Collective Biography and Labour History: The Case of The Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement, 1788-1975

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As a research method, collective biography seems ideally suited to meeting one of the core concerns of labour history – that of acknowledging simultaneously the agency of the individual within the collective, as well as the influence of the collective on the individual. Indeed, this has been one of the key objectives of The Biographical Register of the Australian Labour Movement, 1788-1975, a project on which we have both been working for over a decade and which is nearing completion. The Register, which we are planning to publish in both hard copy and CD form, incorporates brief (300-700 word) biographical entries over 2,000 women and men whose contribution to the history of organised labour in Australia has hitherto been either undocumented or under-documented.

Drawing on our own experiences, and on those of researchers undertaking similar projects in Britain and the USA, our paper explores the particular challenges and potential rewards of collective labour biography. If producing a detailed biographical study of a single labour personality can be conceptually and empirically problematic, attempting to do justice simultaneously to the life’s work of many hundreds of labour activists presents its own special problems. Not the least of these are the issues of representativeness, sampling, selection, and information availability.

Yet the project has also been immensely rewarding. The Register entries assist us to better explain the often deeply personal well-springs of labour activism. Our paper explores some significant demographic factors and trends revealed in the Register entries: birthplace; parental occupation; residency, family structure and size, religion, education level; marital status; age at first activism; longevity of activism; and the like. On these and other dimensions, gender proves to be pivotal. The entries also allow us to illuminate the changing institutional dimensions of activism, together with some hitherto submerged socio-spatial facets of the collective experience. These range from patterns of inter-regional and inter-occupational migration by worker activists, and the importance of intellectual, social and sporting networks in inspiring and sustaining activism, to the shifting nature of working class ‘leadership’ and the vast significance of voluntary labour in the very maintenance of labour organisation.

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