

MINING UNIONISM IN THE FAR NORTH, 1907-1910

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In the first decade of the twentieth century the Queensland labour movement recovered and expanded remarkably after the decimating period of drought, depression and government and employer hostility in the 1890s. With an economic upsurge beginning in 1905, both the numbers and membership of trade unions grew rapidly, enhancing the Labor Party's prospects for increased electoral support and parliamentary representation. The growth of the Australian Workers' Union [AWU] in the western pastoral districts and the formation of the first sugar workers' unions in the north exemplified the spectacular revival of unionism. The most vigorous and important role in this state-wide labour rejuvenation, however, was played by the Amalgamated Workers' Association [AWA] which was formed in 1907 in the mining fields west of the Atherton tableland in the far north.

Within five years of its inauspicious birth the AWA achieved a pre-eminent position in the Queensland labour movement; it had a decisive influence on the direction of both trade union and Labor Party development. The rise of the AWA was accompanied by the spread of unionism among other northern workers - a phenomenon greatly encouraged and influenced by the example of the AWA and the propaganda of its leaders. Industrial growth and re-organization initiated by the AWA heralded remarkable political success, beginning a long period in which North Queensland was a safe Labor stronghold. It was the AWA which was the dynamic force in the creation of the new AWU in Queensland in 1913, when the northern union amalgamated with the southern and western AWU organization. Indeed, the AWA laid the basis for industrial and political alignments in the state for many years.

The importance of the AWA is demonstrated by the attention focussed on it by historians. For instance, a recent article by Kett Kennedy traces the union's history up to its merger with the AWU.¹ Kennedy concentrates on the AWA after it moved out of the far north,

absorbing a number of other infant trade unions in December 1910. This perspective is eminently justifiable since it was particularly after the 1910 amalgamation that the union emerged as the largest, most militant and most progressive union in the state - the result of its victory in the 1911 sugar strike, its subsequent rapid growth and its role in the institutionalization of political activity. Historical attention has also tended to centre, not unnaturally, on the prominent founders of the AWA, Theodore and McCormack, since it was their able leadership of the union which initiated their careers as principals of the labour movement in Queensland.

However, this paper is confined to aspects of mining unionism not fully treated by previous research: it discusses in detail the formative years of the AWA in the mining hinterland of far North Queensland. It was the experience of the AWA in these years (1907-1910) which moulded the union's later concept of industrial relations; which demonstrated the value of a highly-centralized mass union of general workers as opposed to unions confined to a single industry or occupation; and which first impressed upon the union's leaders the necessity of politics as an integral function of trade unionism. Finally, this paper offers a re-interpretation of the alleged radicalism of the AWA.

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century mining operations in the Walsh and Tinaroo district recovered after a long slump and began to expand. Improved transport and communications and a rise in industrial metal prices on the world market presaged a dramatic boom in the district's copper, silver-lead, tin and wolfram mines. With an influx of southern and overseas capital, employment opportunities expanded, attracting labour from all parts of the country. Established towns such as Irvinebank and Herberton assumed a look of renewed prosperity; crude unsophisticated mining settlements like Chillagoe,

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Mungana, O.K., Mt. Molloy and Smith's Creek were reinvigorated. Stimulated by the high prices, new mines were established, abandoned mines re-opened, and existing mines developed more thoroughly. New machinery was installed, communications improved, smelting works built; the share market soared. In his report for 1906 the local mining warden claimed that:

Never has the district gone through a more prosperous and progressive year than the one under review. Of course, the high price of minerals has no doubt created the incentive to prospect, and, as it is a district of such vast and rich resources, the miner and the capitalist feel justified in giving their labour and money with every possibility of a satisfactory return for their outlay.²

A feature of the Walsh and Tinaroo mineral field was the co-existence of individual alluvial prospectors and miners with large-scale company concerns employing hundreds of wage earners. In 1906-1907 over one thousand men won an independent living from alluvial tin and wolfram; mining and construction companies employed a further four and a half thousand workers. As surplus labour was attracted from less prosperous areas, however, a number of unskilled workers found themselves unemployed. Independent prospectors also sought employment intermittently when short of money or supplies thereby swelling the labour force. The large companies thus had a fairly rapid turnover of employees. Men periodically left their jobs to work claims on their own account, or moved to the coast in winter and spring, seeking employment in the canefields and sugar mills.³

In the buoyant mood of 1906 and early 1907 the mining warden discerned in the settlement of Chillagoe "a more prosperous and contented feeling among the community...a feeling of permanency".⁴ Most other observers gained an exactly opposite impression: the mining towns were bawdy, brawling places that "still had a raw edge of impermanency about them".⁵ Amenities were few, women scarce and living conditions crude in these isolated communities. The principal

recreations were drinking and gambling. Working conditions above ground were poor; below they were unhealthy and often dangerous. Dust, damp, outbreaks of fire and earth slides were constant hazards. Lung disease was a common ailment. Long hours and only moderate wages with which to purchase highly-priced goods compounded the grievances of employees and marred industrial relations.

