

Labour in North Queensland

Industrial and Political Behaviour, 1900-1920

Doug Hunt

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ABBREVIATIONS

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AFBEU	Australian Federated Butchers Employees Union
AFULE	Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen
ALF	Australian Labour Federation
AMIEU	Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union
ARU	Australian Railways Union
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
ASPA	Australian Sugar Producers Association
ASWU	Australian Sugar Workers Union
AFTEA	Australian Federated Tramway Employees Association
AWA	Amalgamated Workers Association
AWU	Australian Workers Union
BIC	Brisbane Industrial Council
CPE	Central Political Executive
CSR	Colonial Sugar Refining Company
FEDFA	Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association of Australia
HSL	Herberton Socialist League
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LEFCA	Locomotive Enginedrivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
OBU	One Big Union
PLP	Parliamentary Labor Party
QCE	Queensland Central Executive
QREA	Queensland Railway Employees Association
QRU	Queensland Railway Union
QUREA	Queensland United Railway Employees Association
TIC	Townsville Industrial Council
TLC	Trades and Labour Council
UCGA	United Cane Growers Association
WIUA	Workers Industrial Union of Australia
WPO	Workers Political Organisation
WWA	Western Workers Association
WWF	Waterside Workers Federation
WWU	Waterside Workers Union

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In the course of this research I talked to a great many former unionists and labour activists, and formally interviewed several who are listed in the bibliography. If the book manages to convey some of the ethos of North Queensland labour's history, it is due to their memories and enthusiasm.

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Introduction

This is a history of the labour movement in the Australian region of North Queensland during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It describes and analyses the emergence and development of trade unionism and the industrial and political behaviour of the northern working class. While focusing logically on the institutions of the labour movement, the experiences and attitudes of the ordinary worker are recorded where the evidence permits.

There are a number of reasons why this is both a coherent and compelling topic for historical study. First, the North distinctly forms a clearly defined geographic and socio-economic area of the state. Second, the region has frequently been attributed a special significance in the political and industrial life of both the state and the nation. For many years a Labor¹ stronghold, it produced some of the state's most influential and colourful politicians; at the same time it witnessed some of the most bitter industrial disputes in Queensland, even when a Labor government was in office. Third, as a result of these political and industrial characteristics, the northern labour movement acquired a reputation for "direct-action radicalism"² which persisted at least until the late 1940s. Finally, although several historians have remarked upon this distinctive character, few have advanced detailed and extensive research to substantiate their conclusions. In describing and analysing the evolution and behaviour of the labour movement, this study also examines the historical basis for the militant and radical reputation of North Queensland in the formative period from 1900 to 1920.

North Queensland begins at Sarina, 600 miles north of Brisbane, and extends west to the Northern Territory border and a further 1000 miles north to the tip of Cape York. Brisbane, the state capital, is closer to Sydney than it is to Mackay or Townsville, and closer to Melbourne than it is to Cairns. For several decades the remoteness of the region was underlined by the lack of communications. The railway line north from Brisbane did not reach Mackay until June 1921 and Townsville until December 1923. Transport between the North and the capital was therefore mainly by coastal steamer; the smaller northern ports were frequently subjected to an irregular service. Distance and isolation, key themes in Australian history, thus had a special significance in North Queensland, fostering strong local loyalties, creating a residual resentment of southern government and aiding in the development of a *regional* labour movement.

Regionalism in Queensland, as elsewhere, clearly related to economic as well as geographic and political factors. Historically, the South of the state was the only region to develop an economy based on diversified agriculture, pastoralism and manufacturing. Central Queensland relied primarily on the pastoral industry and to a lesser extent on mining activity; while the North's economy, rested fundamentally on primary industry - mining, beef production and sugar cultivation.

Employment in North Queensland was seasonal in nature. The workforce in the sugar industry reached its peak during the harvest period from about June to November; the killing season in the meatworks usually ran from April to October-November. Mining was also subject to seasonal fluctuation depending on such varied factors as international demand and local water supplies; many mines ceased operations for several weeks at the end of each year. In some areas, railway and road construction was forced to halt during the wet months from December to March. Employment in the transport industry also depended on the seasonal pattern of the overall economy; on the waterfront, bustling activity during the latter half of the year was followed by a period of “slack”, when work was scarce and irregular. Seasonal employment had its natural corollary in seasonal unemployment.

