

# Book Reviews

Glenn Mitchell, **On Strong Foundations: The BWIU and Industrial Relations in the Australian Construction Industry 1942-1992**, Harcourt Brace, Sydney, 1996, 368 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Quinlan\*

Since their emergence in the 19th century unions of building workers have formed an especially powerful and significant element of the Australian trade union movement. It was building unions who pioneered the eight hour day in the 1850s and building unions have continued to be one of the key elements of campaigns for improved wages and working conditions (such as superannuation) in the 20th century. Building unions have also played a critical political role entailing unlikely alliances and objectives, most notably perhaps the Green Bans movement of the 1970s for which Sydney residents today have much to be grateful.

The industrial relations significance of Australian building unions extends beyond the national stage. Their organisational strength and influence has seldom been matched by unions of building workers in other countries, raising intriguing questions as to why this should be the case? Despite this, and the fact that building unions have been the subject a number of PhD theses, there have been to my knowledge no substantial published studies of Australian building unions prior to Mitchell's book.

A book on the BWIU is doubly welcome. The Building Workers Industrial Union was formed in 1942 as a merger of several prominent craft unions, notably Amalgamated Carpenters and Joiners Society and the Bricklayers Union, and so carries with it some of the important traditions of struggle from the 19th century. In the postwar period most if not all the other important craft unions, including the once powerful Stonemasons Society, joined the BWIU. At the same time, as the term 'industrial' in its title implies, the union's formation represented a step away from craft unionism and towards industrial unionism. In the postwar period, two unions dominated industrial relations in the building industry, the BWIU and the Builder's Labourers' Federation (BLF).

Changes in building work through technology and subcontracting, especially after 1970, blurred the craft/non craft divide rooted in centuries old

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production practices. This at once provides an additional explanation (aside from politics) of the tensions between the BWIU and BLF as well as highlighting why in the long term there was a compelling logic for a single union. Aided by de-registration of the BLF under the Hawke Labor government (and dissent within the BLF itself), the BWIU emerged as the clear winner in this struggle by the early 1990s (although a rump BLF survives in some states). In 1992 the BWIU formed the basis of the Construction Division of the new Construction, Mining and Forestry Union (CFMEU). This mega union was itself the product of the ACTU's ambitious amalgamation agenda. While the costs and benefits of the shift to big industry-based unions strategy may be debated it appears that the CFMEU is one of the more successful results – something for which those officials who built the BWIU could legitimately claim some credit.

In sum, the 50 year history of the BWIU incorporates the fundamental restructuring of unionism from around a dozen different occupationally based unions to a single dominant union in the building sector. Labourers working in civil construction were recruited by the omnibus Australian Workers Union not the BLF and thus there is an ongoing division and competition for membership. This competition has been intensified by amendments to the Industrial Relations Act under the then Labor government which permitted single union site agreements. In turn, this also fed off a difference in industrial philosophy and methods with the AWU – something also to found in the metalliferous mining industry where the AWU competes with the Mining Division of the CFMEU (ex Miners Federation) for membership. The divisions between unions in terms of industrial strategies, and the intersection of this with labour legislation and politics, represent important themes in Australian industrial relations which are worthy of close attention.

Of course, it needs to be recognised that writing a union history may not be as simple as it seems. For one thing there are a number of distinct audiences for such a work and accommodating their often conflicting demands is by no means simple. At one level the history can be written (as many have) to provide unions officials and members, past and present, with a record of the union's origins and achievements. Even within this there may be difficulties satisfying both officials and rank and file members. At another level the history may serve as a analytical contribution to academic research in the fields of history, industrial relations, political science, sociology, labour economics and even organisational theory. Once again, some selection is required given that no single history is likely to cover adequately all these disciplinary terrains. The most basic tension is, however, between a popular and a scholarly work. In Australia, Tom Sheridan's

1972 history of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (now part of the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union) set a bench mark in terms of a scholarly work which not only recorded the union's structures, tactics and campaigns but also gave the reader a 'feel' for the membership, their attitudes and desires. Those who have followed in Sheridan's footsteps have found it difficult to meet this standard of accomplished analysis. Most have conspicuously failed and we are often left with histories which provide a rather romanticised history of struggle, setback and ultimate success which suitably satisfies the current union leadership.

The question then becomes what does Mitchell's book offer in relation to this significant union? First, like many more recent histories, the book's title indicates that the author wishes to escape the straightjacket of narrow institutional history and is concerned to look at the BWIU in the broader industrial relations context. Despite this, the book's structure adopts a fairly conventional chronological layout. A short introductory chapter on the historical development on building unionism in Australia is followed by five chapters dealing successively with each decade of the BWIU's existence (ie 1942-1952, 1952-1962 and so on). This layout has undoubted strengths in terms of telling the story of the union from its inception. The account is not simply a history of officials, meetings, struggles and structures but includes an examination of critical issues such as subcontracting, permanency, the BWIU's period of de-registration, its shifting relationship to the BLF and the shift to industry unionism. The story is also laced with vignettes of poetry and popular culture relevant to the union's membership. In short, Mitchell provides a highly readable account of the BWIU which makes ongoing references to the broader industrial relations and political environment. The book is rather weaker when it comes to describing the significant features of the product and labour market in which the union operated or changes in the labour process. A few tables are used, but the selection seems a little ad hoc and the author's insistence on having them conform to the periodisation of each chapter means that the capacity to develop themes through analysing longer terms trends is diminished.