Despite these grievances, initial attempts to form unions failed in the face of worker apathy and employer resistance. Most such efforts were unco-ordinated and confined to particular worksites. Moreover, many wage earners worked for short periods simply to finance their own small claims; they showed scant interest in improving conditions. Thus in April and May 1907 a series of sporadic, poorly organized strikes by employees of the large Vulcan tin mine at Irvinebank failed.⁶ As Young says:

Attempts had been made to organise the workers, but rugged individualism, a capacity for endurance, frequent movement of people, and, above all, a lack of knowledge about trade union techniques made corporate action difficult.⁷

In the second half of 1907 there was a sudden and severe fall in the price of industrial metals. The world copper market, inflated by over-trading, was struck by financial panic: prices tumbled from £112 per ton in March to £98 in June and £62 in December 1907. Silver-lead and tin prices fell simultaneously: lead from £22 per ton in January to £14 in December 1907; tin from £190 to £120 per ton in the same period.⁸ Few of the smaller mines survived the fall; large companies were forced to restrict their operations. The bleak mood at the end of 1907 contrasted strikingly with that at the beginning of the year: "...the enthusiasm which exalted every copper-stained rock to the dignity of a mine was followed by a despondency perhaps equally unreasonable."⁹

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Most of the mines that survived now concentrated on development work and repair of roads and railways in readiness for a hoped-for market revival. The ranks of retrenched employees swelled as prospectors and small-scale miners abandoned claims and leases which were no longer payable. Rising discontent among workers increased as employers attempted to cut costs by reducing wages, increasing hours and generally tightening up on disciplinary conditions.

Although the miners and labourers of the far North were slow to take action to secure wage rises or improvements in working conditions, they were more ready to resist moves to lower existing standards. Indeed it was in the adversity of the 1907 slump that a threat to labour standards created favourable conditions - paradoxically it would seem - for the birth of trade unionism. Some workers at Herberton asked the AWU and ALF to send an organizer to the North.¹⁰ A more positive attitude was adopted by a group of Irvinebank workers who in September 1907 launched the Amalgamated Workers' Association. Similar action was soon taken at Mungana and O.K., where employees formed a Miners' Smelters' and General Workers' Union.

The leading activists in the new trade union were Ted Theodore and William McCormack. Theodore was recently arrived from Broken Hill where he had worked for over four years, thus acquiring a knowledge of trade union activity. An energetic, large and pugnacious young man of twenty-three years in 1907, he was an avid student of socialist and economic literature. McCormack was twenty-eight years old, a gregarious character with a strapping physique. He was employed at Stannary Hills, having arrived on the field from Mt. Morgan in 1904. Theodore's brilliance and organizing genius coupled with McCormack's administrative ability, energy and capacity for sheer hard work, transformed a small, local union of miners and labourers into the most powerful trade union in the state.¹¹

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The AWA began as a defensive organization. It was formed to combat the hardening attitude of mining companies hit by falling world mineral prices. However, there is little that is particularly novel about the birth of a trade union in a period of declining industrial prosperity - especially if, as in 1907, other industries and the economy generally are on the upturn. Many unions came into existence, as the AWA did, originally as defensive associations, to preserve an already existing standard:

Fear of a fall in the standard of living has always been the strength of labour agitation. The cautious man who will take no risk to add to his wages will fight the hardest to maintain them.¹²

The outstanding feature of the AWA derived not from the circumstances in which it emerged but from its subsequent success in operation, often in the face of adverse circumstances. This success was mainly due to the drive and ambition of its leaders. Under the guidance of Theodore and McCormack the union expanded rapidly. Branches were soon established at Stannary Hills, Smith's Creek and Herberton. In December 1907 it affiliated with the ALF. "The Irvinebank Amalgamated Workers' Union [sic]", commented the Worker, "is becoming a real live organisation under the guidance of an energetic committee and executive".¹³ In February 1908 the AWA strengthened these links with the mainstream of labour organization in Queensland by sending representatives to the ALF Provincial Council meeting in Brisbane - the only northern union to do so.¹⁴

In April 1908 Theodore and McCormack initiated a conference at Irvinebank to amalgamate the various AWA branches with the O.K. and Mungana Miners' Smelters' and General Workers' Union. Theodore's report of the conference indicated that the AWA had wide and far-reaching aims. The purpose of the conference was:

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to found a scheme for the complete amalgamation of all existing unions in the north, under one constitution and one controlling body, and for the purpose of propounding a system for the better organisation of the workers of northern Queensland generally.¹⁵

Hitherto, the various AWA branches had remained autonomous local organizations; now, together with the O.K. and Mungana unionists, they were brought under the control of a central executive which met regularly at Irvinebank. The AWA now had 600 members. Theodore was appointed to the only full-time paid office of general organizer, while W.F. Lobban became general secretary.¹⁶ Shortly afterwards, Lobban resigned, fearing victimization by the Irvinebank company for his union activities. McCormack, previously vice-president, replaced him, and the executive headquarters were moved to Stannary Hills.¹⁷

One of the first steps taken by the modified AWA was to affiliate directly with the Labor Party; it also asked the CPE to recognize the union as "the leading Political Labor Body" in the local Woothakata electorate.¹⁸ The move was of dual significance: it indicated that the AWA looked upon politics as a legitimate and necessary sphere of trade union activity; it also signalled the intention of the AWA leaders to play an active role in politics. By securing CPE recognition as the electorate's "leading" branch, or head centre, the AWA hoped to confirm its dominance over the existing Labor electoral centre, the Herberton Socialist League [HSL]. On this occasion the CPE refused to comply with the AWA's request, instructing McCormack to "communicate with the registered organisation at Herberton", but the AWA ultimately replaced the HSL as Woothakata head centre in September 1909.¹⁹

Shortly after the April 1908 conference the AWA was involved in its first major industrial dispute - a strike of construction workers employed on the Etheridge railway. The AWA's entry into the dispute

served further notice that Theodore and McCormack planned to foster a mass union of general labourers, not merely a parochial miners' union.

