

Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Australia)

By [Nathan Wise](#)

Summary

The First World War caused great upheavals within the Australian labour movement. The period 1914-1918 saw the highest national union membership being recorded alongside the greatest number of working days ever lost on an annual basis to industrial action. And yet, this is an aspect of Australia's history that is scarcely documented in detail. As such, and as this survey article will demonstrate, scholars seeking to understand the history of labour movements, trade unions and strikes within Australia during the First World War must cast a broad net, and canvas both general histories and more focused case studies, in order to understand the broad impact of war on Australia.

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Introduction

Around the world, historians of [labour movements, trade unions and strikes](#) have been hesitant to focus too greatly upon the First World War. Many labour historians feel let down by a working class that surrendered their class loyalty to a greater national loyalty during the war,¹ while others simply have a distaste for examining war in general.² In Europe, the international socialist (and anti-war) movements that had blamed the ruling class for advocating war in the 1900s and early 1910s turned on each other when war was declared. Their supposed "union for a common 'international' cause" disappeared amidst an environment heavy with patriotism and international hatred.³ A similar replacement of class loyalty with national loyalty took place in [Australia](#). Thus, although the First World War holds pride of place as the most popular topic in Australian history, histories of labour movements in Australia during the war have been relatively scarce. There is a clear trend with Australian

labour [historiography](#) to not focus exclusively on the First World War, but to instead place that period within a broader historical context. In order to bring to light the work that has been done in the field, this brief survey article documents historical representations of labour movements, trade unions and strikes in Australia during the First World War. To address the scarcity of focused studies of this period, and to accommodate the diversity of subjects within which the topic of labour movements is covered, this paper is divided into two sections. The first section explores the history of labour movements in Australia during the First World War within general studies of the labour movement over broader periods in Australian history, while the second section explores the history of this period as it appears within more focused historical case studies, such as biographies, union histories, and community histories. While this paper focuses on labour movements in general, it does not include an analysis of literature on the political arm of the labour movement, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), as the ALP became quite disconnected from the general labour movement during the war.

In 1962, in the first issue of the Australian journal *Labour History*, published at the time as the *Bulletin of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*,⁴ Robin Gollan lamented the “quite narrow limits” of Australian labour history with its predominant focus on central trade union bodies, and political and legal institutions.⁵ This lamentation was part of an appeal to members of the recently formed Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) to broaden their perspectives on the past. Several years later, in 1965, Ken Inglis made a similar appeal by cautioning Australian historians in general against their continued neglect of the First World War.⁶ For too long, Inglis argued, historians had simply ignored the volumes of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*,⁷ and many of the questions raised within those volumes regarding the war and its impact on society had remained unanswered. In querying this, Inglis suggested that this might be attributed to the fact that “the generation of soldiers produced so few teachers, and partly because those who grew up after the war felt excluded from it.”⁸ Many historians, Inglis suggested, felt little point in contributing to the history of a war that they felt was incongruous with civil society. Indeed, there is a clear pattern among many international labour and social histories to either conclude studies in 1914, or commence them in 1918 or 1919, thus avoiding the turbulence of the war years altogether.⁹ While the separate calls of Gollan and Inglis may have been intended for different audiences, the historical debates that followed sparked a resurgence in Australian historical representations of the First World War, including closer scrutiny of the home front. Members of the ASSLH, publishing predominantly in *Labour History*, also increasingly confronted this traumatic past with their analyses of labour movements, trade unions and strikes during the war.