The North Queensland workforce was predominantly unskilled and itinerant, characteristics which had important implications for the development of the labour movement. Though seasonal workers such as sugar-cane cutters were initially difficult to organise into resilient trade unions, once organised they proved to be cohesive and assertive unionists. One former northern itinerant recalled

a whole host of nomadic workers, blokes like me, who were single men, knocking about, going to look for a job where you could pick up a bit of overtime and build up a thirst to enjoy yourself in the city. And so the atmosphere of North Queensland at that time was very, very influenced by these nomadic workers. You know, that they were moving from place to place, and we didn't give a damn for the boss anyway, you always got a job somewhere.³

Studies of strikes in other parts of Australia warn against “assuming that itinerant workers always bring a spirit of militancy and solidarity into union organisation and industrial disputes”.⁴ Yet in his analysis of the meatworkers union, Terrence Cutler approvingly cites Jack Crampton's view that the rambler, the industrial nomad, working intermittently in a wide variety of low-paid jobs and living without home comforts, became a devil-may-care union militant.⁵ Certainly in North Queensland union militancy was historically characteristic not only of meatworkers but of most unskilled, semi-nomadic unionists in seasonal or irregular occupations: miners, carters, railway employees, sugar workers and wharf labourers.

Geographic and social isolation and the attendant difficulties in communication meant that the labour movement in North Queensland was to a large extent oriented primarily towards the region rather than, as in other states, to the capital. Although individual trade union headquarters were increasingly located in Brisbane (in the case of the waterside workers, in Melbourne) northern unionists jealously guarded their local autonomy. When official union policy appeared to conflict with local interests, “southern” instructions were resented and frequently ignored. Notwithstanding their appreciation of the benefits of national federation, waterside workers often went on strike against the wishes of their federal council. A conflict of interests on North-South lines was also evident in the railway and meatworkers unions: in 1914 and 1917 northern railway workers took industrial action independently of their southern confreres; during the latter years of the first world war the northern meatworkers often demonstrated their rebelliousness, though Cutler's suggestion

that “the Brisbane officials were terrified of being seen in the streets of Townsville”⁶ is perhaps an over-dramatisation.

This assertion of regional interests was facilitated partly by the relatively decentralised structures of the railway, waterside and meatworks unions and partly because their northern officials remained conscious of a need to periodically demonstrate autonomy. Yet the highly-centralised Australian Workers Union also experienced sectional conflict, which took the form of a struggle between the union officials and rank-and-file sugar workers, miners and labourers. To the paid officers of the AWU, rank-and-file agitation was caused by fractious and radical individuals; to many northern workers, however, it reflected the failure of southern union bureaucracy and its northern-based officers to recognise and adequately protect local interests. Parochialism was therefore an integral component of North Queensland’s militant reputation.

However, to characterise labour in North Queensland as exclusively regional in outlook would be misleading. Northern unionists clearly formed part of the mainstream labour movement. It could not have been otherwise, given the demographic, industrial and political structure of the state. Not only was government authority centred in Brisbane, but also, with the establishment in 1916 of a central wage-fixing body - the arbitration court - an important function of industrial relations was also located in the capital. Centripetal forces were also significant.

Nevertheless, developments in the North were often decisive to the overall direction of the labour movement in Queensland. For example, the organisation of the Amalgamated Workers Association in the far north from 1907 to 1911 produced two very influential union leaders and politicians in Ted Theodore and William McCormack; stimulated the unionisation of workers throughout the state; encouraged the active participation of unions in Labor politics; and laid the foundation for the subsequent industrial and political dominance of the AWU. When Labor gained political office in 1915, it was more than given to chance that it won thirteen of the fifteen northern electorates. And when signs of working-class disillusionment with the Labor government appeared in the latter years of the first world war, such signs were most manifest among northern unionists.

