The Impact of Union Amalgamation on Membership: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract

In 1980s and 1990s, Australian trade unions tried to combat declining influence and membership numbers by amalgamating with other unions in the same or related industries. Much has been written on union mergers, but little on how these affect the membership. This article aims to contribute to the literature of the impact of mergers and amalgamations on members but studying just one union, The West Australian Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen's and Cleaners Union (LEDU; 1898-1999). In 1993, the three federal railway unions—the Australian Railways Union (ARU), the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE), and the National Union of Railworkers (NUR), and one bus and tram union, the Australian Tramway & Motor Omnibus Employees Association (ATM)—amalgamated to become the Australian Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBU). The LEDU reluctantly joined the RTBU in 1999. This article examines rank and file reaction to the initial proposals and ultimately to becoming part of a larger union, covering workers with many different interests. The article concludes that, irrespective of whether or not amalgamation was inevitable, given the circumstances in Western Australia at the time, its impact upon the rank and file membership was devastating.

Keywords

Australian, trade unions, amalgamation, rank and file membership

Introduction

"Do union mergers affect the members?" asked Sverke, Chaison, and Sjöberg (2004) in their study of two Swedish blue-collar unions. This question, and a subsequent one, "*How* do union mergers affect the members?" have occupied my mind ever since one of my students chose to examine the impact on the membership of the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU) when it amalgamated with the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) in Western Australia in the early 1990s (Moy, 2008, pp. 19-31). As is discussed further below, much has been written about union amalgamation in Australia, especially with regard to the federal peak body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU) strategy of creating so-called "super unions" in the 1980s. Much less has been written on the impacts upon membership. Using the example of the amalgamation of the railway and tram workers' unions in Australia in 1993, and a methodology employing worker interviews and historical archives including union correspondence, this article considers the impact of amalgamation on the rank and file membership of the West Australian Locomotive Engine Drivers, Firemen's and Cleaners Union (henceforth LEDU). Secondary historical and industrial relations literature, including the author's published work, will be used to draw comparisons with other Australian and British unions.

The LEDU, founded in 1898, covered employees who were known in the railway industry as footplate staff—initially the drivers, firemen, and cleaners of steam locomotives, but later the drivers and assistant drivers on diesel engines. These men saw themselves as having different working conditions and interests from other railway staff such as guards, signalmen, porters, and ticket collectors. This perceived difference was even more acute when comparing themselves with inspectors and stationmasters (seen as being "bosses"), who were members of the Railway Officers' Union (ROU; Oliver, 2016, p. 460). Furthermore, they were intensely proud of being railwaymen—and engine drivers in particular. Given that these men saw themselves as an elite, with different interests even from other railway staff, how did they react when, in its centenary year, their union merged with members of rival unions, who had not earned the particular mystique of being footplate men? What has amalgamation cost in terms of trade identity? If there has been a marked loss of trade identity, has this contributed to declining membership numbers? In studying this issue through the experience of one particular

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union, the LEDU, the article aims to provide an insight into the way that amalgamation affected individual lives, as well as its more general impact on the rank and file, and thereby contribute to the literature on this question.

Method

Much of the research for this article was carried out while I was writing a history of the LEDU (Oliver, 2016). It involved accessing several hundred LEDU files (now part of the Transport Workers Union collection) in the State Library of Western Australia and the records of WA Government Railways (later Westrail) in the State Records Office of Western Australia. For the purposes of this article, the most relevant records were correspondence files and minutes of meetings from the 1980s and 1990s concerning amalgamation. Comparative British material was researched in the records of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) lodged at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, UK.

To access the opinions of the rank and file, I drew upon the 22 interviews that I conducted between 2012 and 2014 and other interviews in the oral history collection of the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History (part of the State Library of Western Australia), as well as secondary literature. Only some of the men whom I interviewed commented on union amalgamation; some had retired before this occurred, or had moved into other work and were no longer LEDU members. Interviewees included a former State Secretary of the union, a former branch secretary, and the State Secretary of the Australian Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBU), the union with which the LEDU merged in 1999. Those who commented on amalgamation expressed strong opinions about whether the move benefited the membership.