Australian labour movements began the First World War in a relatively strong position. They had recovered from the disastrous depression of the 1890s and by 1912 they had reached a union density of 31 percent, the highest in the world at the time.¹⁰ However, when war seemed imminent, [Andrew Fisher \(1862-1928\)](#), the federal opposition leader and leader of the Australian Labor Party, declared that, "Australians will stand beside our own, to help and defend her [Britain], to the last man and the last shilling."¹¹ Such unreserved dedication to the war effort meant, in the eyes of many within the labour movement, putting aside class and labour disputes and focusing on national and imperial interests. Indeed, [Ernest Scott \(1867-1939\)](#) and [Ian Turner \(1922-1978\)](#) note that 43 percent of the approximately 53,000 men recruited during the first five months of the war were unionists, a figure that was "well above the proportion of unionists among adult males."¹² Fisher's pro-war stance certainly helped his party's electoral chances, and the ALP was returned in the September, 1914 Australian federal election with the largest popular vote they had ever won.¹³

This initial public excitement over the war seemed to damage the labour movement's power to support living standards. Between 1914 and 1915 union membership grew at its poorest rate in the decade (an increase of only 4,760 throughout the year), and industrial action declined between 1914 and 1915. However, once that excitement subsided, an alternative reaction to the war began to emerge, particularly among the Australian labour movements. One immediate impact of the war was an increase in unemployment and threats of a wage reduction, and this was certainly not well received by workers and trade unions.¹⁴ After steady pre-war growth, effective wages suddenly dropped between 1914 and 1915, from a comparative index-number of 952 in 1914, down to 862 in 1915 (effectively a 10 percent decrease).¹⁵ As a result, despite losing large numbers of trade unionists to the army, and despite the number of unions remaining relatively steady throughout the war,¹⁶ union membership actually increased considerably from 1916 onwards, from a combined membership of 523,271 in 1914, up to 581,755 in 1918. Indeed, the membership in 1918 was estimated at four times the membership of 1906.¹⁷

Much of this growth emerged following the unrest of 1916 and 1917. The labour movement's frustrations with the war and with wartime conditions reached boiling point in early 1916, and, following the relative quiet in the early months of the war, industrial action once again began to spread across the nation. In 1915, a relatively low 583,225 working days were lost in industrial disputes. This increased to 1,678,930 in 1916, and then to 4,599,658 in 1917 as strike activity reached its peak.¹⁸ The broader effects of this strike action were mixed. As Robert Bollard observed, in some cases it helped relieve "working-class distress at the rise in

living standards”, it helped build trade union organisation, and it contributed towards more critical approaches towards government [propaganda](#), but it also saw the denunciation of strikers as unpatriotic shirkers.¹⁹ The widespread adoption of this latter belief among soldiers serving in the AIF would contribute to the conservatism often identified among veterans in the post-war years.²⁰

Thus, while the labour movement’s initial response to the war in 1914 and 1915 was generally supportive,²¹ there were clearly elements of the movement that strongly opposed the war.²² Ultimately, although the labour movement grew in strength during the war, their loss of political power following the split in the party and the benefits this gave to the new Nationalist Party of Australia, coupled with the failure of many strike activities in 1917, contributed towards the sense of despair felt broadly among the movement. It is fair to say that this sentiment, felt by the labour movement at the time, has also reflected the tone of general histories of the movement in Australia that have been written in the century since the war began, as explored below.

General histories

The history of labour movements in Australia during the First World War has typically been recorded within either general social histories of Australia, or general histories of those trade movements over broader periods of Australian history. For example, Ian Turner’s *Industrial Labour and Politics* covered the period 1900 to 1921, while [Brian Fitzpatrick’s \(1905-1965\) A Short History of the Labour Movement](#) covered the period from the mid-19th century through to the mid-20th century. To document those various contributions towards this history, this section will review those general histories that dedicate some portion of their study to the history of labour movements during the First World War. As will be shown, when those broader histories focus on the movement during the First World War, there is a strong tendency to focus on the role of the movements during several key events, such as the split in the Australian Labor Party, the Australian general strikes of 1917, the conscription debates of 1916 and 1917, and the rise to prominence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also known as the “Wobblies”) during the war.