Northern meat and railway workers in particular revelled in their position as acknowledged pace-setters within their respective unions; it was a matter of some pride that the labour movement in the North was seen as more advanced in its views on unionism. Northern unionists tended to look down on the “backward” South, which was disparaged as dominated by sectional craft unionism, politicians and bureaucratic conservatism. Accordingly, by 1920 internal disagreement in the Queensland labour movement was frequently expressed in regional, as well as ideological terms.

1900 is a fitting starting point for a study of the labour movement in North Queensland. Trade unions had been formed in the region in the 1880s, but these were shattered and demoralised by the industrial defeats and depression of the 1890s. In so far as there was a labour “movement” in the North at the beginning of the new century, it comprised mainly small local groups devoted to Labor Party electoral organisation. Indeed, the success of Labor in state and federal elections contrasted

markedly with the evanescence of industrial organisation. In other Australian states unions were reforming and reviving, but in Queensland drought and economic recession which lasted to 1904 delayed any signs of a revival of unionism.

Improved economic conditions, however, coincided with political developments conducive to the growth of unionism. In the period 1905-1907 labour leaders in Queensland became increasingly dissatisfied with the moderate policies of their parliamentary representatives who had formed a coalition government with Liberal politicians in 1904. When most of the caucus sheared their connections with the party in 1907, those who remained joined with officials of the Australian Labour Federation [ALF] in actively fostering the revival of unionism in Queensland, from which a rejuvenated Labor Party could be launched. (Chapter 1).

When these officials set out to rebuild the political party with a greater industrial complexion, they turned for support to trade unions already active throughout the state: In North Queensland the replacement in the sugar industry of Pacific Island labour by Europeans influenced the formation of the earliest sugar workers unions in Cairns and Mackay in late 1904. Despite an appeal based on an explicitly racial argument - that conditions suitable for "kanakas" were not good enough for white men - the incipient unions had considerable difficulty in establishing a solid and permanent organisation. After strikes in 1909 and 1910 failed to significantly improve working conditions, sugar workers responded favourably to the Amalgamated Workers Association's proposal for amalgamation. (Chapter 2).

Unlike the unstable and penurious sugar unions, the AWA was well organised, astutely led, and highly successful. Formed by Theodore and McCormack in the metal-mining districts west of Cairns in 1907, it soon acquired a reputation for protecting the interests of its members: a series of largely successful strikes saw the organisation grow rapidly in numbers and industrial muscle. Despite its militant reputation, which has been perpetuated by historians, the union followed a consistently pragmatic, even defensive policy. The AWA's use of direct action was in fact a logical reaction to the belligerent attitude of many mining companies whose management refused to negotiate with the union. As the AWA's bargaining strength was recognised, so the union used the strike weapon less frequently. Nevertheless, in the context of unionism in Queensland in this period, the AWA was clearly the most assertive and successful union in the state. Not only did it score a number of impressive strike victories, but it also fostered an amalgamation movement which propelled it to the forefront of the state's political and industrial life. (Chapter 3).

The rise of the AWA was accompanied by an expansion of union activity among other northern workers. Aided by an improvement in economic circumstances, new trade unions were formed and older ones were rejuvenated. Miners, meatworkers, waterside workers, railway employees, skilled craftsmen and general labourers all responded to the new impetus. After 1907 labour in North Queensland generally grew more confident; the incidence of industrial conflict rose accordingly. Contrary to the fears of some observers, the increased frequency of strikes did not signify the influence of doctrinaire socialism. Most strikes represented a drive to remove immediate grievances on the job; they frequently arose in response to employer indifference. Radical socialism

and syndicalism had only a small following and a scant influence on unionism in North Queensland. Socialism in its many forms certainly provided an inspiration and a rationale for unionists, but labour's basic objectives remained practical and meliorative. Politically, the vast majority of trade unionists placed their faith in the moderate reformism of the parliamentary Labor Party. (Chapter 4).

