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Economic change and changes in trade union membership: Peetz’s model of trade union growth applied to an earlier era of economic integration, two Australian colonies, 1860-1890

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies a modified form of Peetz’s (1998) change-response model of unionisation to provide an analytical account of trade union organisation in the late nineteenth century. This paper argues that the economic transformation between 1860 and 1890 created the conditions for a simultaneous expansion in union reach and propensity. By the late 1880s, the substantial transformation of Australian industry and labour market conditions had prompted the development of three distinct types of unionism. The purpose of this paper is to explain this process, using Peetz’s typology to structure the analysis.

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Setting aside the rhetoric about the nature and implications of globalisation, a central theme within the literature necessarily remains the relationship between economic restructuring and the transformation of domestic institutions. If globalisation has a meaning—this meaning relates to the implications of the increased participation of the global marketplace into domestic economic, social and political arrangements. This paper is concerned with the implications of economic development, on one variable of social and economic life: organised labour. In this study, using Peetz’s change-response model of trade union growth, we can see that economic development can act to create the conditions for trade union development, as well as the restructuring of industrial relations institutions more broadly.

This paper proposes an alternative account of the rapid expansion of the colonial labour movement between 1860 and the great strikes of the 1890s, locating this rapid growth as an epiphenomenon of the economic and social transformation resulting from the transformation of the colonial economy during this period. Using a version of Peetz’s change-response typology of trade union growth, the familiar story of the emergence of collective industrial relations will be presented in terms of the rapid increase in union reach and union propensity, as a consequence of far-reaching developments within economic structure and activity (Peetz 1998).

The account within this paper will not rely on new facts; instead, the argument will recast the findings of this substantial literature through a specific analytical framework. Rather than providing a historical account of the period, this paper provides a theoretical rereading of the evolution of trade unionism, relying on a deductive ‘abstract model-building-and-applying approach…[rather than]…an inductive [historical] approach to explanation,’ (Lloyd 1995, p. 71). While a historical inquiry may seek to locate the context of specific facts, events and processes, a theoretical inquiry:

attempts to construct general concepts about types of actions, events, processes and structures within a particular domain in terms of their interrelationships and causation. It does not attempt to explain every actual action, event or process, some of which may even be at variance with the theory’s general concepts’ (Lloyd 1987, p. 37).

Why is such an approach necessary? First, setting aside leading writers on the period, such as Markey, Frances, and Connell and Irving, the dominant tendency within the labour history literature on this period has typically presented increasing detailed aspects of the labour movement and its context (Frances 1993; Markey 1988b; Connell and Irving 1992). Despite the early promise of the new Left writers from the early 1970s, the literature has not substantially reconsidered this period through an explicitly analytical lens (Gordon 1970; McQueen 1970). While Wells’s Constructing Capitalism is a notable exception, what theoretical explanation exists tends to be applied at the micro or meso level of theoretical explanation, with little attempt to recast the evolution of organised labour history in the same way that Denoon, McMichael, White or Cochrane have re-presented Australian economic history (McMichael 1984; Denoon 1983; Wells 1989; Cochrane 1980; White 1992).

Secondly, at a more mundane level, although it is an accepted fact that Australian trade union membership expanded considerably in terms of absolute size, industry coverage and density throughout the late nineteenth century (Quinlan and Gardner 1994; Sutcliffe 1967 (1921)), the literature does not really provide a persuasive aggregated explanation of the reasons for labour movement growth in this period. While there are notable exceptions, such as Markey’s industry-by-industry account of the transformation of several New South Wales industries, Frances account of the clothing industry in Victoria and Macarthy’s arguments about the relationship between the skilled and unskilled labour markets (Markey 1988a; Frances 1993; Macarthy 1967), the typical account relies on a theory of trade union growth as a consequence of labour market scarcity,
economic growth and growing union assertiveness. While there are abundant studies of trade union growth at an industry and firm level, analytical macroscopic studies are in short supply. Key aspects of Fry’s authoritative story of the circumstances of working class life have largely gone been left ignored (Fry 1956).

