



The University of Newcastle
History Club
Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 7

1982

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PREFACE

The 1982 issue of Student Research Papers continues the practice began last year of publishing the best first year essays on aspects of life and work in Newcastle 1938. As explained in the last issue, the History Department of the University, along with colleagues from the C.A.E., is involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of The Australian Bicentennial History Project. We have been training selected students to interview Novocastrians about life in 1938 from an interview schedule arranged by the National Oral History Project connected with the 1938 volume.

Ten students were selected this year to carry out at least one interview (one student Barbara Gaudry interviewed four people) and then, on the basis of controlled background reading, to write an interpretative essay on the problems deriving from work (or the lack of it) which faced a family during 1938. The results, like last year, were varied and many of the same problems were encountered despite our ironing out many of the wrinkles associated with the 1981 project. These papers are valuable mainly as training exercises for our first year students. We have continued to publish them in this form because, in spite of their incomplete nature, they help to give outsiders a glimpse of the rhythms of private experience associated with life in Newcastle and the coalfields.

The papers by Gaudry and Owens deal with the lives of men in Newcastle heavy industry in 1938. Payne's paper also deals with that work experience but adds a dimension to do with the Anglican church and its handling of industrial issues. The effects of religion, of Primitive Methodism specifically, on the lifestyle and expectations of a mining family at Dudley is also highlighted in Curtis's essay. Finally, Deacon examines reflectively the meaning of a single person's life experience in 1938 within the wider pattern of 'history'.

These are tentative steps towards 'people's history'. We hope the Student Research Papers will contribute a little to the data for a social history of this area and with it, to the story of what it meant to be an Australian in 1938.

Sheilah Gray
Peter Hempenstall
Margaret Henry

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'IN A JOB' IN 1938:

A REFLECTION OF DEPRESSION EXPERIENCES

by Barbara Gaudry

Workers in the metal industries in Newcastle in 1938 faced a scene determined by the chronic depression conditions that had existed in the city for more than a decade. In this paper I will contrast the work experiences and attitudes of a skilled worker, Mr J, whose family connections and job training sheltered him from the harsh realities of the depression, with those of three other men who were not so fortunate. Mr J began his apprenticeship during the depression, and became a pattern maker, and member of a strong craft union: the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). The other interviewees became ironworkers, semi-skilled members of the Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA), which was devastated by the depression years. The experiences of the interviewees during the depression honed their attitudes and determined their work options and problems of employment in 1938.

To obtain an overview of the employment background of the interviewees, it is necessary to examine the position of metal workers during the depression. The depression period in Newcastle is notable for its length. For ironworkers the decades preceding the depression were marked by persistent under-employment and periodic chronic unemployment. The FIA, which covered the 'unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the metal manufacturing industries',¹ was a weak union hampered by very inadequate finances and employer victimization of its leaders and organizers. Its poorly paid and under-employed members were 'ever conscious that prevailing unemployment and their lack of skill made them easily replaceable'.² The union's problems were intensified during the depression and its membership declined markedly. Unemployment for metalworkers rose to over 30 per cent, with the level for ironworkers being higher than the other metal unions.³

During this time adults were replaced by low-paid juniors, illegal wage cuts occurred and 'skilled workers were downgraded into unskilled jobs made vacant by the dismissal of unskilled men'.⁴ The FIA did not have the financial resources to pay unemployment benefits to its members, nor to finance breach of award challenges in the courts. For many unemployed ironworkers the position was desperate. The dole provided by the state government reduced the recipients to poverty level and 'State sponsored relief schemes were not widespread until 1932'.⁵ Unemployment levels for ironworkers remained high well into the decade.

The members of the AEU were in a much stronger position. They were tradesmen whose skills were needed by industry, and they were protected by a strong craft union. The AEU, a wealthy union at the start of the depression, was probably the only union able to provide unemployment benefits to members throughout the depression. It paid out £360,000 throughout Australia between 1926-32.⁶ The union was also able to maintain the skilled award rates of its members by taking breach of award cases before the courts. Unemployment rates for the AEU peaked at 25.7 per cent

in 1931-32, and union membership had declined 20 per cent by 1933, after which recovery was rapid.⁷ However, during the depression working conditions of AEU members were eroded. 'Active unionists were usually the first to be retrenched...older men were sometimes sacked upon reaching an arbitrary age limit...and young men were often immediately dismissed upon completion of their apprenticeship'.⁸ Although the AEU could resort to legal challenges, strike action was impossible during the depression.

