

Australian Unions: An Industrial Relations Perspective edited by Bill Ford and David Plowman

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Large, edited books of readings are not dissimilar to parties: some guests (contributors) are invited out of politeness, some are new, and as yet unknown, neighbours, some it is polite to invite, while others are tried-and-true performers, the heart-and-soul of the party. The mixture may or may not combine well. In the present case the hosts (editors) can be fairly satisfied with the outcome: despite a number of blemishes, *Australian Unions* (the editors refuse to use the more common term of 'trade unions', regarding it as an anachronism) is a welcome addition to the literature on an important institution in our society.

The readings are organised under six headings: Historical Context and Perspective, Organisation and Practice, Freedom and Control, Co-operation and Conflict, Issues and Policies, and Future Context and Perspective. In addition, the editors have written an epilogue titled 'Australian unions: audit and prospect', a statistical appendix and an extensive bibliography on Australian trade unions. In total, there are 29 'readings'. However, ten of these readings are reproductions, without any commentary, of a wide range of Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) policies, while the first 'reading', by the editors, largely summarises the other readings. The decision to include ACTU policies is both innovative and useful. There is some danger, however, that the uninitiated may interpret these policies as being the policies of all unions, which, of course, is far from true. To take just one example, the largest affiliate of the ACTU, the Metal Workers, have a substantially different policy on industrial democracy from that of the ACTU.

Section I, Historical Context and Perspective, contains just one reading: a review of union history between 1850 and 1980 by Jim Hagan. It is unfair to ask any author to encapsulate 130 years of union history in less than 30 pages of text. Inevitably, only the highest of the high spots can be touched on. I would question the decision to include such a necessarily brief sketch of union history in such a book.

Section II, Organisation and Practice, presents readings on union aims and methods, shop-floor organisation, a profile of white-collar union officials, a largely statistical piece on unions in New South Wales and a comparative paper on decision-making within two unions, the Metal Workers and the Building Workers. With the exception of the well argued aims and methods paper, these readings report new empirical research. The paper by Frenkel and Coolican on decision-making is an early report of some very interesting comparative research. Malcolm Rimmer's paper on union shop-floor organisation, although historical, is a good contribution to a very sparse literature on shop-floor unionism.

The two readings in Section III, Freedom and Control, cover state-controlled union ballots and the closed shop — two areas which receive more than their share of attention from both friends and enemies of the trade union movement. Don Rawson's paper on union ballots analyses in

detail the impact of the increasing trend towards the use of the Australian Electoral Office to conduct union elections. The extent and coverage of the closed shop and a discussion on preference under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act are the main themes of Michael Wright's article.

Section IV, Co-operation and Conflict, is something of a mixed bag. Of the three readings, only Ken Wright's paper on demarcation disputes is of contemporary relevance. A previously published paper on the Victorian Trades Hall Council split of 1967-1973 and a reading titled 'The ACTU's authority 1927-1957' complete the section. This last reading, an exceptionally well footnoted piece, would have been better suited to a journal such as *Labour History* than to this particular book.

Section V is a catch-all issues and policies section. Three readings cover the relationship between unions and women workers, immigrants and the media, and the remaining two analyse wages and incomes policies. The issues readings are largely breaking new ground in industrial relations research in Australia and, hopefully, the authors will continue to research and publish in these areas. The article on incomes policies covers the expected areas of discussion; that on wages policies introduces some useful ideas which warranted further exploration.

Section VI, Future Context and Perspective, relies solely on a paper by Bill Ford titled 'Unions and the changing environment'. This reading canvasses a range of issues and trends which could affect the trade union movement. Finally, the editors combine to produce a ten-page epilogue full of ideas for future research on trade unions. This should prove a little gold mine for postgraduate students seeking research topics.

Inevitably, the quality of the readings is far from uniform. The combined difficulty of soliciting contributions — 15 of the 18 readings have not previously been published — and working to a deadline means that tardy authors often submit contributions which could and should have been of a higher standard. At least two of the readings are more at the working paper stage than the publication stage. Overall, however, the breadth of coverage, the previously unpublished status of most of the readings, and the choice of topics compensate for the few contributions below standard.

So much for what is in the book. The editors have committed one substantial sin of omission: not one theoretical reading has been included in the volume. Given the state of the art, a current book of readings should contain more than fact-gathering and interpretation articles. At least one 'theory' reading should have been commissioned; if such an article was not possible in the time available, a satisfactory fallback would have been the inclusion of some recent publication on union theory, such as W.A. Howard, 'Australian trade unions in the context of union theory' (*Journal of Industrial Relations*, 19, 1977, pp. 255-73). Certainly, the lack of theoretical content detracts from what is otherwise a very useful book of readings and one which should find a ready market in both the practitioner and the academic community.

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