‘Twenty Years of Schooling and They Put You on the Day Shift’:

The Australian Working Class in the 1990s

by

Diane Fieldes

July 1995

School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour
The University of New South Wales
Sydney 2052 Australia
Introduction

In one sense, the existence of the Australian working class seems too obvious to question. Trade unions, workers’ key defensive organisations, encompass over 2.3 million people and of these, 50,000 represent their fellow unionists as delegates. A more attenuated but still important organisational connection exists between the mass of workers and the Labor Party, through union affiliation to the ALP, membership and voting patterns.

Yet while these facts might be uncontested, analysis of them is not. Conventional sociology has long spoken in terms of interest groups or social stratification rather than Marxist class analysis, and the past two decades have seen a shift even amongst radical theorists away from seeing the struggle between capital and labour as central to social change.²

This paper offers a systematic overview of the working class, refutes common arguments about its supposed disappearance or irrelevance, and seeks to demonstrate the power of Marxist analysis in explaining its role and behaviour. We understand the working class as those who do not own or control the means of production, who must therefore sell to employers their ability to work, and who exercise no substantial degree

---

¹ Until 1995, the Australian Bureau of Statistics published two sets of statistics relating to union membership levels. ABS Cat. No. 6323.0, *Trade Union Statistics, Australia*, is compiled from the unions’ own membership lists. As there is no way to distinguish employees who are members of more than one union, it contains some amount of double counting. The other series, ABS Product No. 6325.0.40.001, *Trade Union Members Australia*, is the outcome of the Bureau’s labour force survey. It consistently produces lower figures for union membership, possibly due to sampling errors and also understatement of union membership (by workers in closed shop arrangements, for example). The actual level of union membership is probably somewhere between the two sets of figures. Throughout the lower set of figures has been used, first because these are more frequently used in discussion of union membership, and secondly, to base our arguments about the continuing relevance of class analysis on the more conservative data rather than data which might be seen as intrinsically more favourable to our case.

of control over their own labour or the labour of others. However, because their labour creates wealth, workers have the power to stop production through collective action.

Narrower definitions are inadequate. For example, attempts to confine the class to blue collar manual workers lead to unsustainable distinctions. White collar workers cannot be distinguished from their blue collar counterparts by their wage levels (which are, in fact, often lower) by their conditions of work (just as likely to be routinised or involve shiftwork), union membership (some white collar areas are now more highly unionised than the average) nor by ownership or control of the means of production – from which they too are excluded. Don Aitken’s extreme requirement that to be a member of the working class one must be an early school leaver, a trade union member, and live in rented accommodation is even less relevant to today’s realities.

While a series of important divisions exists inside the working class, fears that this will paralyse its ability to change society are also misplaced. The common experiences of working class life and struggle provide the means to break down these divisions. The collective activity that involves hundreds of thousands of Australian workers – strike action – shows that class conflict over production remains a key feature of Australian society.

What is the working class?
The labour force in December 1994 was 8,963,800, having almost doubled in thirty years. This includes employed persons and those available for work. Approximately 40% had post-school qualifications, and 31% (compared with 11.6% in 1979) had

---

4 A variant of this is the method adopted by Poulantzas in Classes in contemporary capitalism, where only directly productive workers are included in the working class.
6 Laclau, 1979; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985
attended the highest level of secondary schooling. In 1994 over 42% of the labour force was female. Approximately half were aged between 25 and 44 years.\textsuperscript{7}

To determine the size of the working class within this total labour force we must consider some additional facts. The 1991 census indicated that wage and salary earners made up 81.7% of the workforce, with the remainder being employers, self-employed and unpaid helpers.\textsuperscript{8}

The category ‘wage and salary earners’ still includes people who are not part of the working class. We can use the occupational breakdown provided by the 1991 census to remove managers, administrators and professionals apart from teachers. This leaves us with a figure of 5,647,741 (65.1\% of the labour force) when applied to the 1994 labour force figures. However this figure understates the size of the working class, since there are undoubtedly others besides teachers in the ‘employed professional’ category (such as resident medical officers in hospitals), who are really skilled white collar workers. In addition, the ‘self-employed’ include people in industries such as clothing and construction, as well as electronic outwork, who may formally be independent contractors, but whose actual position is similar to that of wage earners.

Another possible measure is potential trade union membership, which was 6,525,800 in August 1994.\textsuperscript{9} Since this includes some white collar employees in managerial positions, it’s a bit too large. But taking all the measures together we can suggest that the employed working class numbers around six million. To get the full picture we would have to include retirees, discouraged job seekers, persons working in

\textsuperscript{7} ABS 6.22, \emph{The Labour Force (Historical Supplement) 1964-69}; ABS 6235.0, \emph{The Labour Force Educational Attainment, 1979-1994}; ABS 6203.0, \emph{The Labour Force Australia, August 1994}
\textsuperscript{8} ABS 2710.0, \emph{Census Characteristics of Australia 1991 Census}
\textsuperscript{9} ABS 6325.0.40.001, \emph{Trade Union Members Australia, August 1994}. 
the home, and dependents, which would roughly double the total to around 12 million.\textsuperscript{10} On any reckoning, the working class is a big majority of the population.

