lodge around that time note the Masons sent delegates to the Co-operative Association in relation to the formation of a People’s Bank, Masons March 1890. Further, in regard to welcoming Henry George, the members threatened to split the union if it becomes a political rather than a trade organisation. Masons 17 February 1890.

Thus, from Grant, we see Operative Masons at the pinnacle of craft unionism - self-reliant, active, well read and progressive.<sup>496</sup> Surprisingly, however, given this view of class conflict, of inequity and injustice and of urgent appeal to mass political action, the practical policies of the Masons are quite different. Throughout the industrial tumult of the early 1890's Grant admits only to 'small strikes'. These all involved the Masons fighting to control and regulate their industry, walking off the job against those 'declining to contribute to our Union', against contractors engaging non-union labour, and where contractors underpay union rates. No great issues of state; no protracted battles against capital; only the effort of maintaining a system forever under attack by market forces. Moreover, when asked: 'What relations exist between the stonemasons and the employers?' he replied: 'They are very good', conditional that employers are happy with the quality of work and if the masons are paid their entitlements. During what has been historically described as a watershed dispute encompassing the entire eastern seaboard of Australia we find in the building industry only the mundane grind of capital against labour with no hard feelings.<sup>497</sup> In Grant's lively and radical testimony, therefore, is encapsulated the paradox of industrial relations in the building industry, disdain for the class nature of society, but the acceptance of industrial order, necessary to earn a living, and to get the job done.

## Conclusion

Evidence before the 1891 Royal Commission demonstrates the tactics traditionally used by building unionists to regulate industry— control over apprenticeships, walking off jobs, enforcing union membership, society rules, and all other features of craft

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<sup>496</sup> Surprisingly when Grant is asked if he goes the whole length of the Socialists, he replies being 'not quite up to Bellamy yet'. In fact Bellamy appears to disavow class action and militant trade unionism. His famous novel, *Looking Backwards* remarks: 'strikes, lockouts, boycotts, the programmes of labour parties, and the wild threats of the anarchists' and 'followers of the red flag' in general had nothing to do with social progress other than to hinder it (Harvard 1967 p259). *Looking Backwards* was published in 1888 and was circulated word-wide a year later and was obviously influencing Grant. Scates in the literary review cites Henry George as an influence. While Grant does not directly refer to George, he focuses on land and rent as the pivotal to economic problem. Like Bellamy, George was no admirer of the Union movement seeing 'No need for meddling governments or 'tyrannous trade unions'' *Progress and Poverty* pp181 284. George had been on a recent whirlwind tour of the United States, New Zealand and Australia. In 1890 George preached to rapturous audiences. He was from all accounts, a dynamic figure and when reading his pamphlets, such as that on the Irish land question, one is struck by the style of his conviction and compassion. Grant was obviously responding to this. But in his democratic call to freedom and against slavery, his anti-clericalism, anti aristocracy and privilege, his disdain for the idle, and acceptance of constitution, Grant echoes Paine, Owen, Carlyle and Cobbett, and the British working class radical tradition in all its forms.

<sup>497</sup> 9805 9812 9828.

unionism - were failing under modern capitalism. Furthermore, not only were workers suffering the ill-effects of competition, so too were those builders kept 'honest' by militant unionism. In this context co-operation was attractive to both sides. The old industrial relations system had changed dramatically. Where rule making was once a matter of closed-door society meetings and passwords, the tradesmen were warily approaching the state to intervene to help regulate their trade. Bricklayers were even willing to conciliate and accept transgressions of their rules, sacrificing rank and file assent, in order to maintain relations with *bona fide* employers. Though the destructiveness of the market impressed upon building tradesmen a critical need for political change and many sought ultimate social transformation, utopian ideas of social change were somewhat remote to the daily concern of running a union.