Under the Etheridge Railway Act, the private railway from Almaden to the Etheridge mineral field was being privately constructed by the Chillagoe Company. Trouble amongst employees had been simmering for some months before Theodore visited the navvies' camps in July 1908. Grievances centred upon the company's continued refusal to comply with one of the conditions of the Act, namely, to pay the ruling rate of wages in the district. The workers claimed 9/- per day as the minimum rate, but the company paid no more than 8/- per day.²⁰

Taking advantage of the discontent on the line, Theodore enrolled the workers in the AWA and secured his executive's approval for a cessation of work.²¹ Three hundred and fifty navvies formed strike camps, which were maintained by compulsory levies on union members unaffected by the dispute. In addition, the financial and moral support of the ALF was sought; it was willingly given, and the strike fund swelled by donations from many trade unions.²² ALF organizer Charles Collins visited the trouble spot and reported favourably on the AWA and its conduct of the strike.²³ Regular lengthy reports to the Worker maintained the continued interest and support of all Queensland unionists in what was widely seen as a crucial struggle for a fair wage:

The conditions which have been foisted upon the men right through the construction of the line have been worse than rotten, the men having to submit to the most arbitrary rule on the part of despotic supervisors, and in almost all cases having to work more than the recognised eight hours....The sanitation of camps has been bad - scores of men have died on this line, some of the camps being veritable fever beds.²⁴

After several weeks the strike had reached a stalemate: the men remained firm in their demand for a minimum 9/- per day; the company was equally as firm in refusing the claim. At this stage Theodore's

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earlier tactics in gaining the support of the wider Queensland labour movement paid off: Labor parliamentarians and ALF officials waited upon the secretary for railways, a conference was arranged between the disputing parties,²⁵ and on 25 September 1908 the Chillagoe Company gave way, granting the 9/- and other concessions to the Etheridge navvies. The important role played by the ALF and Labor parliamentarians in resolving the dispute was demonstrated when not only Theodore but also ALF secretary Hinchcliffe and PLP leader Bowman signed the agreement on behalf of the AWA.²⁶

Nevertheless, much of the credit for the successful conduct of the Etheridge railway strike was clearly due to Theodore, whose organizing ability and foresight in establishing contacts with Brisbane-based labour leaders eventually won the day for the AWA. The solidarity and discipline of the striking navvies was maintained rigorously: "...during the whole period of the dispute there was not a backslider among them - every man stood solid as a rock, and the united front they presented was impregnable."²⁷

Two other factors also had considerable bearing on the outcome of the strike. First, the navvies seemed to have the support of a large section of the general public.²⁸ Second, some members of the Kidston government, including the secretary for railways, George Kerr, were concerned at the Chillagoe Company's evasion of a clause of the Etheridge Railway Act. Indeed, it was Kerr who persuaded the company to meet the union and who was therefore partly responsible for the final settlement of the dispute.²⁹ With public opinion and sections of the government at least tacitly in support of the strikers' cause (if not of their action), it was not surprising that the company capitulated.

Victory in the Etheridge railway strike demonstrated the value of a composite general labourers' union, encompassing all classes of wage earners in a variety of industries. Alone, the navvies would very likely have been defeated, but with the backing of the AWA miners and

their fellow ALF affiliates, they were remarkably successful. The strike confirmed the AWA as an effective industrial union capable of protecting its members. According to Theodore, defeat would have meant "a severe set-back to unionism in the North."³⁰ Success, on the other hand, gave a great impetus to the spread of unionism generally in North Queensland. One of the first tangible effects was that navvies on the Atherton to Herberton line also sought AWA membership and demanded higher wages.³¹

The Etheridge strike thus encouraged other northern workers to join the AWA which grew rapidly in strength. New branches were established at all mining settlements and railway camps in the district, though methods of organization were still rough and ready. Recruiting procedures, for example, bordered on impressment, while those who neglected the discipline of the AWA incurred as much opprobrium as those who refused to join. Theodore reported shortly after the Etheridge strike that "some scabs sought exoneration from the strike committee." They received short shrift from the AWA:

It was decided in each case that the culprit was guilty of an unpardonable offence against their fellow workers, and they were left to the fate of inexorable public scorn. The feeling shown towards these misguided men amounts to almost unutterable contempt.³²

At the end of 1907, before the Etheridge strike, the AWA had 196 members and £61 in the bank. Twelve months later, by dint of astute organization and efficient administration, it had 1348. Finances were still shaky after the costly three-month long Etheridge strike but stood at an improved £394.³³

On 10 February 1909 delegates from eleven branches met in Chillagoe for the first annual AWA conference, the main purpose of which was to ratify the draft constitution and rules of the union. The conference confirmed the existing highly centralized executive control; a significant feature was the decision to pay the general secretary a

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full-time salary of £200 per annum, placing the office "beyond the pale of interference of victimising mine managers".³⁴ As well, all effective authority was vested in the executive committee, which in practice gave control of the union to the two paid officials - the general organizer (Theodore) and the general secretary (McCormack). At the same time the union headquarters were removed to Chillagoe.