However numbers alone do not establish its collective identity or capacity for collective struggle. These are key issues in debating the usefulness of class analysis. Those who accept the existence of a large wage-labour force but doubt its ability to form a collective identity or wage a common struggle argue that whatever the objective class situation of workers, other differences are more important in determining their interests and actions.\textsuperscript{11} We must therefore analyse the differentiation that does exist, and then consider what factors enable workers to transcend it.

We can’t define the working class in terms of any particular occupations, such as factory workers, because work is continually changing. In Marx’s time the largest single group of employees in Britain was domestic servants.\textsuperscript{12} When the first Australian census was taken in 1911, labourers and miners made up a quarter of the workforce. Yet by the 1991 census only one worker in eight was engaged in these occupations, while the proportion of clerical workers had more than quadrupled.\textsuperscript{13}

The industrial and occupational characteristics of Australia’s working class have changed substantially in the past three decades. One of the most important changes is the decline of manufacturing, which in 1966 accounted for 26.2\% of employment. By 1994 this had fallen to 14.0\%.\textsuperscript{14} As an employer of labour, manufacturing was overtaken by wholesale and retail trade in the late 1970s, and by community services in the mid-

\textsuperscript{10} Data on the various categories are available in ABS 6203.0, \textit{The Labour Force Australia} and ABS 4420.0, \textit{Focus on families: demographics and family formation}.
\textsuperscript{11} For example, Laclau, E. \textit{Politics and ideology in Marxist theory: capitalism, fascism, populism} Verso, London 1979; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985.
\textsuperscript{12} Callinicos, A. \textit{Making history} Polity, Cambridge 1989 p 188.
\textsuperscript{13} ABS 2710.0; Broom, L. and Jones, F.L. \textit{Opportunity and attainment in Australia} ANU Press, Canberra 1976 p 35-36
\textsuperscript{14} ABS 6203.0; Norris, K. \textit{The economics of Australian labour markets} Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1993 p 10
1980s.\textsuperscript{15} In the thirty years to 1994, construction, transport and storage sectors also declined as employers of labour. On the other hand, employment in community services and the finance, property and business services sector almost doubled in this period, and significant growth also occurred in public administration and recreation, personal and other services.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} ABS 4113.0, \textit{Women in Australia}, March 1993
\textsuperscript{16} Norris, p 10
\end{flushright}
Table 1: Industries: % shares of employment\textsuperscript{17}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>1966</th>
<th>1994</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, gas, water</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and retail trade</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, storage and communication</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance, property and business services</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and defence</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community services</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation, personal and other services</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As large companies have replaced family firms and the public service has expanded, new strata of managers and white collar workers have emerged; purchasing, marketing, accounting and administration have expanded to employ a virtual army of white collar workers.\textsuperscript{18} This explains the key change in occupational structure: the growth of white collar service employees. The 1991 census showed almost half of the workforce employed as salespersons, insurance clerks, bank tellers, and other personal service workers; as professionals and para-professionals (such as teachers, nurses, social workers and technical officers) and as clerks. The traditional ‘working class’ jobs such

\textsuperscript{17} Sources: Norris, p 10; calculations from ABS 6203.0, \textit{The Labour Force Australia}, February 1994

\textsuperscript{18} Braverman, H. \textit{Labor and monopoly capitalism} Monthly Review Press, New York 1974 p 293-301
as driver, plant and machine operator, labourer and tradesperson which made up over half of the workforce in 1947, are now less than a third.\textsuperscript{19}

This doesn’t mean all white collar employees are in the working class. Eric Olin Wright distinguishes three class positions: salaried members of the bourgeoisie, workers, and people in ‘contradictory class locations’.\textsuperscript{20} The key factor determining whether white collar employees belong to the working class is their status as wage earners who do not control the use of their own labour or the labour of others.\textsuperscript{21} Using this categorisation, however, it is clear that the \textit{bulk} of white collar workers are part of the working class. One (imperfect) indicator is the wage differential between managerial and administrative occupations on the one hand, and clerical and sales workers on the other. In 1993 full-time managers and administrators received $761.70 weekly gross pay, while clerical and sales employees only earned $507.90.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus the recent changes in the structure of the workforce do not demonstrate a decline in the working class but rather its recomposition. This flows from the reorganisation of industry, which in turn flows from capitalist competition and capital accumulation. Thus competitive pressures may compel the introduction of new technology, for example in mining which was once highly labour intensive. High-tech industries need educated labour, which in turn generates a requirement for mass education and therefore more teachers.