The evidence presented to the Royal Commission could certainly justify many observations outlined in the literature review regarding building operatives: Marxist charges of class collaboration, trade union bureaucratisation as cited by the Webbs, or a clear break in union ideology in the late 1880s as typified in the different approaches of Bavister and Grant. Yet the testimony of all operatives echo a deeper tradition of class awareness and activism. The eight-hour day had been worked since the 1850s, petitions to regulate industry had been organised, rallies on free and secular education had been addressed, and libraries had been set up. Working class institutions like the Sydney Trades and Labour Council had been established for almost twenty years, a union newspaper had been created and circulated, and parliamentary committees had been formed and a candidate elected. Moreover, tradesmen arriving from Britain had a bitter century of conflict behind them as *laissez faire* revolutionised their world. However weak their mechanism to ameliorate the problem of market competition in the building industry through conciliation, it rested upon a rich heritage of advancement, of a recognition of the rights of organised labour. It falls square within the tradition of the working class taking matters into their own hands.

## CONCLUSION

What must have gone through the minds of nineteenth century working men looking at the wealth of their civilisation? Six days at toil, or in search of it, from cradle to grave, before dawn, till after dusk, shamed for their ignorance, and worried for their families, hungry machines to serve the idle few. Nothing in society is as important, or more argued about, as the creation and distribution of wealth. Labour history is central to this debate. A review of scholarship of nineteenth century labour history reveals a passionate critique of progressive and regressive forces in the workers' struggle against oppression. Three major related themes flow through it.

The first is that a distinction can be made between the policies and actions of what are traditionally regarded as the 'labour aristocracy' - the conservative craft unions - and the radical urban proletariat, the so called 'new' unions arising around the mid to late 1880s comprising semi and lower skilled workers. The term 'labour aristocracy' is pervasive and ingrained in the minds of labour historians and is instantly understood to imply the unionisation of privileged and 'respectable' artisans, who identified and collaborated with the middle class at the expense of fellow workers. The second is that a political and class awakening occurred in Eastern Australia by the 1890's due to industrialisation and to the failure of militant industrial unionism. The third theme is underlying. It is largely about how labour history is written: whether it ought be from a 'traditional' perspective that gives primacy to leadership and institutions, or from the view of the rank and file. The question is not answered directly by this thesis, but is answered indirectly by how it is *itself* written - linking leadership, organisation and challenges facing rank and file unionists at work.

The argument that it was the 'new' industrial unions, and not the old trade societies, that were the progressive element in the labour movement is common in British as well as Australian labour historiography, where 'new' union radicalism also manifests in the bush worker. This thesis has argued, however, that the building operatives, who formed one of the oldest organised sectors of craftsmen, were in fact a leading force for progressive unionism throughout the nineteenth century and cannot be regarded simply as a 'labour aristocracy'. This thesis accepts that while self-serving groups of workers arise from time to time among the skilled, and for that

matter the less skilled, this tendency is far from universal and far from usual. Importantly, no good evidence can be adduced to indicate that unionists in the Australian building trades during the late eighteenth century were, as a matter of course, insular or apolitical. Moreover, this study posits that the very idea of 'labour aristocracy' has lessened curiosity about early unionism and has eliminated sound analysis of its diversity and motivation.

The thesis agrees with the assumption that industrialisation of the 1880s, and the great industrial dislocation that occurred in Britain and Australia at that time, spurred the labour movement to radical politics and/or to parliamentary power in order to modify or 'civilise' capitalism. However, it argues that politics, class, and class power were well understood decades earlier by building operatives in particular, whose control over industry was being severely undermined by market forces. The period from the 1850s to the 1890s is one marked by the struggle to regulate work hours, to set up working class institutions, and to define a working class agenda. Australian workers, moreover, were the inheritors of a radical British tradition and, while this radical tradition might not have always been revolutionary, many operatives strongly rejected the basis of capitalism and sought to overcome it, having faith in the ideas espoused by Owen and the co-operative movement.

This thesis has sympathy with Price's view that labour history is too often about working class leadership, focuses largely upon union growth and the establishment of the modern labour parties without particular reference to the day-to-day matter of the working class struggle. Although it has endeavoured to give prominence to the rank and file building unionists' battle to control industry, their concerns and world-view, this thesis, however, hesitates in separating union leadership, labour politics and the daily affairs of unions. While recognising that rank and file activism underpins labour history, it argues that the radical working class movement cannot be understood by looking at the clash of industrial forces alone, no more can it be understood by looking at isolated actors and agitators. When early building unions were progressive and radical it was because they attracted progressive and radical workers to them, many of who formed leadership groups within these structures.