The aims and objectives of the AWA, as expressed in the constitution and rules adopted by the 1909 conference, were concerned largely with working conditions, that is, with the immediate economic concerns and sectional interests of the members. The "fighting platform" stated simply:

1. Advocacy of a Minimum Wage in North Queensland.
2. Advocacy of a 44 hour week in the Mines.
3. Advocacy of State control of the Conditions of Employment in all Industries.
4. Abolition of all forms of Alien Labour.
5. Better Inspection of Mines.
6. Official Recognition of the Union by Employers.³⁵

Here, obviously, was a moderate and practical program, eschewing reference to any form of socialist ideology. Yet in its over-riding concern with economic conditions, the conference did not disavow the AWA's expressly political aspirations. On the contrary, the constitution called for union representation on municipal bodies and required the AWA to conduct plebiscites in conjunction with local WPOs "for the selection of parliamentary candidates to run in the interests of Labour."³⁶

The AWA therefore aligned itself with orthodox Labor Party politics in Queensland. The union's leaders saw industrial strength as the basis for political success; conversely, political influence exerted by trade unions was to be the basis of industrial gains. Industrial action and political action were seen as complementary methods of improving wage earners' conditions. In pursuit of this policy both

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Theodore and McCormack eventually entered state parliament; both became cabinet ministers and ultimately premiers of Queensland. The policy of union involvement in politics became an entrenched tradition after the AWA merged with the AWU in 1913. Thereafter, the AWU dominated both the industrial and political wings of the labour movement in North Queensland.

As with organized labour elsewhere in Australia, AWA members opposed non-white labour. Indeed, agitation against the employment of aliens was often the first form of collective action that unionists took.³⁷ In September 1907 hotel owners at O.K. yielded to local workers' demands that they dismiss their Asian cooks. The victory was seen as both an industrial and a racial one: "The yellow cook was paid at the rate of £2.10s per week, but white cooks now get £4."³⁷ In March 1908 angry public meetings at Mungana persuaded two publicans to dismiss their Japanese and Chinese employees, while a few months later the Herberton AWA branch became concerned about the feared "invasion" of "hundreds of Hindoos." In January 1909 the Chillagoe AWA branch boycotted hotels employing non-white domestic staff.³⁸

Unionists in the far north seemed united in their racialism, but some dissension arose at the AWA 1909 conference over the exact delineation of a colour line: some branches had admitted Syrians as members while others had rejected them. Unable to resolve this issue after a lively discussion, conference decided to leave the matter in the hands of the various branches.³⁹

The conference also considered the propensity of many mine employees to travel to the coast seeking work during the cane harvest season; it called for consultation with the ASWU with a view to including the sugar district of Mossman in the AWA's organizing area.⁴⁰ In the event, the union did not directly organize sugar workers until 1911, but by enrolling miners, engineers, railway navvies and construction labourers, it was already well on the way to becoming a

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mass union of general workers. Through efficient management, it commanded a high degree of loyalty from its members; in return, it offered effective protection of their welfare. The competence of the AWA as an industrial organization was soon to be tried and tested on a number of occasions as it fought to secure and maintain two of its main objectives: a 44-hour week in mines and recognition of the union by employers. In fact, at the very time that the union delegates were meeting in conference, the AWA was involved in an acrimonious dispute with the managements of the Irvinebank and Stannary Hills tin mines.

The metalliferous mining industry elsewhere in Australia was hindered by industrial disputes at this time; the most important culminated in a lengthy strike at Broken Hill early in 1909. Owing to the low prices of silver and lead, and the depletion of the more economically accessible high grade ore, Broken Hill Proprietary [BHP], the largest employer on the field, reduced wages by some 13 per cent. The miners' union's resistance to this decision precipitated a bitter and violent four-month strike.⁴¹

Industrial turmoil in the Chillagoe and Herberton mining region occurred in somewhat similar circumstances to those at Broken Hill. After the metal prices slump in late 1907, companies concentrated on the development of ore reserves, the installation of more efficient machinery and the improvement of transport facilities with a view to the more economical extraction and treatment of mineral ores. In succeeding years, the problem of continued low prices was aggravated by the depletion of local ore bodies. Management responded by economizing on production costs, which to employees might mean retrenchment, longer hours or reduced wages. Having regard to the collective strength of the workers now organized in the AWA, such cost-cutting moves were calculated to cause discontent and provoke confrontation.

In November 1908 a conference of mine managers met in Chillagoe to draw up a common industrial policy for the district. The

meeting resolved that from 1 January 1909 the rates of wages and hours of labour current at Chillagoe should be adopted by all mines in the district.⁴² Since the wages paid at Chillagoe were considerably lower than elsewhere, and since Chillagoe worked 48 hours while other mines worked 44 hours, the employers' action represented a concerted and direct attack on the workers' organization. To survive as an effective trade union, the AWA had to resist this attack militantly:

The hour is coming when we must prove our manhood by decisive and courageous action. Our interests are seriously imperilled by non-descript mineowners of North Queensland, and we must recognise that all who are not with us are against us.⁴³