Indeed, the trend before 1915 was towards the integral involvement of the burgeoning trade unions in Labor politics. Industrial re-organisation thus heralded electoral success for the Labor Party. Symbolic of this success was the election of Theodore as member for Woothakata in 1909 and McCormack's win in Cairns in the 1912 state election; both later became state premiers. Their election reflected not only their personal drive and ability, but also a general revival of Labor Party fortunes in the region, marking the beginning of a long period in which North Queensland was a safe Labor stronghold.

By December 1910 the movement towards "closer unity" among Queensland trade unions had achieved practical effect through the merger of unions of sugar workers, railway navvies, general workers and western copper miners under the umbrella of the AWA. This development subsequently encouraged the AWA to seek amalgamation with other trade unions. In 1913 the AWA joined forces with, and assumed the name of, the Australian Workers Union, which had been confined hitherto to pastoral workers. From this point the AWU became a mass trade union, by far the largest in Australia, organising unskilled and semi-skilled workers in a variety of industries. For a time it seemed that the AWU might come close to its goal of a single union for all Australian workers. It failed, however, when other unions showed little interest in amalgamation, championing instead loose affiliation with trades and labour councils. Prominent among those unions which indicated its willingness to amalgamate at various times but which did not merge with the AWU was the meatworkers union. It ultimately decided that its destiny lay in development as an industrial union embracing all workers in the meat industry. (Chapter 5).

In the meantime, North Queensland unionists were involved in two important industrial disputes which significantly altered the direction of the labour movement in Queensland. In 1911 a lengthy strike by sugar workers, now organised by the AWA, won improved conditions and shorter hours. The strike involved a high degree of orchestration and co-ordination; yet it should be noted that its successful conclusion was neither wholly anticipated nor complete. Contrary to the findings of historians who have viewed the strike as a calculated step by the AWA leaders in pursuit of their industrial and political ambitions, the evidence shows that its organiser, McCormack, held serious doubts about the efficacy of strike action. Moreover, the jubilation which greeted the settlement of the strike masked the fact that one group of workers, field hands, received nothing but vague assurances. In fact, from an industrial relations perspective, the real victory was simply that the recalcitrant employers were forced to recognise, and negotiate with the union.

Less than six months after the 1911 sugar strike, northern workers were again embroiled in a bitter industrial dispute, the general strike of February-March 1912. North Queensland unionists readily accepted the call to down tools in support of their Brisbane comrades. After only a week,

however, they complied with the strike committee's recommendation to return to work. In Brisbane the strike went on to humiliating defeat. Subsequently, unionists contrasted the AWA's performance in the 1911 sugar strike with the directionless conduct of the general strike by the ALF. This not only hastened the demise of the ALF but also gave impetus to the AWA and to unionism generally in North Queensland.

In the wake of the 1912 strike the Denham Liberal government called an election which resulted in an immediate setback for the Labor Party. The government then pressed the advantage with legislation (the *Industrial Peace Act* of 1912) designed to prevent strikes and restrict the political activities of trade unions. The immediate outlook for Queensland labour was gloomy, but the events of that year provided further incentive for the movement to resist politically-created obstacles. The failure of the general strike, and the subsequent anti-union legislation, contributed to a firm belief among unionists that the political success of the Labor Party was now more important than ever. (Chapter 6).

In May 1915 labour's political aspirations were fulfilled by the election of the Ryan Labor government. Subsequent industrial, economic and social reforms were welcomed not only by trade unionists but by many electors outside the working class, including small farmers. Of most interest to the labour movement were the establishment of various state enterprises; improvements to workers accommodation and labour exchange legislation; workers compensation; measures securing the legal status of trade unions; and, pre-eminently, the establishment of a Court of Industrial Arbitration with wide-ranging judicial powers. Most trade unions eagerly sought the jurisdiction of state arbitration; unionism grew rapidly and the Queensland industrial court soon earned a reputation as the most liberal in the country. (Chapter 7).

However, the Queensland government could not avert the political and social upheaval generated throughout Australia by the first world war. Inflation and industrial dislocation aggravated economic discontent; the bitter debate about military conscription and the war, and financial and constitutional impediments to the implementation of Labor policies facilitated increasing tensions within the labour movement. Like Labor governments elsewhere, Ryan's administration could neither match the grandiose expectations of some of its supporters nor assuage the radical minority's impatience with the piecemeal parliamentary program. (Chapter 8).