The thesis dealt with a section of the so-called 'labour aristocracy', the NSW building trade unions of the eighteenth hundreds, and argued that their world was one of conflict, co-operation and radicalism. Australian labour history has to an extent overlooked nineteenth century building operatives, but what little has been done, reveals a rich culture which modifies history's three assumptions. Robin Gollan goes some way to note the pivotal role of building workers in the early labour movement, at least in Melbourne. Markey too notes the valuable contribution of the building trades to the NSW labour movement. The Operative Stonemasons are of course taken as central to the issue of the eight-hour day, and on that matter alone feature regularly, though cursorily, in Australian labour history. But other than in isolated postgraduate research such as Coolican and Niland's we hear virtually nothing of the Operative Bricklayers, or of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. The Progressive Society of Carpenters and Joiners, who are a major focus of this study, are all but omitted from the picture. Generally, all histories that reference building workers, even those that best place them within a radical tradition, like Gollan and Markey, remain, to an extent, fixed to some of the prejudices outlined above.

This thesis presents the history of workers and unions in the building industry in Sydney from the 1850s to 1890, by examining the problem of industrial regulation, a matter currently facing contemporary Australian society. It is through this prism that one is better able to understand the character and politics of building tradesmen. The thesis asks how tradesmen managed to maintain their rates and conditions before legislative minimums existed, when the laws of capitalism dictate they should be ground to a level of bare subsistence. The answer of course was hard and uncompromising unionism. But we see that this militancy accompanied a determined strategy to manufacture consent within the industry and within the community.

The history of the Sydney building industry when told as a response to *laissez faire* reveals a complicated set of relationships between unions, their membership and employers. The relentless growth of competitive forces throughout the nineteenth century stripped building operatives of their traditional control over industry, necessitating vigorous offensive and defensive action to secure or maintain rules and principles. The continual attack upon standards - their living wage - guaranteed that workers questioned the foundations of capitalist political economy. Though frequent

militant action occurred, in reality, tradesmen had by the 1890's little choice but to deal with certain employers in a conciliatory and co-operative way. Here strategies had evolved to protect *bona fide* employers, providing them security in the market. The trade-off was union recognition and expectation that Society rulemaking continued as the primary regulation of the industry. We saw that from the 1850's union militancy and political ideals were not always inimical to employers - some because they too were idealistic and identified with the men, and some were equally critical of competitive forces. Certain employers were of the same mind as the men because they were part of the rulemaking process and because they relied upon union enforcement to protect and secure their positions.

The thesis asked how building industry unionists arrived at this troubled and contrary situation. Chapter three turned to the nineteenth century British labour movement to identify the origins of the radical working class traditions that were pertinent to the activities and policies of the Australian building operatives. It outlined in brief the history of their forthright democratic and political struggle, focusing on the activities of building unionists like George Potter. It also took on board general criticism that from the 1860s and 1870s the building industry changed from the most radical to the most conservative element in trade unionism. But it argued that while tradesmen generally turned away from industrial to legislative methods to resolve the problem of modern capitalism, earlier radical beliefs remained implicit in their ideology. They sought to end exploitation, secure freedom and the vote, and looked at co-operative methods of production and social formation.

When chapter four examined the emergence and nature of Australian building unions, and the work and lives of building workers, it found British radical traditions amply represented. It showed that building workers were at the forefront in creating the basic working class institutions, the Trades and Labour Council and Intercolonial Trade Union Congresses that invited discussion and formed a broad class agenda. The picture presented is of a varied, diverse, but progressive group struggling to control their industry. Again it showed two aspects of the operative builder's political and industrial identity, both militant and political yet seeking industrial harmony. We saw that they were among the first to organise the parliamentary representation of the working class, and we saw them on the street in support of fellow workers, even those

far outside the building game, such as the ironworkers, railwaymen and the seamen. However, though they supported broad militant working class organisation and often took strike action in defence of their rules, as those rules also suggest, they were often wary of becoming involved in such action. In keeping with co-operative ideology they not only enjoyed good relations with those masters who recognised these rules, but hoped that they could walk away from the world of conflict and competition to a harmonious and productive society.

