

A Sense of History

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Trade unions have been around in Australia for a long time and unionists have fought over generations to make a significant contribution to the conditions enjoyed by workers across all industries today. You will note that many things we may take for granted have been achieved by the hard work of our predecessors in a variety of industries and some of those achievements were not that long ago. It is obviously important to maintain the fight if you are interested at all in retaining your conditions.

Some of the milestones in union history are summarised below. These snippets are taken from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) *Worksite for Schools* website [www.worksite.actu.asn.au] and while these acts and events happened throughout the 19th Century one can't help but feel a sense of déjà vu given the current industrial and financial climate.

1828 *Masters and Servants Act of NSW provided that ... "servants could be imprisoned and have their wages forfeited for refusal to work or for destruction of property, and that Masters found guilty of ill-usage should be liable to pay damages up to 6 months wages".*

1850-1900 *This period saw the early development of Australian trade unions. Legislation had existed in Britain that outlawed unions, similar in intent to the Masters and Servants Act, until the passing of the Trade Union Act in 1871. The English and Irish anti-union legislation was not particularly successful in those countries, nor did it prevent union activity in Australia. Transportation ended in the eastern states in 1853, in Western Australia in 1868. Various craft unions were formed.*

1881 *The NSW Trade Union Act is passed giving union rights and registration.*

1891 *The Shearers Union strike over freedom of contract.*

1892 *Miners strike in Broken Hill over wage cuts and employment of scabs.*

1894 *The Shearers Union strikes again on same issues. The Masters and Servants Act is used against the union - 23 years after England proclaimed the Trade Union Act.*

Putting it into the context of the times, the laws written and enacted by the colonial Legislative Councils and endorsed by the British Parliament have unfortunately provided the foundation for the current industrial legislation. The prime minister appears to be locked into the 19th Century with his backward "visionary" outlook for Australia, the way he'd like it to be again, with a laissez faire, frontier style approach to industrial relations for companies large and small. The constraints placed on trades unions and individuals under the new legislation encroach on their right to organize and on freedom of association. The purpose of the government's current legislation is essentially to repeal the Trade Unions Act 1881 to disadvantage the union movement and to increase the powers of the corporations. One doesn't have to look too deeply to uncover key elements of Work Choices 2006. There wasn't a great deal of choice then either.

1901 *NSW Industrial Arbitration Act introduced the option of arbitrated settlement for parties to industrial disputes.*

1907 Employers who could prove they were paying their employees fair and reasonable wages as determined by the 'Harvester Judgement' setting minimum wages were protected from competition of imports.

1936 Printers win one week paid annual leave through their union.

1939 The Arbitration Court determines that the working week will be 44 hours...some miners in NSW achieve a 40 hour week at the same time following a protracted fight through their union.

1944 The Federal government introduced unemployment and sickness benefits.

1947 The Arbitration Court ruled on the introduction of penalty rates for weekends and work outside normal working hours.

1950 The basic wage for female workers was set at 75% of the rate for men.

1969 The Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) awarded Equal Pay for Women providing they were performing work of equal value, incrementally from 1969 through to January 1972. Employers predicted that women's employment prospects were compromised by the decision but history has proven them wrong, again.

1974 The AMWU (Metal Trades Award) finally achieved 17.5% annual leave loading as well as 4 weeks paid annual leave.

1973 Maternity Leave was introduced to government employees.

1975 Medibank was introduced.

1980 After a lengthy campaign by unions and the ACTU, the 38 hour week was won.

1983 The Price and Income Accord ('The Accord') negotiated between the Hawke/Keating Labor government and the unions as a framework for looking at Australia's big picture economic issues - aimed at reducing inflation, unemployment and industrial disputes. The Accord ended in 1996 when a Coalition government came into power.

1986 National wage case put forward by the ACTU awards superannuation to all workers.

1996 The Living Wage case put forward by ACTU for a minimum wage that would increase each year for lower income workers.

2006-2009 The ACTU 'Your Rights at Work Campaign' is waged nationally to inform the Australian people by the draconian nature of the unfair 'WorkChoices' industrial legislation introduced by the Liberal/Coalition Government. The campaign culminates in a change of government and the introduction of fairer industrial laws for all workers.