Early in December 1908 the AWA notified the Irvinebank Tin Company and the Stannary Hills Mines and Tramway Company that their employees refused to accept the proposed new terms, which amounted to a 15 per cent wage reduction and an increase in working hours from 44 to 48. The AWA suggested a conference with the employers, expressing its willingness to negotiate an agreement. However, the companies refused to acknowledge the existence of the union and ignored its approach, whereupon the union prepared for the struggle. Theodore and McCormack visited Stannary Hills and Irvinebank in mid-December to marshal the workers and improve union organization.⁴⁴

On New Year's Day 1909 miners at Stannary Hills stopped work to protest at the wage cuts and increased hours. The strike soon spread to the Vulcan tin mine at Irvinebank and later to the rare metal mines at Wolfram Camp and Bamford. Union solidarity was enhanced when the enginedrivers and carpenters employed at the mines also ceased work in sympathy with the striking miners.⁴⁵ The AWA announced that it was prepared to meet the management in conference at any time, or to submit the matter to an independent arbitrator; the employers, however, refused to acknowledge even the union's right to represent the employees. According to the manager of the Stannary Hills company:

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...the majority of miners have been urged against their will to make trouble, and have gone out at the bidding of men, who, unlike the worker, have nothing to lose but receive fat salaries to stir up strife and discontent and bring more sorrows to the home of the worker.⁴⁶

Incensed at the companies' outright rejection of their overtures, the AWA angrily denied such claims. Hostility between management and labour intensified. Indeed, McCormack's bellicosity now seemed to eclipse the AWA's professed wish to settle the matter by peaceful negotiation:

The intolerance of our opponents, their arrogant attitude towards our pacific proposals and ill-dissembled hostility to our right to combine has necessitated a reckoning at the point of the industrial bayonet...In order to convince [the mine owners] and their servile janissaries that despotic ukase and arbitrary fiat in the industrial affairs of a free community are only incantations of impotence - we must carry the fight into the enemies' camp and turn their own guns against them.⁴⁷

The strike was well organized. Levies were struck on AWA members; donations were solicited from other trade unions; the service of ALF organizer Collins were secured to aid in the on-the-spot conduct of the strike. In order to supplement strike relief, strikers were organized into union-subsidized prospecting parties.⁴⁸

After four weeks, the AWA reiterated its proposal that the dispute be submitted to the arbitrament of a district or supreme court judge. Again the companies refused, provoking predictable response from the union:

The olive branch of peaceful arbitration offered by the miners has therefore been scornfully rejected, reason has been set aside, and the exploiting bosses of Capitalism have determined, if possible, to enforce their despotic will.⁴⁹

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The strike continued and the workers showed little sign of surrender. At length, however, as the tin mines remained idle, the Stannary Hills company recognized the union and agreed to submit the dispute to an arbitrator. Initial negotiations proved abortive since the parties could not agree on the question of working hours, but finally on 1 April 1909 the Stannary Hills workers accepted new proposals offered by the management: slight wage increases were awarded to all hands; the working week was increased from 44 to 48 hours; the company was to pay the AWA's legal expenses at arbitration; no striking unionists were to be victimized. A similar settlement was also reached at Irvinebank.⁵⁰

Thus, as in most industrial disputes, the strike settlement involved compromise. An important gain for the AWA was the mere fact of its recognition by employers. The increase in wages, when the companies had hoped for wage reductions, was also a substantial concession. The Stannary Hills Mines and Tramway Company was successful in having working hours increased, but this proved a Pyrrhic victory: two months after the lockout ended, the company was wound up; a new company was formed to carry on mining operations in the area.⁵¹ Naturally, the suspension of company operations tempered any feelings of triumph amongst the employees. The unemployment level in the district, already high before the strike, was adversely affected by the three-month long lockout. Further, the Ivanhoe mine, the largest in the district, remained idle until January 1910, having been flooded along with many other mines when the enginedrivers manning the pumps withdrew their labour in the previous January.⁵²

The disruption caused by the strike aroused disaffection amongst union members, many of whom did not regain their jobs. Some workers criticized the AWA for provoking the dispute; others attacked the union executive for its surrender of the 44-hour week. To the first charge, McCormack replied that the AWA had not sought the dispute but rather had been forced into it by the companies' aggressive action; to

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the second, McCormack argued that in view of the unfavourable economic conditions and high local unemployment, the AWA had obtained "a very fair compromise".⁵³ To most AWA men this probably seemed a reasonable assessment; certainly, any disquiet was quelled by the powerful executive and by more obvious success in other industrial conflicts.

Throughout 1909 and early 1910 industrial trouble flared at the wolfram, bismuth and molybdenite mines at Wolfram Camp and Bamford. The issues in this lingering dispute were the same as formerly: the union's determination to maintain a 44-hour week and the employers' refusal to recognize the union's existence. This time, however, the AWA's bargaining position was even stronger: the high prices ruling for rare metals enabled the striking workers to prospect profitably on their own account. Finally, in February 1910, the union's demands were conceded.⁵⁴

In July 1909 AWA unionists at Mungana struck work in support of an enginedrivers' demand for a pay increase. The Mungana mines - Lady Jane and Girofla - had perhaps the most oppressive and dangerous working conditions in the district; discontent there had simmered for months before finally erupting in the enginedrivers' strike. After only one week the company capitulated, granting increased wages not only to enginedrivers but to all underground hands as well.⁵⁵

These successes for the AWA, however, were attended by setbacks at the Big Reef mine on the Etheridge field, and at the O.K. copper mine. At Big Reef, a Chillagoe Company operation, employees went on strike in early August 1909 in opposition to an increase in their working week from 44 to 47 hours. Big Reef was a fairly small, isolated mine, where union organization was vulnerable; the company consequently had little trouble in persuading many workers to return to work under the new conditions. The AWA could do nothing to resolve the issue: months later few Big Reef miners were unionists and the 47-hour week remained in force.⁵⁶

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The union suffered more significant defeat at O.K., where the decline in metal prices had affected the copper mines and smelters more severely than elsewhere in the district. Although the mine - opened only in 1902 - paid high dividends in 1905, 1906 and 1907, the company directors had installed outmoded and inefficient smelting equipment; they had also neglected to provide a light railway to the railhead at Mungana. (Camels, and subsequently traction engines, carried ore and supplies between the two centres.)