Most workers are employed in relatively large enterprises. In 1989-90 the largest 1\% of workplaces (those with over 500 employees) employed 24\% of the workforce,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} ABS 2710.0; Scott, A, \textit{Fading loyalties: the ALP and the working class} Pluto, Sydney 1991 p 12
\item \textsuperscript{20} Wright, E.O. \textit{Class, crisis and the state} NLB, London 1978; Wright, ‘Intellectuals …’ 1979
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid 1979, p 194
\item \textsuperscript{22} ABS 6306.0, \textit{Distribution and composition of employee earnings and hours - Australia}, 1975-1993
\end{itemize}
and a majority were in workplaces of at least 100 employees. This is significant because concentration is an important determinant of organisational strength: strikes in large enterprises have a greater impact on the economic system as a whole, which in turn affects worker confidence.

More women joined the paid workforce in the three decades to 1994 than ever before. As the demand for labour grew, their proportion of the workforce grew from 28.1% in 1964 to 42.5% in 1994. Many of these were full-time jobs (in 1994 women were one-third of the full-time workforce as against one quarter in 1964). Since 1988 a majority of adult women has been in the paid labour force.

An even more significant shift occurred amongst married women in this period. Between 1966 and 1992 married women’s participation rate (the proportion available for paid work) increased from 29 to 53%, while that for unmarried women fluctuated around 50%. In the same period the male participation rate declined from 84 to 74%. The highest female rates in 1992 were for married women without children, aged 15-34, and single women aged 15-24 years old, reflecting the influence of childrearing on their ability to engage in paid employment. An increasing number, however, were returning to the workforce after the early years of childrearing.

In the first post-war decades the largest sectors of employment, such as manufacturing, transport and storage, were dominated by full-time males. Since the mid-sixties there has been a boom in part-time employment, primarily involving women. Between 1966 and 1994, part-time work overall almost quadrupled to about one-quarter of the workforce. Some of this is explained by more women joining the

---

24 ABS 6.22; ABS 6203.0; Scott, p 12
25 ABS 4113.0
paid workforce, many of them restricted to part-time hours because child care is inadequate or unavailable. Some is also due to employers seeking lower costs and flexibility of hours in conditions of economic uncertainty.

Another substantial change in the composition of the Australian working class is the growing impact of immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, due initially to employer demands for extra labour to meet the needs of the post-war boom. By 1994 one-quarter of the workforce was born outside Australia, and two-thirds of these came from non-English-speaking countries.26

The recession of the early 1990s exacerbated the tendency towards a high incidence of unemployment amongst recent migrants, with more than 63% of those who arrived from Vietnam in 1991-92, 67% of those from Lebanon, and 58.8% of those from Turkey being classified as long term jobless over two years later.27 Aboriginal workers, however, remain the most dispossessed. They are concentrated in rural jobs, but since the 1970s a growing number have been employed in clerical and other office work.28 Involvement in the paid labour force is lower for Aboriginal people than the rest of the population, reflecting their oppression and marginalisation in Australian society.

**Working class experiences**

Clearly the working class is not homogeneous. Women, Aboriginal and migrant workers are generally lower paid, unemployment falls disproportionately on Aborigines and recent migrants, and there are considerable income differentials within and amongst other groups. Plant and machine operators and drivers averaged $634 per week in 1993

---

26 ABS 6203.0; Lever-Tracy, C. and Quinlan, M. *A divided working class?* RKP, London 1988 p 2
28 O’Lincoln, T. *Years of rage: social conflicts in the Fraser era* Bookmarks, Melbourne 1993 p 7-8
for example, while salespersons and personal service workers averaged $499. Some work full-time, others part-time. National, racial and gender prejudices also create rifts between workers. Other antagonisms, such as homophobia, also play a part. These differences do not, however, make it impossible for workers to unite, for there are also important factors pushing them towards unity.

By bringing together workers from different backgrounds into the cities and large-scale industry, capital itself imposes common life and work experiences on the bulk of the population. The work experience itself, whether it is an assembly line or a small team in a public service office, organises them and teaches them co-operation. Despite a degree of occupational and sectoral segregation, women work alongside men in the workplace, non-English-speaking background migrants work with the Australian-born, part-timers work with full-time workers, older workers with younger. In other words, a common experience of work bridges these divisions, and can lay the basis for undermining them. The convergence of the working conditions of blue and white collar workers in the recent past is evidence of this. White collar workers in the Department of Social Security or Woolworths share with blue collar workers the routinised and fragmented nature of their jobs, and lack of control over their work. For example, in August 1993 14% of employees did shift work. This was most prevalent amongst para-professionals (22%) and labourers and related workers (21%) while at the industry level, shift work was most common in community services (33%) and manufacturing

---

29 ABS 6306.0

30 Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988) provide useful evidence regarding NESB workers by looking at Ford Broadmeadows from 1974 to 1981. The proportion of different nationalities changes over time, but there is always a mixture of NESB and ESB, the latter forming 22.7% of the workforce in 1974 and 20.2% in 1981 (p 240). AWIRS indicated that while the percentage of part-time workers varies considerably by industry, two-thirds of workplaces employed one or more part-time workers alongside their full-time staff (Callus et al, p 31).