Chapter five dealt with the struggle for the eight-hour day which was presented as an ongoing battle against market forces, and which forced the unions over time to change their ideas of class and politics. It was a campaign that was not only an industrial battle but led them to seek political power, and it also drew the public to their cause through demonstrations and parades. The eight-hour day was the founding principle for Australian building unions and it was central to their idea of progress. With time they could learn, and through the power of knowledge they would take their rightful place in the world - stand tall as intelligent, moral, honest and hardworking citizens. It would be a perfect world because they would make it so. But the eight-hour day was not a middle class idea, something that they would seize for themselves and abandon the rest. Eight-hours was a right for all workers; all those who would organise and fight for it, and building operatives were very generous to those willing to do so.

In its last chapter, the thesis reviewed the evidence of building operatives in the 1891 NSW Royal Commission into Strikes. By 1890 industrial relations was at a precipice, old systems and new systems of industrial regulation through union rule making and collective bargaining were failing. The organised sector, employees and employed, were undermined on all fronts by the unscrupulous and the unprincipled, or those merely carried by the logic of competition. Even 'reputable' employers were falling to the pressure of modern industry, reducing rates and walking away from agreements. Ultimately, an unfettered market was not sustainable for established employers or unions, and while most operatives, like Tom Bavister, held some hope that co-operation would one day prevail and that control of government institutions could salvage their position, others, like John Grant, called for major social upheaval.

The word 'civilised' has been used several times throughout this work and requires clarification. This thesis rejects any notion that nineteenth century building workers sought to 'civilise' capitalism in the sense of their accepting market forces as fundamentally correct or desirable. They did not aspire to a *bourgeois* existence of profit and class domination. They sought to create a world of equality and fairness and co-operation, the qualities denied them through the logic of nineteenth century economic laws. Trade societies were bodies which preserved the radical ideologies of generations past but which also minded the experience of countless defeats at the hands of capital and the state. Their responses to capitalism linked into a progressive tradition. Throughout the period constant themes arise in the language and debate of building unionists - terms stemming back over 100 years of working class discourse, such as freedom, rights, progress, brotherhood and good will among men. Tradesmen wanted to 'take matters into their own hands' and demanded their just entitlement to the wealth of modern civilisation - time to read and think and expand their humanity.

In a way the dynamics of the building industry have changed remarkably little in over a century and a half. The sentiments expressed by Roger Gyles in 1991 could find resonance among the NSW public throughout the eighteen hundreds. Those working in modern industrial relations could mingle comfortably with Society men at a Trades and Labour Council meeting in a Sydney Hotel in 1871, or slip into leather chairs at the inaugural meeting of the Master Builders Association two years later. It is true to say then, as it is now, the union does not shape the industry - it is itself shaped by it. While production lines and machinery have replaced some industries in toto, a building is still a building, and is put up with teams of brawn tying steel in the sun or cold or lugging timber and other gear across vast sites, in holes or at great height. The money man is ever distant, with layers of managers and foremen and subcontractors cajoling workers - and to a degree each other - to production, the payment or withholding of progress cheques and weekly wages being both whip and glue to the industry. While mechanisms are invented and reinvented to eliminate excesses of the market process upon building workers, building unions consistently challenge fundamental capitalist forces from which injustices spring.

Yet despite a history of passion and militancy and industrial advancement, there is largely a 'live and let live' philosophy in the building industry. For all the turmoil and

political machinations, houses, office blocks and bridges have been built and the union continues to operate. The word 'chivalry' is too strong a term, but the idea it evokes goes to explain how traditional relations between building industry unions and employers can be both aggressive and co-operative, and perpetual. Certainly the leaders and policies of building unions, or unions generally have not always been radical, utopian or progressive. This fact is as true of the twentieth century as of the nineteenth. Nor can it be said that building unions always represented the political ideology of the rank and file. Far from it – unionists in the deregulated environment of the eighteenth century formed the smaller proportion of operatives. But overall, these operatives, striving for union recognition, industrial order, workers' rights and an end to exploitation and injustice, were the inspired and aspiring section of the working class.

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