Working-class unrest was especially apparent in North Queensland, where economic grievances over wages were compounded by seasonal unemployment, geographical isolation and parochial complexes. From 1916 to 1919 strikes occurred with increasing frequency in the northern railways, on the waterfront, and in the mining, meat export, and sugar industries. In this context militancy was promoted and support for socialism was enhanced. Industrial disputes such as the northern rail strike of August 1917 were symptomatic of growing disillusionment with the arbitration system and hence with a Labor Party which insisted that unionists should adhere strictly to arbitration court decisions. (Chapter 9).

Though still accepting the features of arbitration while it benefited them, many unionists, especially in the North, refused to acknowledge any fetter on their right to take practical industrial action. This sentiment was not confined to the North, as throughout Australia the latter years of the war saw a more militant assertion of working-class interests and a keener interest in radical ideologies. Indeed, industrial turmoil and growing support for socialism in Australia reflected world-wide trends.

Not that radical or even revolutionary rhetoric indicated a commitment to theoretical doctrine among any more than a small minority of northern workers. Neither the syndicalist IWW in the period 1915 to 1917 nor the incipient Communist Party in the immediate post-war years attracted much formal membership in North Queensland. Rather, ideological propaganda served both to rationalise the experiences and justify the demands of the northern working class. Within the ranks of the labour movement itself, ideological debate was very often an expression of internal power struggles in which the real issue of contention was over practical industrial methods of promoting workers immediate economic interests. To a large extent, internal conflict revolved around differing attitudes towards a more basic dispute: industrial conflict between employers and employees.

In late 1918 and 1919 a high level of unemployment and post-war readjustment produced a situation of acute social upheaval in North Queensland. Union assertiveness provoked a reaction from groups of employers and returned soldiers; violent clashes, such as those over the Hughenden hotel boycott in October 1918 were not uncommon. Industrial conflict and community disorder were intensified by Australia-wide maritime strikes which exacerbated the isolation of the North, causing food shortages.

In the eyes of both contemporary observers and later historians, the peculiar northern militancy was confirmed by the Townsville meatworkers strike of 1919, which culminated in an exchange of gunfire between police and unionists in the city centre. The turbulence, violence and acrimony of the dispute, however, should not obscure the fact that the strike was an inopportune move which ended in abject defeat for the union militants. It also reflected and fuelled the rivalries and disagreements within the labour movement at the end of the first world war. The rankling antagonisms were not simply between the Labor government and the trade unions, but also within the union movement itself. On one side were the militant industrial unions of meatworkers, waterside workers and railway workers; on the other side the moderate craft unions rallied to the mass AWU, which had refused to support the meatworkers strike and, at least according to the militants, had actually conspired to defeat it. (Chapter 10).

This militant-moderate division, however, was far from rigid, being complicated by internal conflict within individual unions. Sugar workers, for example, were among the most strike-prone in North Queensland, continually defying the cautious industrial policy of the pro-arbitration hierarchy of the AWU. Nevertheless, the broad groupings apparent at the end of 1919 set the pattern for internal labour movement relations in Queensland during the 1920s and 1930s – in fact, in some respects up to the present day.

In his authoritative history of the labour movement in eastern Australia, Ian Turner considers that 1921 represents “a high point in the history of the movement”⁷ - a judgment which in North Queensland is clearly open to question. Turner’s criteria centre on the evidence of class consciousness and a new wave of socialism; against this, however, must be weighed the practicalities of a high level of unemployment, damaging factional fights in the movement, and a Labor government which showed increasingly less inclination towards radical reform.

The story of North Queensland labour before 1915 is basically one of evolving organisations and political and industrial pragmatism. Thereafter, though these considerations still prevailed, the dominant theme is one of conflict - between militants and moderates; unionists and politicians; radicals and reformers; rank-and-file workers and union officials. These conflicts, endemic to labour movements generally, were lent an extra element of contention in North Queensland by the strength of regional feelings.