31 Braverman, 1974; Willis, 1988
Given the significant impact of shift work on quality of life, this is an important similarity. The spread of Repetition Strain Injury shows how the common experience extends even to physical work stresses.\(^{33}\)

The existence of a distinct working class is also evident in a range of cultural patterns and social networks, though the fact is sometimes obscured by a tendency for workers to describe themselves as ‘middle class’.

This is partly because conventional wisdom tells them we’re all middle class, and partly because it is seen as more prestigious. As Sol Encel put it, the term middle class is status-loaded. ‘A working man who is well-paid and well-trained may — and often does — prefer to call himself “middle class” because he perceives the status questions involved in this terminology.’\(^{34}\) Accordingly, surveys such as Chris Chamberlain’s major 1983 study of class consciousness tend to find workers describe themselves this way. However Chamberlain points out that whatever the language used, workers nevertheless have a fairly realistic understanding of where they fit into the class structure. Much depends, he says, on just what they mean by ‘middle class’. If ‘they mean the great majority of people who do the work of the system, as distinct from the rich who run things and the poor who are the casualties of the system’ this may just amount to ‘a definition of class that cuts across blue and white collar occupational divisions’. Indeed ‘it could be argued that the working class perception that they are the majority group ... is, in fact, fairly accurate; “in reality” they do form about 60% of the population.’\(^{35}\)

\(^{32}\) ABS 6342.0, *Working arrangements Australia*, August 1993

\(^{33}\) Scott, p 10

\(^{34}\) Encel, S, *Equality and authority: a study of class, status and power in Australia* Longman Cheshire, Melbourne 1980 p 31

\(^{35}\) Chamberlain, C, *Class consciousness in Australia* Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1983, p 130, 132
Chamberlain reports other findings that indicate class consciousness. A majority of working class respondents thought they ‘should have a big say’ in the way companies are run and should share in the profits, (people higher up the socio-economic ladder generally opposed this). 15% even favoured workers’ control. Far fewer middle and upper class people held such views.\textsuperscript{36}

Political attitudes also differed on a class basis, with workers significantly more likely to say that voting at elections did not give them a say in how the country was run, and 17% going so far as to say the political system should be ‘fundamentally changed’. These were not necessarily abstract sentiments, either, since 14% of the workers had participated in some form of direct political protest, a higher proportion than for the other groups. Perhaps partly for this reason, the workers were less likely to blame strikes and demonstrations on ‘agitators and extremists’, and fully 76% thought it was perfectly all right to ‘take part in demonstrations or strikes against the policies of an elected government’.\textsuperscript{37}

As for the relevance of class categories themselves, 85% of workers and large proportions of the other groups rejected the idea that Australia was a classless society. ‘In fact, in the interviews the statement was often greeted with incredulity.’\textsuperscript{38} One reasons is that everyone sees the contrasts between different parts of town, a reality shown clearly by the ABS \textit{Social Atlas} series. The maps for income levels and occupations show certain regions as sharply class-defined. In Melbourne, for example, the maps for low income earners, low income households, people working as labourers (as opposed, say, to managers), and for unemployment show distinct splashes of red in

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p 53, 63, 56
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p 72, 81, 83, 85, 94.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p 128-9.
the northern and western suburbs. Municipalities such as Broadmeadows in the north and Sunshine in the west appear over and over at or near the top of the accompanying density tables. In Sydney similar patterns are evident, with the working class clearly located to the south and especially to the west, with Blacktown, Fairfield and Bankstown consistently appearing among the top three or four.\(^{39}\)

Although the dispersion of working class population into suburban sprawls may have reduced the importance of community networks, there are still many formal and informal linkages, ranging from street gangs to local ALP branches, and from football clubs to the regulars at the local pub, ensuring that a certain ‘us and them’ awareness endures. At times of class conflict the linkages can help cement social movements. During the mass marches against Victoria’s Kennett Government in 1992 and 1993, for example, a conspicuous banner was always present reading: ‘The West Will Fight’.