The Literature on Union Amalgamations

Unfortunately, union historians have often dealt briefly, if at all, with the impact of amalgamation on the rank and file. Of members' attitudes to the newly formed AMWU, for example, Sheridan (1975) devoted only a few lines, when he wrote, at the end of his history of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU):

> While many members no doubt experienced a twinge of regret for the final passing of the old order, AEU activists now felt much better equipped to cope with the new era of industrial relations ushered in by contemporary radical changes in the arbitration and bargaining areas and the appearance in Canberra of the first Labor government in 23 years. (p. 304)

Hence, the power that amalgamation gave to the new AMWU, according to Sheridan, outweighed sentiment. Similarly Peter O'Connor (2005), discussing the merger that created the Rail, Tram, and Bus Union in New South Wales, wrote that the new union was a "sensible grouping of rail unions" which created "a strong industry union that could serve each of their traditional constituents from a stronger bargaining position" (p. 86). This merger undoubtedly had more chance of success as all of the unions involved represented road or rail transport industry workers, yet it contained the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE), who—like the LEDU—had formerly resisted all attempts to merge with the ARU. The problem of accommodating multiple interests became even more complex within unions such as the AMWU, which now covers a wide range of employees including those in the metal working, vehicle and ship building, plumbing, and food and printing industries (Reeves & Dettmer, 2013).

Most studies of union amalgamation are concerned with whether the strategy succeeded in increasing union power, enabling economies through more efficient use of resources, and achieving improved wages and conditions for members (see, for example, Fairbrother, 2000; Hose & Rimmer, 2002; Wooden, 1999). Some have considered how individual unions have resisted amalgamation (e.g., Michelson, 1997; Oliver, 2016). At least two studies have addressed the specific issue of the impact upon the rank and file. As mentioned in this article's "Introduction" section, Sverke et al. (2004) raised the important question of the impact of union mergers on members. To ascertain how a merger affected union rank and file of two blue-collar unions in Sweden, Sverke et al. surveyed a sample of 237 Clothing Workers' and 755 Factory Workers' members prior to, shortly after, and then 2 years after the event. The rationale for the merger included financial necessity and the need to operate more efficiently, but, more importantly, it was influenced by a desire to improve "lower-level representational structures" and create a flatter structure to "increase the closeness between the members and their union." Thus the aim of the merger, rather than to "absorb" a smaller union into a larger one, was to create a completely new union covering clothing and factory workers (Sverke et al., 2004, p. 106). The authors found that "membership commitment, satisfaction and participation do not necessarily have to be sacrificed for the benefit of building larger, more stable and powerful unions through mergers" (Sverke et al., 2004, p. 103). They concluded that "the absence of negative consequences of the merger can be traced to how and why the merger was proposed and negotiated. The merger brought about more member participation at the local level and decentralized decision making" (Sverke et al., 2004, p. 118). This did not occur in the Australian unions discussed in this article, and especially not in the LEDU that is the subject of the case study.

Regarding the amalgamation of the PKIU with the AMWU in 1995, Moy (2008) found a strong desire among the PKIU officials whom she interviewed to retain a printing division within the larger union. Factors affecting railway employees had also impacted upon the printing industry. Just as in the railways, printers had ceased to operate in a closed shop, and

declining numbers—which had dropped from 51,000 members nation-wide in 1982 to half that number in 2007—provided a major impetus for amalgamation (Moy, 2008). Consequently, despite fears of the printers' identity being submerged in the culture of the metal workers who dominated the AMWU, amalgamation was regarded as being the only viable solution for the PKIU. It has retained a separate identity as the AMWU Printing Division, although at least one of the interviewees in Moy's study did not think that this had been entirely successful. Unlike my study of the LEDU, however, Moy's study did not canvas the views of the rank and file membership of printers.