In October 1909 the O.K. management reduced the number of men working each shift in the smelters, promising, however, to provide alternative work for those who lost their jobs. A general meeting of the local AWA branch decided to oppose this decision, and all work at the mines and smelters stopped. The traction engine drivers also joined the strike.⁵⁷ Somewhat reluctantly, the AWA executive at Chillagoe endorsed the strike, but appeared less than sanguine of success: "...as the O.K. members were unanimous in the action taken they could not do otherwise than sanction the affair; and do their best to uphold them in their difficulty."⁵⁸

McCormack's misgivings about entering the dispute were quickly confirmed when he visited O.K. and found that the local union leaders had acted rashly. The apparent solidarity of the men had been dissipated: "The great majority of the men seemed to [be] of an opinion that the trouble was uncalled for." McCormack told the AWA executive that the union had a poor case: "The issue seemed to be too small for such extreme measures." The executive concurred, blaming the O.K. branch officers for "an unfortunate mistake"⁵⁹ - the more unfortunate, so it appeared to some - when the O.K. company could use the dispute as a means of closing down the now unprofitable works without alienating public sympathy.⁶⁰

At first sight, the settlement of the O.K. strike after five weeks seemed a reasonable result. The original cause of the strike - a

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reduction in the number of men in shifts - remained, but the company conceded slight wage increases for work in wet ground and for machine operators. The management also agreed not to victimize any striker; it further guaranteed the existing pay rates and the 44-hour week underground. Despite any private misgivings he may have had, Theodore publicly defended the settlement: "The men actually had materially bettered their status by making a stand against the constant irritating encroachments upon their conditions."⁶¹

Any satisfaction gained proved transitory, however, when the O.K. mine and smelters indeed remained closed until late January 1910.⁶² The continuing unemployment prolonged disaffection among the AWA rank and file, much of it now directed against the union executive. McCormack defended himself by reiterating that the O.K. men had blundered: the executive had had no option but to sanction the dispute since the branch had decided to strike by ballot.⁶³ McCormack's recriminations and his personal abuse of the O.K. branch members aroused considerable enmity, contributing to his defeat in the election for general secretary in January 1910. A few months later, however, he was re-appointed to the position.⁶⁴

Industrial setbacks such as that at O.K. were eclipsed by the AWA's political success. From the outset the AWA had organized for political ends as well as industrial action. It therefore came as no surprise when the union's general organizer was nominated as the official Labor candidate for the local Woothakata electorate. The Worker applauded Theodore's candidature: "Brainy, sober and straight, he is the man best fitted to represent a mining constituency like Woothakata."⁶⁵

Since 1902 the electorate had been held by Mick Woods, a former Chillagoe railway enginedriver who had defected from the Labor Party with Kidston in 1907. He retained the seat at state elections in 1907 and 1908, easily defeating the Labor candidate, Alf Pain, a

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Herberton miner, who was also president and secretary of the Herberton Socialist League. As the name implied, the HSL held more radical views than the AWA leaders, in 1909 espousing the syndicalist tenets of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW]. The HSL offered some challenge to AWA dominance of Labor politics in the district; while Pain was secretary of the Herberton branch of the AWA, it continually criticized the executive, demanding more rank and file control of the union.⁶⁶

Outside Herberton, support for the HSL was insubstantial. The great majority of miners, navvies and labourers of the far north were more attuned to the pragmatic reformism of Theodore and McCormack. It was only a short time before the AWA demolished this challenge to their authority. Pain was easily defeated in his bid for the position of general organizer in December 1909; his influence in the union was completely destroyed in 1910 when the annual AWA conference censured him for making allegations of mismanagement against McCormack.⁶⁷ Most AWA members agreed with A.E. Church of Chillagoe:

I sum up this Herberton so-called IWW-ism as bombastic, unpractical, foreign and unsuitable to Australian sentiment and conditions, and conducive to political sectarianism.⁶⁸

On 2 October 1909 Theodore narrowly won Woothakata by a margin of 91 votes.⁶⁹ His victory vindicated the belief of both the AWA and the ALF that strong union organization would foster political success. The ALF secretary had earlier predicted that "the practical evidence of a unionistic revival all over the State...must be assuredly followed by a much healthier political atmosphere."⁷⁰

Theodore's election enabled him to increase the influence of the AWA in the Queensland labour movement. The AWA was now attracting much attention and respect for the obvious ability of its officials, its organizing success and its active policy in industrial disputes. This was demonstrated in February 1910 when Theodore was elected vice-president