People’s experience of education also differs depending on their class position. A survey of around 400 students, parents, teachers and principals in the 1980s showed that ruling class families can pick and choose schools (private and elite state institutions) in a virtual ‘market’ environment and tend to see the teachers as their employees. But for working class people the state school system operates as a far-flung and invulnerable bureaucracy. Whereas elite schools must satisfy their clients, and this often leads to change, change in the state system is typically driven from the top by remote officials and politicians. ‘With the sole exception of the diffuse demand for more education, it is difficult to think of any major change in state schools postwar that has actually stemmed from demands articulated by their working-class clientele.’\(^{40}\)

One consequence is upset and humiliation for working class people. But experiences at school can also lead to rebellion and resistance, though it is usually inchoate. Parents resent the inadequacies of the system, and for the students ‘there are in a sense two schools – the one paid for by the government and controlled by the teachers, and the one that grows up in the crannies and corners of the first, controlled by the kids. The second is part of a larger complex of peer networks in and out of school, street life and beach life ... ’

To cite just one of many other examples: there is even a tendency for working class people to be involved in particular codes of football. A 1992 rugby survey found that 76% of union test players had been educated at fee paying schools, whereas 57% of league players had gone to state schools. This understated the real class distinction, since among the fee-paying institutions it is the Catholic schools catering for large numbers of workers’ children which generally play league. Since teams are supported by clubs with extensive local followings, sport is a significant part of the networks holding social classes together.

If divisions among workers persist, it is partly because employers have an interest in perpetuating them, in order to benefit from paying lower wages to oppressed sections of the working class and to undermine solidarity. The media, the education system and all other channels of mass communication, which are owned or controlled by those who benefit from the status quo, reproduce ideologies like racism and sexism which promote such divisions. As recently as the 1960s such ideas had sufficient hold to be embodied in formal pay differentials, where employers had legal justification to pay

---

41 Ibid, p 162.
lower wages to Aborigines in the pastoral industry, and women workers in most places. Until March 1966 the Northern Territory pastoral workers’ award contained provisions specifically exempting Aboriginal people. After that date, the award contained a ‘slow worker’ clause that was used to continue the low wages of Aborigines until widespread strike action saw the introduction of equal pay with white workers in the next two years. In 1950 women’s wages had been raised to 75% of the male rate, where they stayed for another 20 years. It was not until 1974 that equality of all award wages was won.\(^{43}\)

In other words, such ideas are not static. In particular, the hold of conservative ideas is challenged by workers’ own involvement in struggle. When Australian unionists in the 1960s took industrial action to win equal pay for women, or to support the pay and land claims of Aboriginal stockmen in the Northern Territory, their ideas about race or women’s place often changed too, helping to forge a stronger class identification across race and sex lines, based on the recognition that they faced a common enemy.\(^{44}\)

**Trade unionism in the 1990s**

In August 1994, 35% (2.3 million) of Australia’s 6.5 million eligible employees were members of trade unions. It is true that the proportion in unions has been falling since the late 1970s, from 50% in 1976 to 35% in 1994, but the decline is by no means an even one: the number of union members amongst professionals and para-professionals grew between 1986 and 1993.\(^{45}\) Disregarding ‘growth’ through amalgamation, it was


\(^{45}\) ABS 6325.0.40.001; ABS 6203.0
still the case that 15 of Australia’s 20 largest unions increased in size between 1979 and 1989, with eight of these growing on average by more than 3% each year.\footnote{Frenkel, S. ‘Australian trade unionism and the new social structure of accumulation’, in Frenkel, S. (ed) \textit{Organised labour in the Asia-Pacific region} ILR Press, Ithaca 1993, p 267-268}

The unionisation process both reflects the differences within the working class and shows the potential to overcome them. Unions are much stronger in some areas than in others, but even where they are weak there are indications of their potential power. Unionisation is strong in such traditional blue collar areas as utilities, mining, telecommunication, transport, storage and manufacturing (see Table 2). But they also have a strong presence in public sector clerical areas as well as nursing and teaching. Nearly one half of all union members in the early 1990s were white collar.\footnote{Frenkel, pp 255, 267} Table 3 shows that unionisation amongst para-professionals was higher even than in construction and manufacturing, or amongst tradespersons and labourers. The weak spots of union organisation were in white collar private sector areas: clerks, salespersons and personal service workers.
Table 2: Union Membership, 1989-90\(^{48}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry sector</th>
<th>% Membership</th>
<th>% Unionised workplaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, gas and water</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and defence</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and storage</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community services</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance, property and business services</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation, personal and other services</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and retail trade</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, fishing and hunting</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sectoral shift in employment from manufacturing to services has been advanced as an explanation for declining union membership.\(^{49}\) In the short term, some time lag is to be expected as employment in areas of traditionally low unionisation increases. However, as the experience of white collar unionisation in the 1960s and 1970s shows, when membership increased by 9% each year from 1969 to 1976 (principally in the public service, nursing and teaching), this is not to say that this sectoral shift is insurmountable. A further factor has influenced the low level of unionisation in the private sector service industries which expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. Not only did workers enter areas with little tradition of union organisation,

\(^{48}\) Adapted from ABS 6325.0, August 1990 and Callus et al, p 103. Note that ‘% unionised workplaces’ indicates the proportion of workplaces with more than 20 employees in that sector that have at least one union member.

they did so at a time when levels of industrial activity were low and the union movement could point to few recent achievements.