One of the first general social histories to explore labour movements during the war in detail was Ernest Scott’s contribution to the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918 as Volume XI: Australia during the War*. Scott’s volume, first published in 1936, provides an extensive and detailed account of the Australian home front. Within this, Scott frequently touches upon the role played by labour movements during the war, but, aside from a chapter

on “Labour Questions and the Industrial Ferment”, the history of those movements is rarely a subject of considerable focus. Rather, much like the other volumes of the *Official History*, Scott’s style of writing focused on giving Australians a historical work that they could read and reflect proudly and patriotically upon.

Scott’s work stands in contrast to Brian Fitzpatrick’s *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, first published shortly after Scott’s volume in 1940.²³ Fitzpatrick’s book is an early work in the field which, while now somewhat dated and criticised for its uncritical praise of the labour movement,²⁴ nonetheless provides four key chapters that provide a detailed and valuable contribution to the history of labour movements during the First World War. Whereas Scott focused on building a sense of national pride, Fitzpatrick focused upon building a sense of class pride by, in his words, “describing what Labor has done and has tried to do towards building a ‘fair and reasonable’ society in Australia under capitalism.”²⁵ Peter Love argued that Fitzpatrick “spoke directly to working people about their past” and his book “helped pave the way for the academy’s acceptance of labour history.”²⁶

In 1945 Ernest William Campbell revisited similar topics in his *History of the Australian Labour Movement*. Campbell acknowledged the foundations established by Fitzpatrick and asserted that his work was similarly an attempt to wrest control of the history of labour movements away from, in Campbell’s words, “bourgeois liberal historians.”²⁷ While lacking much original research, Campbell dedicated a single detailed chapter to labour movements during the war where he sought to utilise Fitzpatrick’s earlier work, among others, to criticise the historical complacency of labour movements and thus imbue the contemporary version of those movements with a revolutionary spirit.²⁸

By the mid-1960s the history of trade movements was increasingly accepted as an academic pursuit. Following Robin Gollan’s 1962 academic call-to-arms within the *Bulletin of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, Ian Turner’s 1965 book, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, set a new benchmark for scholarly investigations of the labour movement. To this day Turner’s book remains a seminal read and he too focused upon that common series of key events during the First World War.²⁹ Several other works from this period are also worth noting, such as James Sutcliffe’s *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia* (first published in 1921 but reprinted in 1967),³⁰ P. W. D. Matthews’ and G. W. Ford’s *Australian Trade Unions*,³¹ and Brian McKinlay’s *A Documentary History of the Australian Labor Movement 1850-1975*.³² Within all of these books, the focus on labour movements during the First World War is only brief, but they all nonetheless provide a valuable contribution to the

subject. Sutcliffe briefly covered trade union developments during the First World War by focusing in particular on debates surrounding the move to “one big union”. In Matthews’ and Ford’s book, Robin Gollan provides a succinct summary of the challenges faced by the movement during the war,³³ and Jim Hagan similarly dedicated a brief section of his 1981 book, *The History of the A.C.T.U.*, to exploring the general challenges to labourism during the war.³⁴ McKinlay explores labour movements during the First World War several times throughout his work with close support from a valuable suite of documentary sources.

The increased academic acceptance of labour history in the 1970s also contributed to the diversification of the field, as explored in more detail below, and debates increasingly focused on the nature of historical representations of class, labour and gender. The 1970s saw the start of a broader revisiting of the history of labour movements, and by 1975, the United Nations’ International Women’s Year, historians had particularly identified the need to redress the gender imbalance in Australian history in general.³⁵ However, it must be acknowledged that, as much as historians such as Joy Damousi³⁶ and [Raelene Frances](#),³⁷ among others,³⁸ have worked extensively to promote the study of gender in labour history, and as much as women were a core part of the labour movement during the First World War, the historical literature on labour movements during the war remains largely focused on the history of men.