Why Did Australian Unions Amalgamate?

Australian trade unions developed sometimes in parallel, sometimes in advance of their counterparts in Britain (Kirk, 2011). They achieved recognition in the 19th and early 20th centuries, grew stronger, and flourished mid-century, when more than 50% of the workforce was unionized and declined from the 1970s (Crosby, 2005). A significant factor in unions gaining the right to present their members was the institution of State and Federal Arbitration Courts (Kirk, 2011), where unions were registered, at the beginning of the 20th century. Western Australia was the first Australian state to adopt the arbitration system, passing legislation in 1900 that established the Arbitration Court prior to Australian Federation. New South Wales (1901), the Commonwealth (1904), and the remaining states followed suit, although Victoria, Tasmania, and initially South Australia adopted a less judicial system of wages boards. Wages boards differed chiefly in their composition and procedures. They were composed of representatives of employers and employees with an independent chairperson, and they could act without the formal requirement of a dispute. Unions, however, preferred an arbitration system, which granted them official recognition as representatives of their members and permitted preference for union members in employment. Eventually the mechanisms of the two systems converged (Macintyre, 1998a, 1998b).

Despite British and American workers' suspicions that a compulsory arbitration system would favor employers (Oliver, 2016), in Australia, the reverse was true, nowhere quite so evidently as in Western Australia, where legislation had to be passed to legalize trade unions before they could be registered as partners in the industrial wage system. But the system also placed restrictions on union rules and conduct. Originally, unions that chose the path of strike action were not permitted to appear in the Arbitration Court. Consequently, militants regarded arbitration as a "sham," while employers, on the contrary, wanted the Court to impose penalties on strikers (Macintyre, 2005). On occasions this resulted in a union being de-registered, as happened to the LEDU briefly following a strike in 1946 (Oliver, 2016).

The British concept of a "closed shop"—a workplace where all employees must belong to a union—flourished in Australian factories and workshops. Thus, not only was a majority of workers unionized, but there were also many different unions, often operating only at the state or local level, even in government-owned facilities such as railway workshops. The Western Australian Government Railway (WAGR) Workshops at Midland in Western Australia provides just one example of the proliferation and then reduction of the number of unions on a worksite. In the early to mid-20th century, two separate, rival unions covered engineers, and the trades of molder, boilermaker, blacksmith, car and wagon builder, coachbuilder, painter, plumber, carpenter, coppersmith, and electrician each had its own union. There was also a "catch all" government railway employees union—the Western Australian Amalgamated Society of Railway Employees (WAASRE)—which included unskilled laborers in its coverage. The impact of amalgamation was such that by the time the Workshops closed in 1994, only four unions covered all of the trades and the clerical staff on the site (Layman, 2006).

Several factors caused this decrease in union numbers. According to Sheridan (1975), metal workers' unions were working toward amalgamation from the late 1950s. Reasons for this included technological changes (which resulted in the disappearance of some trades, such as boilermakers), joint union efforts to achieve outcomes at arbitration tribunals, and an increased feeling of solidarity brought about by both the tribunals' use of penal powers and the increasing importance of shop committees consisting of representatives from kindred unions within a workplace. In the late 1960s, changes to the wage system sparked industrial stoppages, and a growing perception that employers were becoming more powerful provided further impetus for unions to consider amalgamation as a strategy for increasing their bargaining power.

A catalyst for the union amalgamations that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Western Australia, was the iron ore mining industry, which commenced in the Pilbara region during the 1960s. Union officials visiting mine sites found poor conditions, a largely unorganized, non-unionized workforce and multi-national employers with very hostile attitudes to unionism. Amalgamation, therefore, was a strategy for increasing union strength and resources in an adversarial environment. The first amalgamation to affect the railway industry was that of Boilermakers and Blacksmiths (separate unions who had combined in one Society in 1966), and the AEU to form the AMWU in 1971. These unions represented several trades in the railway workshops but not members of railway footplate or platform staff. In 1969-1970, waterfront unions covering ship builders and painters, waterside workers, and watchmen formed the Maritime Workers Union of Western Australia (Oliver, 2003). Although this merger was limited to Western Australia, this union later joined with the nation-wide Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), formed in 1993 from the

Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union (Kirkby, 2008). The WAASRE joined with its federal counterpart to become the Australian Railways Union (ARU), WA Branch, in the 1970s. The ARU had been in existence in the Eastern States since 1920 (Patmore, 1982).