**Table 3: Union Membership by Occupation, 1994 (descending order)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>% Unionised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plant and machine operators and drivers</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-professionals</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradespersons</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers and related workers</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespersons and personal service workers</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus unions continue to have a powerful presence in a range of core sectors. The second column in Table 2 is revealing too: although overall unionisation in the white collar private sector areas was low, around two-thirds of workplaces with more than 20 employees had at least one union member. The average across all workplaces of more than 20 was a massive 80%. Furthermore, of those workplaces with at least one union member, three quarters had the majority unionised, with the average membership being 70% of employees.

Union organisation is strongest in large workplaces, where industrial action is more common. This is because class relations are more transparent, both because the personal relations between employer and employee found in the smallest workplaces are less significant, and because workers’ collective power over what happens in the workplace is most obvious. Unionisation was more significant in the largest workplaces.

---

50 Adapted from ABS 6325.0.40.001
surveyed in 1989-90, with only 4% of the workplaces with more than 500 workers having no union members. Yet it was still the case that more than one half of workers in workplaces of more than five were in unions. These basic data indicate that even though trade unionism is weaker than ten years ago, the potential is there for a revival.

Women’s increased involvement in the paid workforce is reflected in the unions. The 1960s and 1970s saw mass recruitment push up the female proportion of union membership from one quarter in 1970 to more than one third 20 years later.\(^{51}\) With growing numbers of women in unions, agitation for equal pay contributed to a 30% increase in the ratio of female to male award wages—reducing, although certainly not eliminating, one of the major inequalities within the working class.\(^{52}\)

While males are still more likely to join unions (37.9% in 1994) than are females (31.3%), this is not mainly due to an averseness on women’s part. Indeed, a 1993 study of more than 1,200 South Australian union members found young women were more interested in being involved in union work than young men.\(^{53}\) In various service occupations they were as likely to be unionised as men, and in the wholesale and retail trade they were more likely to be in unions. Their overall lower rate of union membership was due to such factors as more women being in small workplaces, where unionisation was lower for both sexes.\(^{54}\) A further cause was the large number of women doing part-time work, an area where unionisation was lower than average. Still, part-time women workers were more likely to be unionised (24.5% in 1994) than part-time men (18.3%). Nor were part-time employees inherently hostile to unionism. In the

\(^{51}\) Nightingale, M. *Facing the challenge: women in Victorian unions* Victorian Trades Hall Council, Melbourne September 1991 pp 10-11

\(^{52}\) Gregory, R.G. and Daly, A.E. ‘Can economic theory explain why Australian women are so well paid relative to their US counterparts?’ ANU Centre for Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper No. 226, February 1990 pp 6-15.

\(^{53}\) Pocock, B. *Raising our voices: activism amongst women and men in South Australian unions* Centre for Labour Studies, University of Adelaide 1994.

\(^{54}\) Nightingale, p 11
four years 1988-1992, while the total number of union members fell, the number of
unionised part-time workers increased by 118,300.$^{55}$

Unionisation rates are lower amongst the young. At 19.3%, the unionisation rate
of 15-19 year olds is less than half that of workers aged 35-64 years.$^{56}$
Reasons include higher employment in poorly-unionised areas among young people. In recent years
some of the gap may be due to different experiences, since older people are more likely
to have seen unions winning improvements in real wages and conditions in the 1970s
and early 1980s. For younger workers, the experience is one of unions failing to defend
wages and conditions. Still, this problem could be overcome if unions were more
effective. Since most work alongside older workers, the potential for a transmission of
positive attitudes remains.

Immigration helps unions grow. In every census of union membership between
1976 and 1994, workers born abroad were more likely to be members. Partly this is
because new migrants entered highly unionised industries and occupations; partly it
reflects the trade unionist or left-wing political traditions that migrants brought with
them from such countries as Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. In 1992, 60% of the
workforce from these three countries were trade unionists.$^{57}$ There was no evidence that
an influx of migrants dampened the strike rate.$^{58}$

It is indicative of their oppression that ABS does not keep separate figures for
unionisation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Nonetheless, trade union activity
by Aborigines themselves and by non-Aboriginal workers in support of black rights, has
helped to break down racist attitudes.$^{59}$

---

$^{55}$ ABS 6325.0.40.001
$^{56}$ Berry and Kitchener, 1989, p 52-53; ABS 6325.0.40.001
$^{57}$ ABS 4101.0
$^{58}$ Lever-Tracy and Quinlan, p 141
$^{59}$ D. Fields, p 11-18, 28-31
Attitudes to unionism are another indicator of common interests that can bridge divisions. A survey of Victorian union members found they thought their unions should pursue the following priority issues: job security, better working conditions, healthy and safety, higher wages and better retirement benefits. There was a high degree of agreement about these traditional trade union priorities: the survey found the same issues in the top five for both women and men, for those from English speaking backgrounds and various migrant groups.  