This leads directly to the major observation that needs to be made about the book which is that in choosing between the various options available in terms of a union history Mitchell has essentially offered a popular union history where critical analysis must be fitted within the confines of telling the union's story. Important issues and themes, such as changes in the industry and union workforce from immigration or the growth of industry-based unionism in Australia, are addressed but the discussion is clipped and does not draw on all or even the best available source material (this includes

cases where the material directly refers to the BWIU or the building industry). Use of the theoretical material is also clipped.

The abbreviated reference to theoretical work or general industrial relations literature may be understandable in a book clearly written so that it can be read by the union's membership. To be fair, I suspect some compromises may have been forced on the author as the book contains an appendix on industrial relations and building industry literature which briefly discusses what this literature addresses and then lists the major references. I found some comments in this appendix a little strange. Most notably, on page 343 Mitchell states that industrial relations in the building and construction industry has caught the attention of few historians but has been addressed by other scholars. He is apparently unaware of the 1993 PhD on the Victorian building industry by Rich and his introductory chapter on the early history of building unionism indicates little awareness of more recent published research which provides information on early organisation by building workers.

More worrying and less excusable is the fact that Mitchell makes little use of a wealth of material (published and unpublished) on the building and construction industry even to better chronicle the BWIU's history and to help readers understand the issues he does address. In the endnote attached to his comment on page 343 Mitchell refers to the work of Alice Coolican, Meredith Bergmann and Laura Bennett while only bothering to cite the full reference to Coolican's massive and impressive PhD (which he makes no apparent use of nonetheless). Not included is the full reference to Bergmann's PhD on the BLF and I could find no evidence that her thesis had been used. I might add here that the author's failure to include a full bibliography of sources (instead, there are endnotes after each chapter) and his less than exacting index makes it very laborious and difficult to check what material has been cited in the text and what has not. Bennett's detailed analysis of the 'destruction' of the BLF (*Australian Journal of Labour Law*, March 1991) also appears to have escaped use. The latter is far more than a legal analysis but looks at political and institutional factors, and makes use of the Teagle's earlier study of the BWIU during its period of de-registration. Indeed, while aware of Bennett and Teagle's research on de-registration as well as studies of Richard Mitchell and Andrew Ferguson (now a CFMEU official) Mitchell makes almost no use of them to help explain the dynamics of de-registration – why the BWIU survived its stint (1948-1962) and why the BLF survived de-registration in the 1970s but has been mortally wounded by this measure in the 1990s. There are other questions deserving of careful attention here such as why building unions have been perhaps the most frequent target for de-registration proceedings? Mitchell's

book provides some interesting detail on the de-registration struggles and makes good use of tribunal transcripts. However, it is essentially a stand-alone examination, despite the important industrial relations policy and other issues these events raise.

In this sense his discussion of this issues remains interesting but essentially descriptive, isolated from other research, and ultimately superficial. The same point could be made in relation to other issues like subcontracting. In my opinion Mitchell could have made better use of other research to build on their insights, and in so doing enhanced rather than detracted from the history of the BWIU and its industrial and political significance.

Having said all this I would stress that the book has strengths. Those interested in the union, the industry or the more general history of industrial relations in the postwar period will find the book to be useful. It also contains some items of information which will undoubtedly be of value to readers with more specialised interests. For example, for those interested in occupational health and safety there is quite a good account of the struggle for 'accident pay' in the 1970s (see pages 174-195).

Mitchell also avoids the problem with many other union histories which are laced only with photos of officials (individually or in groups) plus the odd illustration of a procession, strike or dramatic incident. His book uses these devices but also thankfully includes 'shots' of ordinary members going about their work. This not gives some visual recognition to the rank and file but also highlights the tasks they perform. As labour historians are only too well aware, amidst the plethora of photographic records of the 19th and early 20th century there are comparatively few dealing with people working (as opposed to staged group photographs). With videos etc this may not be so much of a problem today but nevertheless these photographs in Mitchell's book are a powerful symbolic statement. There is even a photograph of the new generation of female building workers which is part of a small, but hopefully, significant shift in the industry's workforce.

In sum, Mitchell's book may be best described as in the tradition of the 'popular' union history, more firmly directed to the membership than an academic market. Being written by an academic it is (as one would hope) both readable and professional. It makes some use of the overseas and local research but remains largely descriptive. Unfortunately, Mitchell's book misses the opportunity to utilise a number of PhD and other theses plus published research in order to provide the important piece on building unionism and its place in Australian industrial relations which is, I believe, not only necessary but long overdue.