Mr J. began his working life in 1926 when he was fourteen years old. His dream of becoming an office worker was dashed because 'things were so bad money-wise'⁹ that his father put him to work on a fruit cart for 2/6 per week. During the year his father remarried and the new family connections had a profound effect on Mr J's life. His new step-grandfather was a foreman with Goninan and Co Ltd, and his two step-uncles also worked for that company. An invitation to become an apprentice patternmaker followed for the interviewee, and after two years in the stores he began his training in 1929. Although he had no desire to be a manual worker, fate was kind, for he soon grew to like his new job and it provided a haven from the severe effects of the depression. The work was interesting and as a qualified patternmaker Mr. J. enjoyed relatively high job security and monetary rewards.

After his apprenticeship Goninans kept him on for a year 'although most firms put their workers off straight away when there was no work'.¹⁰ In 1934 there was little work for patternmakers in Newcastle and Mr J. was forced into a migratory lifestyle for almost five years. Work was immediately available in Sydney with its large number of engineering shops and foundries. There he stayed with his aunt but returned to Newcastle whenever Goninans, or occasionally the BHP, telegraphed him that work was available. Mr. J. was eligible for unemployment pay from the AEU, but he chose to work in Sydney because 'when you are in the highest paid trade in the country you won't be happy with 10/- a week from the union'.¹¹

Despite the relative privileges of a sought-after trade, the forced migratory work pattern presented difficulties. The interviewee was 'unable to get continuity at any one firm...with a series of little jobs of three to six months in Sydney...and the remainder in Newcastle mainly at Goninans'.¹² The working hours were long, and with travel-time added, he often arrived home in Sydney close to 7 pm.¹³ Nor did he like Sydney. 'It was huge, everyone was a stranger to you'¹³ and he made no friends. He finally obtained permanent work with Goninans in 1939.

What then were Mr J's experiences of the depression? His family connections enabled him to get an apprenticeship in a trade that was interesting, well paid and provided constant work in hard times. His father and brother, both butchers, were also permanently employed, but his two sisters were not so fortunate. Neither ever had a job and went from home duties into marriage: an industrial town provided limited job opportunities for females even in more prosperous times. Trade apprenticeships in industry were not available and heavy work was a male domain. However the family was 'very fortunate with all the male members working and was able to get all that was needed'.¹⁴ Mr J's six or seven mates were not so lucky. When they left school they did not obtain apprenticeships and he 'cannot remember them ever having a job except for state relief work'.¹⁵ The interviewee was not personally aware of any other unemployed people, but he knew that hundreds of men waited at the BHP on call-up days hoping to get a job. His attitudes, developed by his family upbringing and work experience, are reflected in his total lack of interest in politics. When asked if the Government could have done more for the

unemployed he replied,

I was never interested in government or politics. The fact is I was working; maybe I was complacent, or just satisfied. I was working, I didn't have to worry about anyone else, why should I worry? If I had been out of work it would have been a different proposition.¹⁶

For Mr J. life at Goninans in 1938 was very pleasing. 'They were the best company to work for in Newcastle...they were a marvellous firm'.¹⁷ Unlike BHP, where he was told 'I was there to make patterns not to whistle',¹⁸ the work atmosphere was relaxed, and sufficient time was allowed for making the pattern. He thought the work conditions were good, although workers with catarrh or asthma were affected by the very fine timber dust in the pattern room. There was no lunch room or first aid station, nor any sick leave. Unemployment pay and annual leave were not provided by the company. Promotion opportunities existed and depended on seniority.

At lunch time the table tennis competition reigned supreme. Politics and union matters were not discussed, a pattern which Mr J. was familiar with from his home environment. 'Work conditions weren't ever discussed. There were no complaints, we did our job and went home'.¹⁹ According to the interviewee, this was not due to the unemployment situation, but 'because the men were satisfied with their wages and conditions...one thing I was pleased about in those days was that there were no strikes, there were no talks of strikes'.²⁰ In 1938 Mr J. was earning £6/19/- per week, £3 above the basic wage. His was the highest paid trade in the country and he was content with his lot.

The depression experiences of Mr T. were markedly different. In 1926 'he was on top of the world'²¹ earning £6/10/- per week as a qualified tradesman in the clothing trade. He had £120 in the bank, was second only to the manager on the promotion list, and was union delegate in a very happy 'family' workplace. When the depression hit the clothing trade in 1928 Mr T. and ninety girls were out of work.