Whereas the amalgamations of the late 1960s and early 1970s had been instigated by the challenge of meeting industrial changes in the mining industry and perceptions of increased employer power, those of 20 years later were brought about by an environment in which, by the beginning of the 1990s, "union membership had declined from 51 per cent of the Australian workforce in 1976 to 42 per cent in 1988" and trade unions were "fighting for their very survival in the face of industrial and economic reorganization" and "legal and political onslaughts on the conditions of work and workers' rights to organize" (Kirkby, 2008, pp. 392-393).

Several factors contributed to this decline. Computerized systems replaced much manual labor. Railways, in a period of three or four decades, had passed from very labor intensive steam, through dieselization to a mix of diesel and electric. Trades such as blacksmiths and carriage makers disappeared when fiberglass and aluminum replaced wood as the material for building carriages and wagons (Fox, 2006). The proportion of private industry (often with non-unionized workforces) increased, and governments began outsourcing contracts to private manufacturers, resulting in the closure of government railway workshops at Ipswich (Queensland) Eveleigh (NSW), Launceston (Tasmania), and Midland (WA) in the last two decades of the 20th century (Elliott, 2006; Oliver, 2004; Taksa, 2001). The workforce underwent considerable demographic change, caused by an increased proportion of white-collar occupations, which are traditionally less organized.

Perhaps more significant than all of these changes, however, were the legislative changes instituted by Federal Labor governments at the beginning of the 1990s, which permitted single-employer agreements (enterprise bargaining) and non-union agreements. The resulting "fragmentation of bargaining practices . . . eroded the capacity of the ACTU to coordinate unions in the bargaining sector" because it had lost the "bargaining power to negotiate enterprise agreements" (Briggs, 2004, p. 251). A paradigm shift occurred in the way Australian society viewed unions. John Howard (Australian Prime Minister 1996-2007) fostered an attitude that strong unions threatened Australia's economic performance, rather than playing a beneficial role in the community. Blame has also been leveled at unions themselves. According to Michael Crosby (2005), unions had grown complacent, partly because mid-century, they had enjoyed a workforce density of 63%. There was increasing disquiet among the rank and file that their officials struck too many "deals . . . with the boss," and these did not always benefit the membership.

Another motivation for amalgamation arose from the fear that what was happening to New Zealand unions would soon occur in Australia. Crosby argued that Australian companies, including the major banks, used New Zealand to test de-unionization strategies before attempting them in Australia. He asserted that New Zealand's *Employment Workplace Relations Act 1991* influenced the design of Australia's *Workplace Relations Act, 1996*, and that the survival of Australian unions was "intimately linked with the survival of organised labour in New Zealand" (Crosby, 2005, p. 238).

In summary, then, Australian unions benefited from their integral role within arbitration and tariff systems that protected employers from outside competition. Their high membership density, achieved through successfully negotiating gains for their rank and file within the organized structure of arbitration, enabled to them to hold a privileged position in Australian society. Traditionally, the union movement had paid little attention to industries with a high proportion of female workers when these were a minority in the workforce. This complacency, combined with external circumstances including the numerical decline of the traditional union heartland—the industrial, highly skilled blue-collar workforce; the increase of non-organized occupations such as hospitality; and the de-regulation of the industrial relations system led to a reduction in union membership numbers and density in the workforce. In the last two decades of the 20th century, government policies from both sides of politics favored the privatizing of industries, and gave employers freedom to hire non-unionized workers and broker non-union agreements and employees the right to choose whether or not they would join a union. With the era of the closed shop well and truly passed in Australia, some claimed that unions were facing oblivion (Crosby, 2005), although other commentators regarded the "end-of-unionism-as-a-movement thesis" as being "over-simplified, over-generalised and over-deterministic" (Briggs, 2004, p. 253). In this uncertain environment, some saw "super unions"—a strategy proposed by the ACTU in the 1980s—as the only viable means of survival. With unions perceiving threats to their very existence, it is likely that what the rank and file wanted was a secondary consideration.