Thirdly, setting aside the work of Macarthy and Markey, the substantial advances made by Australian economic history have largely been ignored by Australian explanations of the growth of the labour movement (Macarthy 1970; Markey 1985, 1988b). Butlin, Boehm and Sinclair, for example, have provided substantial factual and analytical insights for understanding the nature, character and form of trade union organisation and expansion in this period (Boehm 1971; Butlin 1964, 1962; Sinclair 1976). As this paper will briefly outline, the Australian economic structure underwent a substantial and fundamental restructuring during this period. In the wake of this restructuring, an increasingly formal, antagonistic set of relationships between management and labour emerged, leading to a crude, unstable form of collective industrial relations, within a statutory and ideational employment regulatory regime structured around the common law contract of employment, the master and servant principle and the prohibition against the restraint of trade.

This paper will use Peetz’s change response framework to structure an alternative account of the growth of the labour movement. Specifically, this paper uses Peetz’s concepts of union reach and propensity to re-interpret the secondary literature. It will be argued that the rapid economic development of the Long Boom prompted a fundamental restructuring of the economic, political, social and legislative context for trade unionism. This restructuring simultaneously acted to dissolve the previous constraints on trade union reach and propensity, and increase the likelihood of workers seeking union representation at the same time as increased capacity for union penetration into the workforce. Viewed through Peetz’s framework, the period between 1850 and 1890 can be understood as the movement from low union propensity and reach, towards relatively high propensity and reach, driven by economic restructuring with its social and political consequences (Table 1).

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<th>union reach</th>
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This paper will commence with an overview of relevant aspects of Peetz’s change-response model. The second section will sketch the main features of the economic transformation underlying creating the environment for an expansion of the labour movement, and the formation of a collective industrial relations. The third section will begin the substantive argument of this paper, highlighting the ways in which union propensity increased throughout the period, while the fourth section will outline the key means through which union reach expanded. Section five highlights the implications of the emergence of the new collective industrial relations.
1. Peetz’s change-response framework

Peetz’s *Unions in a Contrary World* suggests a framework that provides a coherent way of typologising the process of trade union growth in this period. In Peetz’s framework, union movement organisation can be typologised in terms of two main variables: *union reach*, the capacity of unions to access potential members; and *union propensity*, the willingness of individual employees to actually join and maintain union membership (pp. 11-24). Changes in the variables composing these variables will lead to an increase or decrease in unionisation. These variables have several sub-components.

Union propensity can be understood as having two different aspects. First, to what degree is an employee willing to join a union? This requires a measure of union *sympathy*. The second segment concerns the decision of the individual employee to continue their membership within the union. This, Peetz suggests, is a reflection of the *instrumental* value of union membership.

Union reach, in Peetz’s typology, is composed of four components. *Industry and labour market structure* – the size of workplaces, the competition between employers, employee hours of work, occupational status, skill levels and wage rates, for example—affect the capacity of a union to recruit, as well as the attitude taken by employers to union presence. *Employer strategy* towards union presence and employees, in addition to management’s approach to the work process can affect the capacity of a union to recruit and maintain membership. Thirdly, *union structure and strategy* shapes the capacity of a union to recruit and hold membership. Finally, Peetz points to the role of the *state and the broader environment* in shaping the context in which union reach is determined.

These variables are dynamic, interdependent and necessarily represent an ideal-typical simplification. Union reach tends, in the long-term, to be influenced by union propensity, and union propensity is likely to be influenced by union reach. Within the union reach variable, for example, changes in union strategy and structure, can prompt changes in employer strategy; changes in employer strategy can create the cause for increased union sympathy and instrumentality. The reverse process can also occur.

Further, these relationships are affected by other variables. Structural change—in the nature of industry composition or inter-employer competition, or changes in labour supply and skill levels, can significantly influence the reach and propensity of unionisation. Changes in prevailing attitudes—such as government attitudes to unionisation, typified in the *Workplace Relations Act*, or of sections of the community, such as the Papal Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, can significantly influence the context of union activity. Peetz also points to the perceptions of the capacity of unions to respond to changes in the environment faced by potential and existing employees.