Ten years of 'battling around for jobs'²² followed. A man 'who had never worked hard until then',²³ was glad to clean ships' bilges, shovel coal into trucks, load cases of bananas or work at any other casual jobs he could find. The times were very hard. At Sulphide Corporation, where he had his worst job, he saw men who had acid burns around their bodies shovelling fertilizer, and others who were suffering the effects of rock dust from inadequate ventilation. The men were afraid to complain in case this meant they would lose their jobs. Some of Mr T's jobs were for half a day, others were for a few months. During these ten years he cared for his mother who received a pension of £1 per week. With a weekly rent of 17/6 and the single man's dole at 5/- they were constantly in debt.

In 1938, Mr T., a former qualified tradesman and now aged 38 years, began work as an 'odd-jobs man'²⁴ at Goninans. At this time it was still 'very hard to get a job anywhere, and you had to know someone'.²⁵ Working conditions at Goninans were 'very bad'²⁶ with no lunch place or bath houses, and inadequate toilet facilities. The floors were of dirt and one building flooded in wet weather. However, the 'bosses' were very good. They had trained at Goninans and knew and understood the men. Mr T. was paid the basic wage of £3/19/- per week and worked an 8-3/4 hour day plus Saturday mornings. He became an overhead crane driver, which led not only to welcome overtime, but also to industrial deafness from the noise of the riveters working below.

The nature of his original trade profoundly affected the depression experiences and job opportunities for Mr T., and no doubt enhanced his sense of loyalty to Goninans with whom he finished his working days. He had great affection for the company. 'They were very good to the men and we helped them all we could'.²⁷ The company had finally provided him with job security.

The effects of the depression on the life of Mr A. were debilitating. The son of a share-farmer, and one of eight children, he left school in 1929, aged fifteen. For him 'there was no future'.²⁸ The family farm of 100 acres in western New South Wales was unable to support him, but provided a little seasonal work.

It was necessary to look elsewhere, but there were no jobs and there was nothing to train for. Thousands were walking about and things were so bad in the country you had to get out.... They were horrible years; you didn't know where to go or what to look for.... It destroyed your faith in the future. You had no objective...just aimlessly wandering around looking for work'.²⁹

Nine years of intermittent work followed; mainly seasonal farm work and occasionally government relief work. In 1938, when he was working on a Queensland banana plantation, a friend informed Mr A. about a job opportunity at Lysaght Pty Ltd. He moved to Newcastle, began work on the production line and earned £6/10/- per week. This company was almost totally unionised, having brought out a strong union workforce from the parent company in England.³⁰ When the work petered out Mr A. moved to Stewarts and Lloyds Pty Ltd which had opened in 1934. Throughout his first year he saw six to seven hundred men waiting at the gates for a vacancy. He found his size an advantage, for big men were selected to work the heavy machinery. In 1936 the Trades Hall Council reported that only 2 per cent of the men were unionised.³¹

The new company was well lit and had good amenities: eat houses, bath houses and a first aid room. However, the weekly wages were lower at £4/6/-, and the bonus system operated. Mr A. was very critical of this system, because while the 'speed-up' relaxed safety measures for the workers, it led to increased production at minimum cost for the company. The interviewee worked in a very hot environment where 'the men had to work half-an-hour on and half-an-hour off because of dehydration'.³² Furthermore, the noise of the heavy machinery led to industrial deafness in later years for Mr A. and many others. He found life on the production line 'soul destroying'. The worker was tied to the job and found it difficult even to go to the toilet because a relief worker had to be found to back up production. Shift work was very disruptive to the body clock, and later to family life. It was very difficult to establish a regular routine because of shift changes.³³

Although Mr A. found his production line worklife soul destroying, he feels he adapted to circumstances. Nine years of 'aimless wandering', his first real job at twenty four years of age, and no craft training severely limited his job options.³⁴ However, his upbringing and his depression experiences, developed in him a keen interest in politics and trade unionism and encouraged a 'militant attitude'. Mr A. became an ironworkers' organizer committed to improving the conditions and wages of the workers.³⁵