Case Study: The LEDU

In Western Australia for much of the 20th century, the two main unions for railway staff were the LEDU, representing all footplate staff and engine cleaners, and the WAASRE, which covered all other wage-earning railway staff (such as guards, porters, crane and forklift drivers, trades assistants, and unskilled laborers). The much smaller ROU represented railways clerical staff, stationmasters, and inspectors. To give some idea of the comparative sizes of these unions in their heyday, figures published in August 1948, when the population of Western Australia was a little more than half a million (Caldwell, 1988), show that the WAASRE registered almost 5,000 workers—being the second largest union in Western Australia, after the Australian

Workers' Union, which had over 10,000 members. In comparison, the LEDU mustered fewer than 1,500 members (*The West Australian*, 1948, p. 24). As mentioned earlier, in the 1970s, the WAASRE amalgamated with its Eastern States counterpart, the ARU.

Officials of the LEDU had begun considering amalgamation in the late 1970s after membership declined, but rather than negotiating with the ARU—which (despite the perceived differences mentioned earlier in this article) at least covered other railway workers in the traffic branch—the union began talks with the AMWU. Approaching the AMWU (then titled the Australian *Metal* Workers Union) was an interesting move, given the union's steadfast refusal to join with WAASRE on several earlier occasions when that union had made overtures; however, as the AMWU covered former AEU, boilermakers', and blacksmiths' members, and was a militant union, ideological similarity may provide the key to understanding it. Historically, all of these unions were more militant than the ARU, and they had supported the LEDU when it took strike action in 1946 (Oliver, 2016).

Yet LEDU members were keen to maintain a separate identity if a merger occurred. They belonged to the AFULE, forming the WA Branch of the Federal body, but this was a loose knit, semi-autonomous federation of State branches. The fact that the WA union—alone of all those that entered into the AFULE in 1921—kept its original name indicates the strong desire to retain independence. According to LEDU official Jack Bainbridge (Oral history interview, State Library of Western Australia [SLWA] Accession No. OH 2056, transcript, 1998), the members were prepared to amalgamate "on the condition that we can retain our identity" (p. 23). He said that members of many years standing were proud of being enginemen and they did not want to just become part of a larger union. Thus, he felt that maintaining their "identity" was very important to the members.

In 1983, in the Eastern States, the AFULE began talks with the ARU, with a view to forming one union of railway workers (Ellercamp, 1983). The LEDU opposed the amalgamation plans, in particular because, according to Des McPolin (the union's State Secretary 1986-1996), the proposed amalgamation discussions had been arranged without adequate consultation. McPolin warned that if talks continued before all of the Divisions had been consulted and given a full opportunity to discuss the proposal, the WA Division would prefer to enter into amalgamation discussions with other Western Australian unions, with whom it felt it had more in common. McPolin (1987) expressed similar sentiments to AFULE General President Ron Bradford as those of Jack Bainbridge, quoted earlier. He wrote that locomotive enginemen were "a proud breed of workers" who would not be intimidated by the ACTU or the AFULE. Clearly, he felt that the union's rank and file had a strong desire to maintain a separate identity within a larger union of transport workers, with whom footplate staff would share some common concerns.