Many historians have speculated about the nature of the northern labour movement, though few have advanced detailed evidence to substantiate their conclusions. Although Geoffrey Bolton’s history of North Queensland dealt with trade unionism virtually as an aside, it remains influential in attempts to explain the alleged political peculiarities of the region. A central theme of *A Thousand Miles Away* is suggested by its title: distance and isolation, which inspired “fierce local loyalties”, “a strong spirit of communal identification” and, in the labour movement, “direct-action radicalism”. Briefly touching on the intense industrial conflict at the end of the first world war, Bolton asserted that “there had always been a tough, practical edge to Northern radicalism which owed nothing to imported ideologies”. This “old, irreverent Northern radicalism” was also reflected in the electoral victory of the Communist, Fred Paterson, in Bowen in 1944.⁸

In her study of ideological conflict in the Queensland labour movement in the 1920s, M.B. Cribb noted that “left-wing militancy” seemed most pronounced among northern miners, sugar workers, wharf labourers and railway navvies. She found a plausible explanation for this in the arduous working conditions, climate and isolation of the region; the latter was, corroborating Bolton, perhaps most significant:

It must be remembered also, that North Queensland represented one of the last “frontier societies” with a sizable population in Australia. As such, it tended to produce a special kind of outlook or philosophy. Separated by 1000 miles from the centre of authority and power, certain that those in the Government at Brisbane cared little for them, and understood less about their conditions, North Queenslanders developed a continual dissatisfaction and a contempt for, those in authority, a belief in their ability to take things into their own hands, and in the necessity for looking out for themselves.⁹

Andrew Jones likewise canvassed these parochial idiosyncrasies in his study of electoral support for the Communist Party in North Queensland in the late 1930s and 1940s. Although he placed some importance on ideological and organisational factors in Paterson’s 1944 election, Jones still assigned most weight to regional conditions which had produced a militant labour tradition and a political climate in which personality was at least as important as party.¹⁰

Unlike Bolton, Cribb and Jones, Cutler focused attention on the industrial militancy of northern workers rather than on their more debatable political radicalism. Yet he too emphasised the North's isolation and frontier quality, which "bred parochialism and self-reliance" and "gave to the north Queenslander an independent, rebellious character". The other ingredients shaping the attitudes of the northern meatworker were oppressive working conditions ("these professional slaughterers were brutalised by their job") and "the conditioned recklessness of the seasonal worker".¹¹ Cutler's discussion of these traits in connection with the Townsville meatworkers strike in 1919 is convincing, but it should be noted, as D.W. Rawson pointed out, that at this time "although the curious circumstances of Townsville made it particularly prone to violent outbreaks, there was a general social malaise almost throughout the country".¹²

Cutler's argument was reiterated and refined by another attempt to define an independent political *milieu* for North Queensland, Ian Moles' biography of Tom Aikens. Moles drew also on the works of Bolton, Cribb and Jones to suggest that "isolation and localism" on the one hand, and the seasonal nature of employment, on the other, formed equal elements in a "tradition of rebelliousness" that was at once militant, regional and radical.¹³ Meanwhile, the most recent study of North Queensland working-class politics was Diane Menghetti's treatise on the Popular Front in the 1930s – the apogee of the "Red North" image. She attributed much of the success of the Communist Party at this time to its identification with issues important to sections of the northern community, and its interaction with that community. For a brief period at least, the Communist Party was "indigenous" to the North.¹⁴

Although the period after 1920 lies beyond the scope of this study, previous developments in the labour movement vindicate many of the deductions offered by historians. For example, the significance of regionalism in the northern labour movement, and the militancy of most seasonal workers, were amply demonstrated between 1900 and 1920. Certainly during the war North Queensland acquired considerable notoriety for industrial conflict. However, it is evident that some qualifications and clarifications of the militant legend of the North are necessary.

First, one may question the plausibility of listing a series of spectacular industrial disputes - the 1911 sugar strike, the 1919 meatworkers strike, and the South Johnstone Strike of 1927 - and linking them with the support enjoyed by the Communist Party in its "popular front" phases of the 1930s and 1940s, in order to adumbrate a "tradition" of militancy or radicalism peculiar to North Queensland. As the present study suggests that there was only a tenuous connection between the labour movement of the 1890s and that of the early twentieth century, so it submits - without denying the strength of historical continuity or tradition - that the links between 1919, the acclaimed pinnacle of northern militancy, and 1944, when Paterson and Aikens and other mavericks were elected, should be more adequately established.

