

**INTERNATIONAL UNION ACTIVITY:
Politics of scale in the Australian labour movement**

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**This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Philosophy**

**Work and Organisation Studies
University of Sydney**

2004

Declaration:

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university institution.

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Acknowledgements

The year I spent in Australia researching and writing this thesis was one of the great experiences of my life. While I was writing the thesis, my wife was also working for the Australian Council of Trade Unions as a consultant with several member unions. In large part, our friends and colleagues were union members, organisers, and sympathisers. Many if not most of the people I spent time with played some small part in shaping my understanding of the state of the Australian union movement. Because of this, and because more so than in the U.S., the Australian system of industrial relations and its union movement affect most areas of people's lives, I can truly say that in some ways it is hard to separate my experience of living in Australia from the experience of researching and writing this thesis.

However, there are many people without whom this thesis could not have been written. Perhaps the greatest debt is to my wife for her patient support. She not only supported me emotionally when the task became gruelling, but was always able to offer keen and cogent insight based on her experiences as an American union organiser working in Australia. My advisor, Dr. Bradon Ellem always pushed when I needed pushing and helped rein me in when the project started to get too large. He always believed in the thesis and my ability to complete it: a trait in an advisor which anyone who has written one of these things will know is essential.

For material and financial support, I must thank the Institute for International Education, the Australian-American Fulbright Commission, and the Australian Council of Trade Unions. This research was completed under the auspices of the Fulbright program, for which I will always be a great advocate. The Australian-American Fulbright Commission was wonderfully flexible when I made several changes to my original research proposal. I have to thank the ACTU Organising Centre and especially Michael Crosby and Chris Walton for providing a place to work, access to the ACTU library, organising interviews, and helpful discussion during two months I spent in Melbourne. Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the many Australian union organisers and leaders who gave me time for interviews and access to internal documents.

List of Abbreviations

ACCC	Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AMWU	Australian Manufacturing Workers Union
APHEDA	Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad
APLN	Asia-Pacific Labour Network
CFMEU	Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union
CTUC	Commonwealth Trade Union Commission
EWC	European Works Council
GUF	Global Union Federation
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union
HRM	Human Resource Management
HSUA	Health Services Union of Australia
ICEM	International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ICFTU-APRO	ICFTU-Asia-Pacific Regional Organisation
ICTUR	International Centre for Trade Union Rights
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITF	International Transport Federation
ITS	International Trade Secretariat
KSTL	Konfederasaun Sindicatu Timor Lorosa'e
LHMU	Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union
MUA	Maritime Union of Australia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PPRC	Pan-Pacific Relations Committee
PPTUS	Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions
RTGUN	Rio Tinto Global Union Network
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SIGTUR	Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights
SPOCTU	South Pacific and Oceanic Congress of Trade Unions
TUAC	Trade Union Advisory Committee
TWU	Transport Workers Union
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

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Abstract

In recent years, industrial relations scholars have begun to discuss the “revitalisation strategies” unions are using to rebuild lost density, power, and political leverage. This thesis studies the role international activities play in the revitalisation of Australian unions. Rather than assert the importance of international activity, or emphasise the value of certain forms of international activity, the thesis seeks to understand why unions choose to engage in particular forms of international activity.

International activity in Australian unions takes on a remarkable diversity of forms. The analysis of international activity therefore requires a theory that is capable of describing these different forms of international activity and then explaining why they exist. However most scholars have not examined the role of union agency in choosing international activity. Within industrial relations, there is very little existing theory or research on which to base the kind of analysis proposed for the thesis.

Most theories are ideologically driven, prescriptive accounts that either promote or challenge particular institutions or ideas about international activity. The problem is that they deal with international activity as an abstract kind of response to universal pressures of globalisation. These kinds of arguments serve well to articulate the need for unions to “think globally”, but are ill suited to the task of the thesis, which is to explain particular forms of international activity in particular unions.

The questions about international activity that the thesis intends to answer form a point of connection between industrial relations and the related discipline of labour geography. In making the connections between labour geography theory and the analysis of union international strategy, the thesis argues for labour geography as a political economic foundation for industrial relations in the tradition of Hyman’s Marxist theory of industrial relations. This provides a critical theoretical perspective and conceptual vocabulary with which to criticise and extend industrial relations research on international activity. The result is a spatialised theory organised according to topics of interest in industrial relations research that can be applied to the study of Australian international activity.

The thesis is evenly divided between developing this theory and research on international activity in the Australian union movement. Empirical analysis begins with a study of the international activities and policy of the ACTU, distinguishing different kinds of international activity. By treating the international activities of the

ACTU as representative of the Australian union movement as a whole, the thesis identifies three functional levels of international activity: strategy-sharing, regional solidarity, and global regulation. The chapter also examines the material and discursive construction of the international scale within the ACTU.

The thesis also analyses the international activities of three Australian unions, the TWU, LHMU and CFMEU. While all three unions engage in each level of international activity, the review of their activities shows differences in the focus of each union. The thesis suggests that the explanation for these different ratios depends in part on the spatial structure of the industries that the different unions organise.

The kind of research undertaken in this thesis has little precedent. The work of the labour geographers on international activity does not deal with union revitalisation strategy, and the research from industrial relations on the strategic aspects of international activity have not latched on to labour geography. This thesis argues that unions scale their activities internationally for particular reasons, some of which are structural and can be specified up front, and others that are historically contingent and can only be explored on a case-by-case basis. In examining this “politics of scale” the thesis redefines many of the issues in the discussion of international activity and proposes a new conceptual background for industrial relations generally.