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of the ALF,⁷¹ and in May 1910 when McCormack was elected to the Central Political Executive of the Queensland Labor Party.⁷² The activities of the AWA delegates at the trade union congresses of 1910 and 1911 further contributed to the growing esteem in which the AWA was held.⁷³

More remarkable in the union's ascendancy was the fact that in 1909 there were fewer miners employed on the Chillagoe and Herberton mineral fields than in any year since 1902. Employment opportunities picked up slightly in 1910, but it was obvious that the days of heady optimism and high profits had gone from the district for good.⁷⁴ Despite these adverse circumstances the AWA continued to expand, partly because of the enrolment of railway construction workers as far south as Proserpine. Union membership stood at 1650 in December 1909, compared with 1348 a year previously. By December 1910 the AWA boasted 2300 members.⁷⁵

Industrial trouble continued in 1910. The Lady Jane mine at Mungana closed after a subsidence and a serious underground fire; at Girofla the high-grade ore had been exhausted, and the diminishing profitability of the low-grade lodes did not augur well for future mining operations; the Mt. Molloy copper mines and smelters closed down permanently in 1909; the O.K. works, which had resumed early in 1910, also ceased operations later that year. A rise in the price of tin in 1910 was offset by the exhaustion of many payable lodes, leading to the closure of tin mines at Smith's Creek, Stannary Hills and Herberton. On the other hand, the price of wolfram remained high, giving some encouragement to large companies as well as small-scale miners. The completion of the Chillagoe company's railway to Charleston also saw the revival of many auriferous copper mines on the Etheridge field.⁷⁶

Despite the overall bleak prospects for the mining industry, the AWA persevered in its determination to expand its activities and protect the welfare of its members. Since "employers could not afford to be generous, even had they so wished,"⁷⁷ disputes between management

and labour continued, often involving the union's longstanding antagonist - the Chillagoe Company.

AWA unionists at Charleston stopped work in February 1910 in protest at the Chillagoe Company's decision to increase working hours at their recently acquired Queenslander and Nil Desperandum mines from 44 to 48 hours per week.⁷⁸ The company gave way. Even the government was confronted by the industrial muscle of the AWA: in June, construction navvies on the Herberton to Ravenshoe railway went on strike for a rise in the minimum wage rate. The AWA organizer, Fred Martyn, attributed their victory to "the splendid class of workers" employed, "95 per cent of whom are AWA members".⁷⁹ But Martyn overlooked the very vital support given by local residents who, anxious for the railway to be completed, called a series of successful public meetings, angrily blaming the government for the delay in construction and urging it to accede to the navvies' "reasonable request."⁸⁰ The AWA's next test came at Koorboora, arising out of its efforts to enrol mine workers. The mine manager dismissed some employees who joined the union, whereupon all workers downed tools. Management promptly capitulated and recognized the union. A brief strike over wage cuts at Charleston met with similar success.⁸¹

By now - late 1910 - the Worker habitually referred to the far northern union as "the fighting AWA", a sobriquet bestowed out of deference to its organizing zeal and its readiness to use direct action to further its objectives.⁸² The title was well-earned since the AWA was prepared to resort to direct action, but not in any syndicalist pursuit of ideological goals. The militancy of the AWA was most often defensive - a reaction against the belligerent attitude of mining employers who refused to negotiate with the union or even to recognize it as its members' advocate. In the depressed market conditions of the base metal industry in far North Queensland, a trade union's adherence to a policy of protecting labour standards meant that it would be involved in strikes while northern employers consistently refused to

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grant reforms and in fact tried to lower the existing standards of working conditions.

The characteristic prelude to trade union militancy on Australian metal-mining fields was a price slump, as Blainey correctly argues:

So long as a copper or lead field was new or the price of its metals high, there was small danger of a sharp rift between owners and men. But once workers' capitalism declined and metal prices fell, tensions quickly marred personal relations. As Broken Hill revealed, the economics of base-metal fields were such that workers' capitalism tended to decline more quickly than on a goldfield. Moreover, unlike gold, the price of which was fixed, base-metals on the world market behaved erratically, and thus a sudden fall in price imposed sudden tensions on the mining fields. When companies suffered a drastic fall in profits they tried to cut wages or exact more work from men. The men resisted the attack.⁸³

Thus most of the early strikes in which the AWA became involved were the result of employers' attempts to cut wages or to alter working conditions. Its frequent recourse to strike action was also influenced by three other factors: its determination to survive as an industrial union; the employers' adamant refusal to recognise the union until forced to do so; the legal situation in Queensland at the time, which as yet did not provide for an alternative system of arbitration.⁸⁴

Further, a problem which the mining settlements of Herberton and Chillagoe had in common with metal-mining towns the world over, may also be relevant: isolated communities dominated by, and dependent for their livelihood on, a single employer, and with a restless, predominantly unmarried workforce, have historically engendered tough industrial relations.⁸⁵ However, the AWA generally explored every

/ avenue of negotiation before authorizing a stoppage of work. McCormack stressed as much at the time of the Stannary Hills lockout:

...it will be noted that the Executive made every effort to bring about a conference between the mine managers and our members who are affected, and that they took the extreme step of calling out the members only when all means of bringing about a peaceable adjustment of the difficulty had been exhausted.⁸⁶