Peetz’s framework will be modified in several ways. First, Peetz’s framework has been developed to explain the ebb and flow of unionisation rather than the processes involved with the initial formation of the labour movement, and the factors that enable union organisation to commence and develop in the first place (p.9). Second, Peetz’s definition of ‘union reach’ relies on a distinction between *open* and *closed* jobs, amenable or not to union recruitment. This paper will take a broader meaning for ‘union reach’ that relates to the legal and practical capacity for employees to join trade unions and participate in union activities.
The contention of this paper is that the institutional and cultural arrangements of trade unionism underwent significant transformation during the ‘Long Boom,’ moving from a low propensity, low union reach environment to a high union propensity, high reach environment. This process was the result of a combination of changes in industry structure, social dislocation and proletarianisation, the division of labour as well as legislative reform provided the environment for a significant increase in trade union membership, resulting in a simultaneous increase in union propensity grew sharply and the union reach (Table 1). This pattern of expansion was not homogenous across all sectors of the workforce; craft unionism struggled to consolidated its organisation, while semi-skilled unionism emerged as a result of new technology and the growing division of labour, and unskilled unionism emerged largely as a consequence of the expansion of the labour market and continued labour scarcity (Patmore 1991; Markey 1988a,b; Philipp 1953; Lee and Fahey 1986).

2. A sketch of the main features of the transforming colonial workplace

It will be seen in the following sections that the substantial growth in union propensity and reach occurred as a consequence of the social and economic changes deriving from Long Boom economic development. Between the goldrush of the 1850s and the late 1880s, output grew in both relative and absolute terms, not only increasing the scale of economic activity but substantially increasing the range of economic activity (Jackson 1977; Boehm 1971). This growth and restructuring was uneven across the economy, between and within industries and between the metropolitan and rural zones of the colony (Butlin 1964, pp. 207-8). This process is further complicated by the rationalisation of some industries over time; despite growing in size in terms of output and employment. In some industries, the actual number of firms and workplaces may actually have declined by the late 1880s from their ‘Long Boom’ peak, despite the substantial increase in output and total employment (Ville 1998, p. 30).

Of particular importance is the absolute growth in employment and output in this period. The ‘Long Boom’ economic transformation saw the average workplace increase in employment size, the establishment of new workplaces, across a greater number of industries. Gross domestic product grew at an average of 4.9% per annum between 1861 and 1891, with output per worker growing at 3.1% between 1861 and 1877, thereafter at 1.1% per annum, declining in the 1880s due to increased investment in speculative assets such as real estate and pastoral properties. Over the period, enterprise capitalisation increased although the extent of this growth varies significantly between and within geographical regions and industries (Linge 1979, Table 8.11). Over time, economic activity carried out by sole-proprietor and partnerships, was increasingly supplemented by private corporations and joint stock companies open to public subscription. The volume, and number, of stock market transactions and bank clearings significantly accelerated (Hall 1968, Tables 4, 9). This was accompanied by the general formalisation of firm management structure, away form small-scale owner-management, towards entrepreneur-based structures, particular in the clothing and construction industries, and in more capital intensive firms, towards a formal managerial structure with a formally separation of ownership and management (Linge 1979; Ville 1998, p. 18).