Greg Patmore’s *Australian Labour History*, published in 1991, traced labour history in general from the late 19th century through to the late 20th century.³⁹ The publication of *Australian Labour History* came at a time when scholarly attention to the First World War in Australia was booming, but when some historians were proclaiming the death of labour history.⁴⁰ Patmore’s timely historical and historiographical analysis drew various threads of Australian labour history together into a single, comprehensive account. Of particular pertinence, Patmore explored labour movements during the First World War indirectly throughout several thematically-structured chapters.⁴¹

But perhaps the most valuable general history of Australian labour movements has come very recently in the 2013 publication of Robert Bollard’s *In the Shadow of Gallipoli*.⁴² Bollard’s analysis of the Australian home front during the First World War is sure to be a seminal work in the field as this focuses on the history of labour movements throughout the different stages of the First World War, from the announcement of war, through the conscription debates of 1916 and 1917, the Great Strike of 1917, the Armistice, and the immediate post-war years. Bollard concluded that these wartime issues polarised Australian society more

than ever, and as right-wing political mobilisation continued, wartime radicalisation ended, the left shrank and the labour movement went into retreat.⁴³

Finally, the history of labour movements during the First World War has also featured prominently in general popular and social histories of the Australian home front during the war. As noted earlier, Ernest Scott's volume of the *Official History* must be included in this category, alongside other key works by [Joan Beaumont](#),⁴⁴ Michael McKernan,⁴⁵ and Stuart Macintyre.⁴⁶ In addition, wartime experiences have often featured briefly in more publicly accessible histories of the labour movement, such as Joe Harris's *The Bitter Fight: A Pictorial History of the Australian Labor Movement*,⁴⁷ Wendy Lowenstein's and Tom Hill's *Under the Hook*,⁴⁸ and Sean Scalmer's *The Little History of Australian Unionism*.⁴⁹

Case studies

The history of labour movements in Australia during the First World War also features prominently in various focused studies. Such studies can generally be divided into several key categories: union and movement studies, biographical studies, community-oriented studies, and event-focused studies. Trade union and labour movement histories in particular have long formed the backbone of Australian labour history and they contribute some of the most revealing analyses of labour movements during the First World War.

The history of the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia during the First World War has also captivated the attention of numerous Australian historians. Frank Cain's *The Wobblies at War*, first published in 1993, focuses exclusively and in detail on the history of the IWW in Australia during the First World War.⁵⁰ Ian Turner's *Sydney's Burning* also focuses on the IWW during the war, but Turner focuses his attention primarily upon the "IWW Twelve" (also known as "The Twelve" and "The Sydney Twelve") – a group of IWW members who, in September 1916, were arrested and charged with treason, arson, sedition and forgery.⁵¹ Verity Burgmann's *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism* provides a broad history of the IWW, and Burgmann dedicates several detailed chapters to the First World War.⁵² This scholarly treatment on the IWW is valuable because, unlike the broader analyses explored below, these works typically concentrate attention on the treatment of a specific labour organisation during the First World War. To a large extent, the IWW stood somewhat apart from the activities of the labour movement in Australia in general. Whereas the labour movement sought to operate within the social and legal structures of the nation, the IWW generally sought to fight against those structures. A key value of those historical analyses is that they show how the labour movement responded to conservative attempts to attack individual

elements, and indeed, how those responses served to strengthen the movement as a whole. For example, when the IWW Twelve were convicted, individual labour organisations around Australia rallied to campaign for their cause.⁵³

Aside from the history of the IWW, historical analyses of individual labour organisations tend to be less focused on the First World War. Indeed, it is difficult to present a general picture of the union experience of the First World War because different unions and organisations fared differently. Raymond Markey provides two lengthy chapters on the history of the Labor Council of New South Wales from 1901-1919, during which he frequently links Labor Council developments with other wartime events.⁵⁴ Other union- or industry-focused works such as those by Bradon Ellem,⁵⁵ Lucy Taksa,⁵⁶ and Raelene Frances,⁵⁷ dedicate small sections within their broader analyses to the challenges faced by those individual unions and industries during the First World War.