Such tactics were the guiding principles behind the AWA's conduct of industrial relations. On occasions when the union rank and file hastily precipitated strikes - for instance at O.K. and later at Selwyn - the executive publicly endorsed the dispute but privately rebuked the local officials for causing "unnecessary loss of time and money to members."⁸⁷ Shortly after the AWA merged with other North Queensland unions in December 1910, McCormack complained about the number of small strikes occurring in Townsville. He advised the union district secretary to intervene in disputes before the men actually ceased work: there would then be a better chance of successful settlement without a strike.⁸⁸

Often, when the AWA entered a dispute, it was partly with the object of gaining more members and thereby more industrial strength. Conversely, as union action proved successful in maintaining or improving working conditions and wages, it attracted more workers into its ranks. McCormack reasoned: "nothing is gained by ignoring a dispute and it helps us in the organising."⁸⁹

As employers came to recognise the AWA and negotiate with it, so the union used the strike weapon less frequently. It is noteworthy that in 1910 most of the industrial conflict in which the AWA was involved, occurred on the Etheridge field or at Koorboora - areas where the union had not hitherto been active. On the other hand, its major achievement in the Chillagoe-Herberton district - a negotiated increase in the minimum wage at the Chillagoe smelters from 8/- to 9/- per day,

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without any withdrawal of labour - occurred in an area where the AWA was well established.⁹⁰ In 1913 Theodore lauded the fact that employers were now more willing to negotiate with the AWA:

It is a favourable commentary on the work of the union that the employers adopt a much less bellicose attitude now than formerly, and are more ready to meet the representatives of the union in peaceful confab to discuss matters of mutual concern.⁹¹

As the AWA's use of direct action aimed primarily at achieving recognition and negotiation, so it never opposed an ancillary means to the same end: contrary to what its record might suggest, the AWA preferred some form of arbitration to direct action. In fact, Theodore's very first speech in parliament advocated an Arbitration Act:

There have been so many disputes in connection with railway construction and with the mining and sugar industries during the past two years that I think it incumbent upon the Government to make some provision against the dislocation of industry brought by such disputes....The dispute which took place at Stannary Hills this year could have been avoided had there been provision for arbitration.⁹²

On occasions Theodore and McCormack appeared to condemn arbitration, but, as Kennedy discerned, their criticism was largely aimed at specific features of Queensland or Commonwealth legislation, not at the principle of arbitration per se. Thus at the AWA conference of January 1913 McCormack stated that: "Personally he did not believe in arbitration, because it was fictitious. Judge Higgins had laid down a very beautiful sentiment until one came to look at it."⁹³ Previously, however, McCormack had admitted the benefits of arbitration: if forced the disputing parties to come together, and gave the workers an opportunity to air their grievances.⁹⁴ Indeed, although McCormack professed a lack of "belief" in arbitration at the 1913 conference - a sentiment echoed by other prominent AWA officials present - this did not

prevent the very same conference from resolving to make arrangements for the sugar workers to seek a Commonwealth Arbitration Court award.⁹⁵

The apparent opposition to arbitration which McCormack and other AWA officials expressed at the 1913 AWA conference was in fact directed primarily at the New South Wales AWU. The latter's delegates to an amalgamation conference in June 1912 had shown great concern that a merger with the AWA would endanger the AWU's position under the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act and imperil the pastoral award. McCormack and Theodore were eager to reassure the AWU that the AWA had no desire to seek the jurisdiction of the federal court. The remarks at the 1913 conference were also directed at the AWA's own membership, the radical section of which feared that amalgamation with the AWU might circumscribe their industrial strength. McCormack hoped to allay their qualms by declaring that there was no plan to approach the court for an award covering North Queensland miners, "because today that trade enjoyed better conditions than they could get from an Arbitration Court award, and could secure better conditions by the methods ordinarily employed."⁹⁶

When a Labor government took office in Queensland in 1915, Theodore and McCormack became staunch defenders of arbitration - indeed they came into bitter confrontation with trade unionists who refused to accept it. This was attributable in part to the differing responsibilities and aspirations of trade union officials and politicians. More importantly, however, the politicians believed that the disabilities under which trade unions had previously operated were in fact removed by ameliorative Labor legislation, notably the Trade Union Act of 1915 and the Industrial Arbitration Act of 1916. These measures, both introduced by Theodore, instituted an industrial court with both arbitral and legislative powers and provided for the registration of trade unions and the amalgamation of unions by agreement.

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The AWA's attitude towards arbitration reflected the consistently pragmatic approach to trade union problems that its leaders always adopted and which indeed was the major factor in the union's phenomenal success. The leadership was not guided by theoretical considerations or socialist principles; rather it followed a practical, almost ad hoc policy of protecting the members' interests by whatever means possible, including direct action. This did not involve a deliberate policy of strike action, as claimed by Sullivan, nor a consistent militancy, as claimed by Lane.⁹⁷ The AWA preferred compromise to confrontation, conciliation to conflict; its leaders wanted to cope with capitalism, not overthrow it.

Nevertheless, in the context of trade unionism in Queensland in this period, the AWA was certainly the most progressive and dynamic union in the state. Not only did it conduct successful strikes but it also pursued a policy of direct involvement in politics at a time when most trade unions were content to leave direct political organization to the Labor Party. Moreover, its actions were indeed militant by comparison with those of other Queensland unions which lay quiescent. The AWA did not seek strikes "deliberately" and "consistently", but neither did it avoid them as a means of furthering its objectives. If a strike appeared unavoidable, the union entered the dispute wholeheartedly with all the resources at its disposal.

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