Similarly a South Australian survey found male and female union members had similar motivations in joining unions, especially protection of their rights, and better pay and conditions. Men and women agreed on the top three issues they wanted to see unions take up: job security, working conditions, and health and safety. There are no such studies comparing white and blue collar workers in this country, but British evidence shows that their priorities are also similar. 

Unions rely on workplace delegates, stewards, activists and militants to represent and organise workers on the job. Such delegates were found in two-thirds of unionised workplaces in 1989-90, and at 93% of the largest workplaces. In total there are about 50,000 delegates, with women, migrants and white collar workers increasingly important. Although still under-represented, women (40% of the workforce) comprised 29% of delegates in 1989-90, while workers of non-English-speaking background (13% of the workforce) made up 12% of union delegates. For both women and migrants this was a major advance on the situation in the 1960s. Nearly a-third of delegates were professionals or para-professionals, 11% were clerks and 10%

---

60 Bertone and Griffin, p 90-92  
61 Pocock, p 30  
62 Socialist Review, September 1994 p 7  
63 Callus et al, p 271  
64 Callus et al, p 102
were in sales or services. Such has been the spread of union organisation to ‘non-traditional’ areas that less than one-half of all delegates were manual blue collar workers.\(^{65}\) They are numerous even in industries with low unionisation rates, for example in 34\% of all workplaces (not just the unionised) in wholesale and retail trade, and in 36\% of finance, property and business service workplaces.\(^{66}\)

**The balance of forces**

If unionism helps shape a sense of common interests amongst workers, it also points to the counterposed interests of employers. It is not possible to understand the working class on its own. Conflict with the ruling class, and shifts in the relative strength of the two classes, affect workers’ wages and conditions, their organisations, and also their consciousness.

Even official statistics reflect the reality of a struggle between capital and labour. From 1982-83 to 1991-92 real wages were driven down by over 10\% while profits rose\(^{67}\). In the decade ending 1993-94 award rates of pay increased by 51\%, company profits before tax increased by 134\% and executive salaries by 135\%.\(^{68}\) (Meanwhile the Consumer Price Index rose by just under 70\%.)

The shifting balance of forces was also reflected in other ways. Average hours worked per week in Australia increased to 43 in the early 1990s, while official overtime decreased. In other words, the 1980s saw a rise in the unpaid hours worked. During the 1992-94 recovery the amount of overtime (both paid and unpaid) increased as companies preferred to get the existing workforce to work harder, rather than take on more labour as demand increased. To cite a related example: whereas 43\% of workers

---

\(^{65}\) Callus et al, p 63, 106-107

\(^{66}\) Callus et al, p 103

\(^{67}\) Stilwell, F. *Economic inequality: who gets what in Australia* Pluto Press, Leichhardt 1993 p 19; ABS 5206.0

\(^{68}\) ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty in *The Age*, 17 November 1994.
took less than four weeks’ annual leave in 1978, by 1988 54% were taking less than their statutory entitlement. This too reflected the shift of power towards capital.

The incompatibility of interests between capitalists and workers results in a pattern of industrial conflict, whether open or hidden. Class resentments are expressed in overt activities such as strikes and work bans, as well as in a range of covert forms. Those forms of action which are documented demonstrate clearly the social weight of Australia’s working class, and the continued importance of industrial struggle. Right through the 1980s and early 1990s, a period of relative quiescence, there were still over 1,000 industrial disputes recorded each year, directly involving at least half a million workers. In 1994, the number of strikes reached a fifty-year low. Yet even so, there were 556 disputes, involving 261,000 workers and 497,400 strike days.

According to the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) in 1989-90, one quarter of workplaces had an active union presence, meaning frequent meetings, the existence of a union committee and regular negotiations and discussions with management. And, despite the stifling effect of the close relationship between the ALP government and senior union officials, even in 1989-90 (at a time of recession and very low strike activity) 12% of all workplaces and two-thirds of workplaces employing more than 500 undertook some form of industrial action.69 White collar organisation has advanced strongly in the last two decades: the rate of picketing during disputes in 1989-90 was highest not in the building industry, coal mining or engineering, but in public administration!

In terms of people collectively attempting to improve their lives, there was no other undertaking in Australian society that so actively involved as many people as

---

69 Callus et al, p 62-65
striking. Nor were the conflicts simply about money. Official statistics include ‘managerial policy’ and ‘trade unionism’ among the possible causes of strikes, indicating antagonism over the relative rights of employers to manage and workers to organise.\(^7^0\) In addition, actions not normally thought of as indicating class conflict, such as leaving a job, may actually be a powerful measure of work dissatisfaction. AWIRS revealed an overall voluntary labour turnover of 19%, with a daily absenteeism rate of 4.5% showing ‘boredom and frustration with work or even a more general societal alienation’.\(^7^1\)