This expansion led to the restructuring of the workplace; creating circumstances favourable for the growth of organised labour. New workplaces were established and existing workplaces expanded in output and employment; the organisation of the production process became increasing complicated and sophisticated, with the emergence of new markets, product differentiation, the arrival of new entrants into product markets, the inflow of debt finance and technological change. All of these changes contributed to the breakdown in the Long Boom wage relation, and the emergence of a new wage relation based on collective industrial relations (Frazer 1990; Bongiorno 1996; Markey 1985).
The economic transformation of this period can be categorised in four main ways: the growing complexity of the economy due to large scale investment, the increase in production scale, output expansion through labour productivity improvement, and increased inter-employer competition. First, new industries and activities emerged in the wake of large-scale investment, either to provide the necessary materials and services unable to be imported, or to satisfy the emerging colonial consumption market. These new domestic enterprises had the effect of creating greater ‘depth’, ‘breadth’ and sophistication in economic and financial activities within the economy, as well as further integrating the various sectors of the economy, particularly through the development of the finance industry. The growth of new industries, and the increasing diversity within existing industries, added to the demand for labour, skilled and unskilled. Unskilled labour, in a labour market undergoing prolonged expansion and development of labour intensive industry, was already scarce, leading to the compression of skilled-unskilled pay relativities (Macarthy 1967, p. 67), although this effect did not extend to all industries (Lee and Fahey 1986). Skilled and semi-skilled labour, was also in high demand. This can be seen in the strategic position taken by locomotive drivers and engineers, and maritime engineers (Broomham 1991; Hearn 1990, pp?).

Secondly, the increase in output occurred in several ways. In many workplaces, particularly the smaller, less well established or inadequately capitalised workplaces, output was increased through an expansion in scale. Within this extensive approach several variants were employed: expansion through increased hours or work, enlarging productive capacity through adding new machinery and through sub-contracting. This can be seen in the clothing industry depicted by Fry, Frances and Ellem (Frances 1993; Fry 1956; Ellem 1989).

In the third case, some firms adopted an intensive approach to increasing output: productivity improvement through workplace restructuring. Some firms adopted new productive equipment, which provided more efficient ways of carrying out production. In some firms, management deliberately undertook the subdivision of the labour process to simultaneously reduce the reliance on skilled labour, to enable the employment of less skilled labour and to increase labour productivity, all resulting in the reduction in the per-unit cost of labour. Making use of fluctuations in the primary and secondary labour markets, some firms adopted a strategy based on utilising cheaper labour; necessitating the adoption of deskill work processes noted earlier. Other workplaces effected an increase in workplace productivity through the adoption of increasingly efficient management and supervision techniques, with resultant productivity implications. Over this period, previously ad hoc management practices were increased replaced by structured, formal employment arrangements.

The emergence of new firms, and the expansion of existing firms led to growing competitiveness within industries. Although the growth in real wages led to the growth in consumption capacity across the economy, the expansion in productive capacity in some industries outstripped the absorption capacity of the economy. Excess supply, particularly in under-capitalised industries unable to accommodate short and medium-term downturns, obliged employers in some industries to seek additional reductions in the cost of production (Lee and Fahey 1986).

By the mid-1880s, the limits to economic growth were becoming apparent. Reliant on borrowings from the London capital markets, leading sections of the economy—particularly in the pastoral sector, and in public works—had applied debt funds towards low-yielding, long-term capital improvements. By the late 1880s, these sectors adopted retrenchment strategies in order to meet debt repayments, beginning the economic contraction that culminated with the depression of the 1890s. Despite the rapid growth of the colony economy, the majority of employers were under-capitalised, and reliant either on the continued inflow of borrowings or the economic activity resulting from the capital investment in other sectors, enabled by the capital inflows. The
expansion of industry had seen the entry of new producers into the marketplace, adding to product market competition, asset price inflation and declining revenues. As will be discussed later in this paper, this growing difficulty prompted a renewed wave of productive re-organisation, as employers sought new cost efficiencies (Beever and Freeman 1967; Boehm 1971).

3. Increasing union propensity

The economic restructuring outlined in the previous section had immediate consequences for the colonial employment relationship. Using Peetz’s notion of union propensity, we can see the likelihood of an employee unionising in this period grew substantially for a range of reasons. This can be seen primarily in terms of the rapid evolution of union sympathy—a key determinant in the decision to join a union - and to a lesser degree in the maintenance of union instrumentality. This account in this paper will emphasise the growth in union sympathy.