Second, the pervasiveness of the militant reputation of the North¹⁵ tends to obscure the parallel existence of the consistently moderate, if not conservative, outlook of most northern workers. This trend, often treated as merely the antithesis to militancy and radicalism, was represented by an abiding faith in parliamentary reformism and a firm belief in industrial

arbitration. It was evident in the pragmatic approach to industrial problems evinced by the AWA in the mining and sugar districts of the North; it was the trend apparently vindicated by the collapse of the 1917 railway strike and the 1919 meatworkers strike.

Third, this study of the labour movement in North Queensland suggests that historians should clearly define the terms which they use to describe working-class behaviour. The writers mentioned above do not seem to distinguish between *radicalism* and *militancy*. There is a connection between these terms, but they are decidedly not interchangeable. Indeed, some Australian trade unions which are fairly described as industrially militant, have a membership and leadership which are commonly non-radical in political outlook.¹⁶ This study cites the case of the AWA, which in the quiescent context of the first decade of the twentieth century was decidedly militant but whose leaders were radical mainly in their commitment to the Labor Party and the parliamentary process. Conversely, while many northern unionists in the latter years of the first world war proudly wore the label “socialist”, it is clear that socialism or radicalism did not *cause* any strikes in North Queensland. It is also true that ideological conviction sometimes lent an edge to industrial action. Nevertheless, it is best to use the term “radicalism” to refer to political attitudes and behaviour; and to confine “militancy” as far as possible to the arena of industrial action.¹⁷

Was this brand of working-class militancy, often associated with radical politics, peculiar to this region of Australia? This is a difficult question to answer, caught up as it is in judgments of both the significance of regionalism and the strength of militancy. In 1980 B.J. Dalton made a salient, general point:

The problem is that, for the most part, there do not exist comparable studies of other regions of Australia. As a result it is often impossible to tell whether what has been shown to be true for a North Queensland topic is broadly similar to, rather different from, or totally at variance with its counterparts in other regions or in Australia generally.¹⁸

There has been considerable attention to themes of place, locality and community in labour history since this was written,¹⁹ though it remains a valuable observation for labour in North Queensland. Yet a survey of the rich field of Australian labour historiography reveals that few, if any, large, distinct areas were accorded quite the reputation of this region. Militancy (and for that matter radicalism) has most often been discerned among particular occupations, such as waterside workers, miners, or, as already noted, meatworkers. Mining particularly, whether coal or metal, is highlighted – the Hunter valley and Wollongong regions; Broken Hill and Mount Isa, where isolation and harsh living conditions influenced industrial relations as they did in North Queensland.

The significance of the North is indicated by studies which use it as something of a yardstick. Bernie Brian’s study of the North Australian Workers Union compares the raw, radical-militant image of Darwin from the 1920s to the 1940s with North Queensland. He draws from the thesis on which the present book is based to challenge that image.²⁰ From another direction, Barbara Walter’s admirable history of Rockhampton unions, *inter alia*, analyses the reasons why they were, overall, decidedly less militant than their northern counterparts.²¹

As implied at the beginning of this Introduction, this study sits within the genre of institutional labour history. It does so without denigrating approaches which gained some academic favour in the late 1980s and 1990s. Certainly, works which illustrated, or more commonly merely exhorted social history and postmodern approaches have contributed much to our understanding of unorganised and less-organised workers, and of other vulnerable groups in society.²² However, a so-called traditional or “classical” approach remains legitimate, especially if, as in this book, the focus is on the political and industrial participation and behaviour of ordinary workers in the broader labour movement.²³ This may be institutional history, but it is only incidentally a history of institutions. To reiterate, the thesis of this study is that of the emergence and travails of a regional labour movement, in which locality, community and an awareness of distance and isolation provided the decisive dynamics.