Despite these differences, however, a 1991 LEDU Working Party Report on a proposed amalgamation of themselves with the ARU and the Amalgamated Tramways and Motor Omnibus Employees' Association (ATM) indicated that many practical issues such as relocation of office staff and officials would not present major difficulties. Yet there were some complications. The ARU and the LEDU were State registered, while ATM was registered federally. It is significant that members of ATM, the smallest and least well resourced of the three, feared monopoly by the larger railway unions. Some members objected to the union disposing of property that had been acquired with contributions from the rank and file. The loss of such assets was equated with a loss of union identity and possibly also the loyalty that most members felt toward their union (LEDU, 1991). Despite the optimism in the 1991 Working Party report, the LEDU again reneged on amalgamation, leaving the other two parties to create the Australian RTBU (n.d.). The LEDU continued to seek a merger with other WA unions.

Between 1991 and 1994, following the LEDU's decision not to amalgamate, approximately 1,250 employees took voluntary redundancy, leaving the union leadership fearing that their union would be no longer viable (McPolin, 1994). Other members decided individually to make the decision that had been denied them en masse by joining the RTBU. Yet other drivers left the government railway service (Westrail) and joined the Commonwealth system (National Rail), which meant transferring union membership to the federal union, the Australian RTBU (R. Bergsma, interview with the author, February 11, 2013).

In 1996, in controversial and divisive circumstances (Oliver, 2016), the union elected a new President, David Hathaway, who strongly opposed amalgamation with the RTBU. Hathaway stated that the union must continue to resist amalgamating with either the RTBU or the Australian Services Union (ASU; "the old Right Wing Clerks' Union" as he termed it). They should "hold together as enginemen" but, if amalgamation became a necessary, it would be better to "look to a respectable blue collar Union" (Hathaway, 1996). Despite the strong feelings against the ASU, the LEDU's Executive signed a Memorandum of Understanding with this union in 1997. This move did not please some of the membership, who objected that railway officers "are not Enginemen's friends," and they circulated a petition in September 1997 to reconsider the issue of amalgamation with the RTBU (LEDU, 1997). The ASU included in its coverage members of the former ROU. In this particular instance, therefore, the strength of membership opinion against the ASU influenced the direction the union's officials chose to take.

By this time, the State had experienced 4½ years of industrial reform by the Liberal-National coalition government of Premier Richard Court. The legislation replaced existing award structures and centralized bargaining with individual workplace agreements, some of which offered only the most basic working conditions, curtailed workers'

right to claim entitlements under the *Workers' Compensation Act*, and eroded safety requirements (Oliver, 2003). Westrail embarked on stringent rationalization measures to reduce staff numbers and undermine working conditions as well as putting workers' safety at risk, according to the Union. Some members were pressured to sign individual workplace agreements. It became clear that the LEDU could not prevent the loss of conditions that had "taken 100 years to gain" (Hathaway, 1997).

In mid 1998, the LEDU's centenary year, which should have been a year of celebration, the membership voted on the matter of "harmonization" of the LEDU and the RTBU. Only 360 ballot papers were issued, indicating that the membership had more than halved since 1994 (LEDU, 1997). Of 217 completed ballots returned, over two thirds voted in favor of amalgamation—but what of the more than one third of the membership who did not bother to vote? Did they believe that the result was a foregone conclusion and that their opinion made no difference? The evidence from the union's files is that former officials blamed the President, Hathaway, for under mining the union's capacity to advocate strongly on behalf of its members (e.g., Jarratt to Hathaway, 1997; Jarrett to Hathaway, 1997). Hathaway, however, criticized the branches for not giving the General Committee any guidance or making their wishes known (Hathaway, 1997). The author interviewed 22 former union members when researching the union's history (Oliver, 2016). Not all expressed opinions about the amalgamation, but some blamed the union's demise on the division between officials in the Executive, especially Hathaway, McPolin, and former Secretary Les Young. One said that joining the RTBU was "the worst thing they did" (J. Menegon, interview with the author, March 14, 2014) and another that the officials' "putting the union down" weakened its capacity to survive (V. Charushenko, interview with the author, March 14, 2014).