The growth in union sympathy occurred in several ways. Firstly, the general conditions of economic prosperity provided the circumstances for key occupational groups to win and maintain improved wages and conditions. Chronic labour shortages enabled some groups of workers located in leading industries such as shearing, transportation and construction, through collective bargaining or through the imposition of union rules, to achieve improved wages and conditions. This can be seen in the attainment of the eight hour day in some industries and in the compression of the relativities between skilled and unskilled labourers. This feature of the period has attracted substantial attention within the literature, emphasising the conditions faced by leading segments of the workforce (Spence 1909; Sutcliffe 1967 (1921); Buckley 1970; Gollan 1960; Gollan 1963), with limited recognition of the insecurity and poverty of the majority of the remaining workforce (Fry 1956; Lee and Fahey 1986). Successful union activity enabled further union activity; spreading across workplaces and industries and across occupational groups, as other groups of employees adopted similar tactics to improve their circumstances. Assisted by the general optimism of the times, particularly the construction boom, and the speculative crazes in the pastoral and real estate industry, employees in leading industries were confident of the ability of their employers to withstand their claims. In this environment, unionism in some industries expanded.

Secondly, as noted earlier, a feature of the 1880s was the rapid expansion in the size and scope of the workplace, the growing complexity of the production process, the growing dependence on financiers, and increasing product market competition (Linge 1979, pp?; Jackson 1977). Increasing competition necessitated the adoption of labour process changes aimed at work intensification through deskilling of craft activities, the sub-division of the production process, the adoption of core-peripheral labour hiring practices. The adoption and expansion of new technologies of production created new categories of workers, and changed the work process, as new skills became increasingly valued within workplaces, and other skills lost their importance. This prompted two additional types of unionisation: unionisation as an attempt to consolidate the position of an newly emerged occupational group and unionisation as a defensive strategy adopted by established occupational groups to withstand the erosion of their position within the labour process.

This can be seen in the inter-coastal shipping industry after 1870, when engine-driven vessels replaced wind-powered shipping. The new ships required maritime engineers, with specialist skills, to provide the locomotive power. Although this activity was central to the operation of a ship, the importance of these skills was hesitantly organised by ship owners. For the engineers unionisation became a mechanism to articulate and collectively advance their demands. For the ship officers, however, the advent of steam power undermined the skills acquired during the age of wind-powered shipping. The growing competitiveness of the inter-coastal colonial trade saw
shipping employers seek further reductions in staffing levels, putting pressure on the increasingly superfluous shipping officers. As a consequence, technological and industry change saw the shipping officers unionise to protect their position (Broomham 1991; Fisher 1981). Churchward notes a similar process, in the Victorian tramways in the 1880s (Churchward 1982).

A similar process can be seen in the Victorian clothing industry, where process sub-division and outsourcing undermined the bargaining position of the tailors, and later, the seamstresses. Facing work intensification and cuts in wage rates, the tailors formed an association which sought to use liberal protectionist parliamentary influence to withstand employer encroachment, this association gradually taken on union responsibilities by the end of the 1880s. By 1882, however, the seamstresses had formed the first female union in the Australasian colonies, and had participated in a dispute which saw the first inter-union co-ordination by the Melbourne Trades Hall Council (Frances 1993, ch. 1; Brooks 1983).

Thirdly, the ideological constraints to unionism gradually weakened throughout this period. This occurred in several inter-related ways. The expansion of the workplace and the adoption of increasingly structured work processes saw informal workplace arrangements replaced by increasingly formal and structured relationships. As workplaces grew in size, and as producers faced increasing competition from other employers, on one side, and financiers, on the other, more formalised structures of workplace management were adopted. The adoption of more efficient organisational and supervisory approaches acted to replace informal arrangements between employer and the employed with more structured, hierarchical relationships. Merritt provides an interesting study of this phenomena in the shearing industry (Merritt 1986, pp. 76-89).