Employers understand this general sense of class conflict, even if they don’t articulate it as such. Surveyed in the early 1990s, senior management of 109 large companies listed ‘employee resistance’ as far and away the most common problem in implementing organisational change. Employees, concluded the researchers, ‘distrust the motives of top management and fear for their job security ... [They] don’t develop ownership of the change program’ (emphasis added).\(^7^2\) Given workers’ lack of ownership of any other part of the industries in which they work, employers face an uphill battle in trying to convince them that organisational change is something over which they can exercise any real control. Distrust is one of the consequences of workers’ alienation from the means of production and the products of their labour. AWIRS indicated conflict even at the level of perceptions of ‘truth’. Asked about ‘organisational change’ (i.e. the restructuring of work practices and the organisation of

\(^7^0\) ABS 6321.0, Industrial Disputes Australia (monthly), ABS 6322.0, Industrial Disputes Australia (annual); ABS 4101.0.


the labour process), only 21% of managers said that it had reduced workers’ morale, while a much higher proportion of union delegates (53%) said that this was the case.\textsuperscript{73}

Trade unions’ very existence indicates the presence of class antagonism and where active union organisation exists, workers are more likely to be able to improve their situation. Union members continue to earn more on average than non-members (even though in official statistics non-members are heavily represented amongst the most highly-paid, managerial staff). In 1992 the difference for full-time male workers was marginal, but full-time female union members averaged 9% higher wages than their non-union counterparts. For part-time male and female workers the differences were 37 and 25% more, respectively.\textsuperscript{74} The impact was not confined to wages: on questions such as childcare and gender equity, non-union workplaces were far more likely to perform poorly.\textsuperscript{75} Non-unionised employees had less superannuation, long service, annual and sick leave as well.\textsuperscript{76}

**Political representation**

While some workers (including union members) vote for the openly pro-business Liberals, this is vastly outweighed by the attachment, at least electorally, of millions of workers to the reformist politics of the union-based Labor Party. Just as the existence of trade unions exposes class divisions (as well as organising working class unity) in Australian society, so does the mass working class Labor vote for Labor; it is another indication of class consciousness arising from workers’ conditions of life.

The class nature of voting became particularly clear at the 1992 Victorian election, at which the Kennett Liberal landslide badly mauled the ALP, reducing it to its

\textsuperscript{73} Callus et al, p 192
\textsuperscript{74} ABS 6325.0
\textsuperscript{75} Ellem, B. ‘The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey and trade unionism’ *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 33(4) 1991 p 538; Nightingale, p 11.
core constituency. The electoral maps published the next day showed a concentration of ALP voters in the same western and northern suburbs of Melbourne discussed earlier. Moreover in those two top-of-the-list working class suburbs, Broadmeadows and Sunshine, Labor’s vote actually rose as people rallied around the party.77

Some writers nevertheless argue that the class basis of the Labor vote has declined since the second World War, a trend supposedly related to the ALP’s pursuit of ‘middle class’ votes in marginal electorates. But as Andrew Scott demonstrates, this argument can only be sustained by denying that white collar workers are part of the working class. When evidence of voting patterns is broken down into occupational groups, we find it is the clerks, shop assistants and salaried professionals rather than accountants, doctors and lawyers who are more likely to be Labor’s white collar voters. And, after the 1960s, there was a rise in ALP support amongst white collar workers. Far from reflecting a change in the class nature of Labor’s vote, the fact that such workers have become more pro-ALP reflects their increasing identification with the rest of the working class.78 Meanwhile the ALP received just as high a proportion of manual workers’ votes in the early 1980s as it did in the late 1940s.

Thus the working class Labor vote has held up even while ALP membership amongst individual working class people has seriously declined.79 This apparent contradiction can be explained by what Scott calls the ‘fading loyalties’ of the working class to Labor. Workers still have a class identification with Labor which shows up in voting patterns, but after years of disappointment no longer believe they can mobilise effectively as a class through this party.

77 The Sunday Age 4 October 1992.
78 Scott, p 51-53
79 Scott, p 62.
Even right-wing Labor leaders like Paul Keating understand this loyalty and attempt to use it. Faced with an ‘unwinnable’ election in March 1993, the ALP made an appeal to workers based on class politics—for example, using propaganda against the Liberals’ tax policies portraying a group of the extremely rich crowing about how taxes on necessities would fund their Ferraris.

**Conclusion**

Having identified workers’ common interests, their class organisation and their ability to wage a class struggle, this paper has sought to offer a systematic overview of the working class and to refute common arguments about its supposed disappearance or irrelevance. Statistical data and various attitudinal studies show that while we can draw distinctions in terms of specific working class experiences (women’s oppression and racism, for example) we are still left with a common class experience based on workers’ relationship to production that transcends such distinctions. By rejecting the unsustainable distinctions which attempt to confine the working class to some narrow, stereotypical sub-set such as blue collar workers, the paper indicates the continuing potential in Australian society for workplace-based class struggle on a large scale.