Mr H's experience was comparable. Most of his working life was spent as an ironworker and he was acutely aware of the problems this entailed. When he joined the BHP in 1924 a workmate asked him to join the FIA. He paid his 5/- union due and was warned 'not to tell because he would be sacked'.³⁶ According to the interviewee 'it was taboo to discuss work conditions or politics at work, because of the fear of dismissal or someone reporting to the boss'.³⁷ The BHP had a history of anti-union activity. It worked actively to suppress unionism. Men involved in union activity were dismissed, and a record of this was kept to prevent their re-employment by the BHP or its associated companies.³⁸ By 1936, only 25 per cent of the workers were trade unionists.³⁹

In 1926 Mr H. joined the Railways Department as a porter in the hope of finding the security and conditions of a 'government job'. The onset of the depression meant dismissal and two weeks' severance pay. Again he turned to BHP where he worked periodically until 1936. During slack times he was laid off and spent a total of three and a half years unemployed. The work conditions of this time reflect the impotent position of the trade unions. Mr H. reminisced:

The 48 hour week was spread over five and a half days. BHP ran a seven day roster with two days off per fortnight. The first day off could fall immediately after 'dog watch' and so become a wasted day. Shift workers received one penny an hour extra. There was no annual leave or sick pay. Safety equipment such as gloves, hats, boots and clothing were not provided. Many workers suffered health deterioration through the nature of their work.⁴⁰

In 1936 the interviewee moved to Stewarts and Lloyds, but was dismissed as a unionist, 'never to be employed again'.⁴¹ He moved to Commonwealth Steel Co Ltd where he worked as a furnace man for three years. Here the work was very heavy but not unhealthy, although it was necessary to take salt tablets because of the hot work. No protective clothing was provided by the company and the purchase of boots and clothing was a problem for Mr H. He wrapped his hands in hessian to protect them from the heat. The floors were of dirt, and no lunch rooms or bath houses were provided. The bonus system operated and junior workers were employed below the basic wage. In 1938 he was temporarily dismissed for refusing to work a faulty furnace.

The experiences of the workplace led to Mr H's strong allegiance to trade unionism. His experiences of the depression, heightened by his involvement with the Unemployed Workers' Movement, led to his 'disgust with the system' and a commitment to change.⁴²

For all of the interviewees the effects of the depression extended until 1938. An enforced migratory lifestyle still confronted Mr J. despite the financial rewards of the highest paid trade, and work conditions with which he was very content. For the other men the depression had been harsh; they had neither the skills nor training to negotiate in the workplace. 1938 was a watershed for two of them, for it represented permanent work after particularly long periods of unemployment. Work in 1938 was marked by a drop in status, work conditions and financial reward for Mr T., compared to his former heady days as a tradesman in the clothing trade. Life on the production line was soul destroying for Mr A., and for Mr H. there was no alternative to the continuing hard life of the ironworker. All of the problems of the non-craftsmen confronted these men in 1938, but at least they were 'in a job'.

FOOTNOTES

1. J.A. Merritt, "The Federated Ironworkers' Association in the depression", Labour History, No.21, p.48.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, p.49.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, p.52.
6. G. Robinson, "Owing to the economic position: The Plight of Labour during the Great Depression", unpub. Honours Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1977, p.5.5.
7. T. Sheridan, Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-1972, Melbourne, 1975, p.106.
8. Ibid, p.112-3.
9. Interview with Mr. J., retired pattern maker, at Merewether, 27th and 28th July 1982, tape 1, side B, count 459.
10. Ibid, 1:A:255.
11. Ibid, 2:A:210. Note: The rate rose to £1 or 30/- later, according to the interviewee.
12. Ibid, 1:A:280.
13. Ibid, 1:A:373.
14. Ibid, 3:B:229.
15. Ibid, 3:A:192.
16. Ibid, 3:B:524.
17. Ibid, 2:B:19.
18. Ibid, 2:B:131.
19. Ibid, 2:A:164.
20. Ibid, 2:A:106.
21. Interview with Mr.T., retired overhead crane driver, at New Lambton, 16th August, 1982. (untaped interview).
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Interview with Mr.A., retired production line worker, at New Lambton, 12th August, 1982, (untaped interview).
29. Ibid.
30. Phone interview with Mr. McCarthy, FIA Official, 10/8/82.
31. The Workers Case Against the B.H.P., issued by the Trades Hall Council in 1936, p.11.
32. Mr. A., op.cit.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Interview with Mr.H., retired ironworker, at Merewether, 18th August, 1982, (untaped).
37. Ibid.
38. H.Hughes, The Australian Iron and Steel Industry 1848-1962, Melbourne, 1964, p.95.
39. Trades Hall Council, op.cit., p.11.
40. Mr. H., op.cit.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.

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