The formalising work relationship also acted to dissolve longstanding social assumptions. During the 1860s and 1870s, the rapid expansion of secondary industry, the ease of entry into self-employment saw a relative ease of movement from the ranks of the employed to the employing. The wage labourer, with luck and effort, could quickly become a master themselves. This belief, assisted the maintenance of a culture of workplace interdependence, assisted and reinforced by direct communication between the employer and the employed. In the trades the small size of the workplace, the regular interaction between the tradesman and other members of the craft had acted to disguise the objective employment relationship, enabling a relationship between brothers-in-trade. As organisations became larger and management structures became more structured, these older social structures were replaced by more formalised relationships. This process was not confined to craft occupations, as over time increasing numbers of occupational classifications were subject to formalisation of the employment relationship, restructuring of work tasks, deskilling and out-sourcing (Fahey 1981).

Over time, pre-existing relationships predisposing the parties to amicable workplace relationships were replaced by more calculated relationships shaped by different logics from the employer and the employee. Driven by competitive and financial pressure, employers were obliged to adopt more formal, efficiency driven approaches to workplace management. At the same time, the growing cynicism within sections of the workforce, coupled with the erosion of the previous workplace loyalties, added to the propensity of employees to continue organising collectively against their employers. (Frances 1993, ch. 1) provides a nuanced account of this process within the clothing trades in the 1880s.

The growing antagonism between employers and the employed was not just a phenomenon of the cities. A feature of Australian development until the early 1880s was the prevalence of a widely-held theory of social mobility. Australia, it had been understood, was a land where the determined and hard-working could quickly become a landholder or employer, within the space of a few
years. By the early 1880s, the failure of the selection legislation had become obvious. The squatters retained control of the best land, and over time, defeated small holders sold up and moved back into the cities to a life of wage labour; or grudgingly continued to work their selections, joining the pastoral workforce during the shearing season. These defeated smallholders later proved, in different ways, to be recruits for the emerging labour movement. Rickard develops this theme more broadly, arguing that the period marks the clear onset of class awareness.

Elsewhere, the tenor of working class thought was increasingly critical of the existing structure of society. This theme has been thoroughly explored by writers such as Gollan, Scates, Palmer and Serle (Palmer 1954; Serle 1973; Gollan 1965; Scates 1986).

Thus, compared to 1860, union propensity had significantly increased, largely as a consequence of the process of economic development creating new areas of labour market advantage, eroding the labour advantage of others, and eroding pre-industrial social relationships. The typical worker, in the late 1880s, was more likely to join a union than in 1860s, for a variety of context specific reasons.

4. The expansion in union reach
The Long Boom period also saw an expansion in union ‘reach’ in several ways. First, the trade union legislation of the 1880s saw a firmer legal position for Australian trade unionism. Secondly, substantial public sector investment in transportation and communication substantially improved the ease of movement of trade union organisation and co-ordinated activity throughout the colonies. Thirdly, workplace and industry expansion, coupled within increased mobility simplified workplace organisation. Fourthly, as the membership of trade unions expanded, exerting broader influence across their responsive industries, the response by employers to form collective organisation assisted the growth of trade unionism.

The partial adoption of British trade union law of the 1870s in Victoria and New South Wales by the mid-1880s acted to increase the capacity of ‘unions’ to organise. This occurred in several ways. First, the pre-1880 legislative framework for trade unionism encouraged ad hoc, secretive rules and procedures for internal management. One consequence of this was the mythology of the trade union as a ‘secret society’, among some groups of potential members, as well as among employers. These theme, not prominent in the secondary literature, was clearly an issue in debates between 1881 and 1886, as the New South Wales and Victorian parliaments debates proposals to amend the various Trades Unions Acts.

Secondly, the technical legislative prohibition on collective activity placed some limits on overt union activity. Until the Trades Union Acts were passed, the activities of colonial trade unions were still largely regulated by the British provisions established in 1825. The majority of trade union activity could be brought under the 1825 provisions, in addition to codifying the common law remedies against restraint of trade, also prohibited actions, which:

by violence, or threats, or molesting, or other form of obstruction, prevented a workman from working, or compelled him to join a union, or to make payments to one, or compelled an employer to carry on his business in a certain way. (Portus 1958, p. 3).