The new union, the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industrial Union of Workers (WA Branch), was registered in the State Industrial Relations Commission on March 12, 1999. The LEDU rank and file feared that they would become a small, neglected group within a union that now had responsibility for most public transport drivers. Their fears were not unfounded. From 2006, rail car drivers (many of whom were former LEDU members) were placed under a different award from TransWA drivers, which resulted in their receiving only about 75% of the pay of their colleagues. They felt abandoned by the union but powerless to do anything. Paul Robinson, himself a rail car driver, rectified this anomaly after he became State Secretary of the RTBU (P. Robinson, interview with the author, February 28, 2014). This incident indicates the need for officials in "super unions" to be vigilant about the needs of all of their members, not just those from their own trade or section. In summary, the evidence suggests that the amalgamation of the LEDU with the RTBU, while it may have benefited members in creating a viable union, was accompanied by considerable bitterness, recrimination, and regret.

Conclusion

This article has not set out to draw conclusions about the full extent of the impact of amalgamation on union rank and file membership, which would be impossible with just one case study. Rather, with the other contributions surveyed here, it aims to begin to establish a literature of the ways that union amalgamations do affect rank and file members, whether for well or ill. In the case of the LEDU, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which becoming a mere division in a larger union undermines the culture of being enginemen, because that is not the only factor that has come into play. At least two other factors are significant in the Western Australian context. First, the large-scale privatization of industry has introduced an aggressively anti-union culture into the rail industry, particularly from international companies such as Genesee & Wyoming Inc. Australia (Oliver, 2014). Second, the system of training engine drivers has changed significantly. Under the WAGR/Westrail system, employees might take 20 years to achieve the status of driver, so, not surprisingly it was sought after, valued, and proudly held. Today, a person from a non-railway background can be trained to be rail car driver in 6 months (N. Little, interview with the author, December 12, 2012; Robinson, 2014). The concept of "railway families" with generations who worked for the WAGR has vanished.

Of the two WA unions compared in this article, the PKIU members appear to have had a much clearer idea about the benefits that could be accessed by belonging to a numerically and politically powerful union. Moy (2008) found that both officials and members saw advantages in "economies of scale" (p. 25), legal resources, and bargaining power. Negative effects, such as a fall in recruitment, have to be seen in the light of the fact that most of the post-amalgamation study has fallen either within the tenure of the Howard Federal government (1996-2007), an era in which Australian unions experienced the most sustained attacks since the 1920s, or that of its conservative Labor successors, Rudd (2007-2010), Gillard (2010-2013), of which the latter was a minority government dependent upon the support of Independent members and the Australian Greens. The arbitration system (which was once claimed to benefit the worker) was completely re-shaped to re-emerge, in the post-Howard era, as the Fair Work Commission—a body that places considerable limitations upon what constitutes legal union activity. The extent to which these changes impacted negatively on union numbers and density in workforce is still being determined (see, for example, Oliver, 2014).

Increasing membership numbers would be one indicator that unions have regained the confidence of workers in the industries that they cover, but accessing reliable figures, even from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, appears to be very difficult. Recent observations state that the percentage of unionized workers in Western Australia rose from 14.3% in 2008 to 17% in 2010, but "plummeted" to 13.7% in 2014 (Amendola, 2009; "Union Membership

Falling," 2014). Evidently, larger unions have a greater capacity to offer services to members and provide more adequate legal protection in times of adversity. Conversely, larger numbers of rank and file are governed by smaller groups of officials and action may be determined more by ideology or political expediency than by responding to what the rank and file wants.

As another major amalgamation is being contemplated between two of Australia's largest and most militant unions, the MUA and the Construction, Forestry, Minerals and Energy Union, it is to be hoped that the sacrifices enforced upon the rank and file by amalgamation are beginning to yield the benefits anticipated by union officials, as enunciated by Sheridan (1975) over 40 years ago: being "better equipped to cope with the new era of industrial relations" (p. 304). Certainly, those unionists back in 1975 could hardly have envisaged the ravages that 21st century politics and economics would inflict on the Australian union movement.

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