Additional insight into those challenges faced by the labour movement during the First World War is provided by event-oriented histories. As noted above, labour histories of the home front have largely focused around events such as the split in the Australian Labor Party, wartime strikes (particularly the Australian general strikes of 1917), and the [conscription](#) debates of 1916 and 1917. Histories of strikes during the war, including the 1917 General Strike, range from general studies and edited collections such as Malcolm Waters' *Strikes in Australia*,⁵⁸ John Iremonger's, John Merritt's and Graeme Osbourne's *Strikes, Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*,⁵⁹ and D. J. Murphy's *The Big Strikes: Queensland*,⁶⁰ through to more focused studies such as those by Lucy Taksa,⁶¹ and Robert Bollard,⁶² among others.⁶³ Similarly, the topic of conscription has spurred a broad body of literature. The conscription debates were a particularly divisive issue for the labour movement in this era (indeed, it led to the split in the Australian Labor Party in 1916, and a subsequent split in their voter support base), and the response to this issue from different areas of the labour movement provides a revealing insight into the complex relationship between trade organisations, their political representatives, and the role of individuals throughout those areas. Ian Turner's chapter on "The Conscription Crisis" is of particular value as it focuses on the role of labour movements and politics during those debates, whereas other studies such as Leslie Jauncey's *The Story of Conscription in Australia* and Kevin Fewster's "The Operation of State Apparatuses in Time of Crisis" provide a broader political context.⁶⁴ Additional insight is also gained through case studies of the organisations and people involved, as explored below.

Wartime conditions and circumstances, including those surrounding the conscription debates and increased industrial action, also gave rise to new personalities within the labour movement, and the biographical histories of those individuals also add to our understanding of the history of labour movements during the First World War. In addition to various biographies of political leaders of the time, such as those of Andrew Fisher,⁶⁵ [William “Billy” Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#),⁶⁶ [William Holman \(1871-1934\)](#),⁶⁷ and [Thomas Joseph Ryan \(1876-1921\)](#),⁶⁸ we must also consider the biographies of later leaders who were active in the labour movement during the war, such as [John Curtin \(1885-1945\)](#) and [Ben Chifley \(1885-1951\)](#),⁶⁹ and the broad collection of biographies of union leaders and others involved in social and labour movements during this period.⁷⁰

Finally, regionally-focused and community-oriented histories have also made substantial contributions to our understanding of labour movements, trade unions, and strikes in Australia during the First World War. While many community histories dedicate sections to the First World War, and many of these cover labour movements and strikes during this period,⁷¹ several key works stand out for their particular attention to this period and these themes. Bobbie Oliver’s *War and Peace in Western Australia* and Raymond Evan’s *Loyalty and Disloyalty* are both notable for their extensive focus on labour movements and strikes in the Western Australia and Queensland, respectively, during the First World War.⁷² Through a strong focus on class conflict and industrial tension, both Oliver and Evans reveal the deep divisions that split these states during the war. Similarly, John McQuilton’s *Rural Australia and the Great War* provides a micro focus by exploring the impact of war on north-eastern Victorian communities.⁷³ Through this focused study McQuilton, like Oliver and Evans, manages to uncover the intricacies in the challenges regional communities encountered during the war, and he reveals the causes of the divisions that tore apart many families and communities during the First World War.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, there are few dedicated studies of labour movements, trade unions and strikes in Australia during the First World War. Nonetheless, the field has grown considerably from the early general histories of labour movements that often dedicated small sections to the First World War, through to the diversification of the field in the 1970s and the resulting growth of focused studies that documented the agitation and action that took place during the war years. While the field is broad and diverse, by surveying the existing literature this paper has shown that, by casting a broad net and drawing upon focused biographical,

community/regional and union/organisational studies, alongside those more general thematic studies, historians can piece together an understanding of key labour movement developments in Australia during the war.

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