Although the Trades Union Acts of the 1880s increased the range of activities of trade unions, a fundamental problems remained; there was no legislative recognition of collective agreements reached between trade unions and employers, unless specifically imported into the contract between employer and employee (Frazer 1990, pp. 30-31).
Finally, the registration legislation gave union memberships the ability to more strongly protect and control the assets held by the union. The support of the Victorian trade union leadership for the 1886 legislation, and its predecessor bills, was based on the need to provide a perpetual legal existence to a union, able to sue defaulting officials and members in areas, enter into contracts, and own real estate. Previously, the technical illegality of trade unionism prevented union members from prosecuting corrupt trade union officials, or suing union members in default of their membership obligations.

The trade union legislation went some way to formalising union structure, providing public legitimacy for trade union activity and clarifying union rules, enabling trade unions to be more effective in winning and holding membership.

Secondly, the expansion in workplace size and the growth in industries saw growing economies of scale for union recruiters. The growth in unionisation was made more likely as a response to the growth in size in some workplaces. As Barrett and Buttigeig have argued, the size of the workplace is generally associated with a higher predisposition to unionisation. This predisposition cannot be directly attributed to the increase in size, per se, rather, the increase tends towards changing the social relations of work, underpinning the informal and ameliorative voice mechanisms between employer and employee. As management structures changed towards increased distance between the employer and the employed, as the work process became increasingly formalised and, segmented, deskill and reliant on a peripheral workforce, the conditions were created for increased unionisation (Bain 1970; Coolican 1989).

Thirdly, as Butlin has demonstrated, a key area of public sector capital formation during this period was the construction of railways, roads and telecommunications. At the same time, the expansion in the school system, increased levels of literacy and the growth in newspapers. A consequence of this was the relatively rapid spread of trade union awareness throughout the colonies, by increasingly mobile workers and union organisers. Trade unionism, in addition to deepening its regional penetration also expanded across regions and colonies, and between colonies.

The expansion in union reach and the expansion in union propensity created the opportunities for unionisation to significantly increase. As specific occupational groups became to organise, the increased mobility of employees and the conditions of relative scarcity of unskilled labour, enabled union-awareness to be easily disseminated across industries and between industries. Adjoining occupational groups would emulate the tactics of unionised groups, and begin to organise, assisted by the peak trade union bodies (Markey 1994, p. 16).

The growth in size of occupational groups due to the expansion of industry added to the possibility of the emergence of ‘occupational communities,’ of groups of workers bound together with similar assumptions about the structure of society, and most importantly, the relationship to employers (Kerr and Siegel 1954; Williams 1986). Rickard provides a similar argument, but at the societal level, in his influential account of the formation of class society during the 1890s (Rickard 1976, pp. 1-2).

Some of these occupational groups pre-existed the 1880s, having their roots in the traditions and cultural norms of the English craft system, such as the engineers and the other metal trades, seamen, printers, boot-making and tailoring, and in the building trades. The 1880s, prompted the formation of new occupational groups, or the expansion and consolidation of new groups, amenable to the growing reach of trade unionism. The most obvious examples can be seen in the rapid formation of occupational communities outside the metropolitan areas (Tureen 1997). This
can be seen in the pastoral industry, with the expansion of a skilled, elite shearing workforce providing a needed service in conditions of time constraint and labour shortage. Similarly, the coal miners quickly formed a coherent occupational community. These groups, in keeping with Kerr and Siegel’s argument, remained separate from mainstream society, and developing a particular set of cultural norms and assumptions. This can be seen in Spence’s accounts of the shearing union, in Walker’s description of the Jondaryan pastoral station and in Gollan’s depiction of life in the mining communities of the new South Wales Hunter Valley (Gollan 1963, ch. 1; Walker 1988, ch. 3-4; Merritt 1986, ch. 2; Spence 1909).

In urban areas, the formation of occupational communities had been underway for some time, initially through the craft unions, and later, through the mutual societies (Green and Cromwell 1984). These friendly societies formed the formal infrastructure for encouraging ‘uplift’ unionism, which played three roles in colonial society (Broomham 1991, pp. 15, 17; Hagan 1966, pp. 287-288). These friendly societies provided opportunities for self-improvement and mutual protection. Secondly, these societies were the primary location for the discussion and dissemination of the ferment in popular thinking (Scates 1997). Providing inexpensive access to books, reading rooms, and public lectures, ‘new ideas’ could be heard and ventilated (Lyons and Taksa 1992; Merrifield 1962; Wood 1962; Zainu’ddin 1967). Thirdly, these societies occasionally formed the nucleus for the formation of trade unions (Hearn 1990; Hearn and Knowles 1996; Merritt 1986; Wyner 1983; Bowden 1993; Broomham 1991; Buckley 1970; Churchward 1982; Coolican 1988; Donovan 1972; Fahey 1993; Fitzpatrick and Cahill 1981; Sullivan and Sullivan 1983; Svensen 1989; Walker 1988).

5. the onset of collective industrial relations.

The expansion of organised labour, and the onset of economic difficulties saw the emergence of employer associations, and the adoption of more determined and co-ordinate managerial activities between employers (Mathews 1971; Pigg 1971; Hall 1971). Prompted by the growing militancy of craft workers and occupational groups, and by the late 1880s, by the rise of relatively unskilled ‘new unionism’ unions, industry employers began to meet to discuss collective responses to their labour difficulties.

In some cases, these new collective organisations sought to establish collective bargaining and dispute resolution arrangements within the industry. In the Victorian clothing industry, employers and the various unions established an industry wide log of wage rates by 1885; while the Hunter Valley coal owners used collective organisation as a means of stabilising coal prices, as well as labour costs. The New South Wales metropolitan building employers keenly encouraged the use of a conciliation committee to set pay rates across the industry.

These industry associations were typically short-lived. In the pastoral industry, the embryonic collective bargaining arrangements were quickly frustrated by a small number of more militant employers; while the collective arrangements in the Victorian clothing industry were quickly frustrated by a number of smaller employers. Similarly, in the coal fields and the New South Wales building industry, the collective agreements carefully reached between the unions and the employer associations were effectively scuttled by individual employers seeking short-term cost advantages, prompting other employers to follow.

Attempts to establish industry-wide collective bargaining were typically unsuccessful, but provided a further spur to trade union organisation. As employers sought to increasing organise the workplace, adopting industry-wide strategies, these co-ordinated actions prompted increased co-operation by union members workplace across industries. As a result, organised labour
increased its coverage within occupational and craft groups, expanded in coverage across industries, and soon developed colony-wide and inter-colonial federations.

6. The argument in conclusion.
While this paper has not presented any new facts about the nature of the growth of trade unionism in the late nineteenth century, it has presented an alternative perspective to understanding this period. Using a form of Peetz’s change-response model, the rapid expansion of the trade union movement can be seen in terms of two broad analytical categories. First, we can see the consequences of the economic restructuring developed a substantial increase in union propensity. This paper, merely a sketch, has emphasised the more important of the two components of union propensity, union sympathy, rather than union instrumentality. The paper has demonstrated how labour market shortage increased the effectiveness of trade union organisation; the transformation of the production process created two distinct types of trade union organisation – an ambitious and aggressive type aimed at improving conditions for their occupational group, as well as a defensive unionism, using collective action to fend off deskilling employers and predatory occupational groups. In the third and fourth cases, we can see the rise in union propensity, as a consequence of the increasingly impersonal workplace relationship, and with the erosion of the mythology of colonial egalitarianism.

Similarly, union reach expanded considerably during this period. The various trade union reform acts, although not widely used in this period, provided a firmer legal basis for trade union organisation for those unions registered under the acts. The expansion in workplace size and the proliferation of industries, made trade union organisation easier, as did the rapid development of transport and communication throughout the colonies.
References


