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# Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Records

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One of the most important trade union collections held by the Noel Butlin Archives Centre is that of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). It documents the activities of the ACTU from its inception in 1927 and includes records of a predecessor interstate union body, the Commonwealth Council of Federated Unions (CCFU).

The CCFU was formed at a Melbourne conference of Commonwealth- registered unions held in February 1923. It was an advisory body, with its functions being limited to dealing with issues that arose out of the administration of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act and other federal legislation, involving conditions of work. Records held include six bound subject and correspondence files covering the period of operation, and minutes of evidence of the Royal Commission on the Basic Wage 1919-1920. They reflect the main concerns of the CCFU: to organise opposition to attempts by employer organisations to have the basic wage reduced: to campaign for the restoration of the 44 hour week to those awards from which the Court had withdrawn it: and to establish the principle of the 44 hour week as a standard in all industries.

The beginnings of the ACTU can be traced to a Trade Union Congress held in the Melbourne Trades Hall Council on 3 May 1927. The meeting was convened to "consider the possibility of creating a representative body for the whole trade union movement in Australia". The congress elected a committee of seven, which produced a report including a proposed constitution for a new body named the Australasian Council of Trade Unions. (The name was changed to the Australian Council of Trade Unions at the 1947 Congress).

The constitution was accepted with two minor amendments on 7 May 1927. "The socialisation of industry, ie production, distribution and exchange"' was the sole objective of the ACTU stated in its constitution until the 1971 Congress added two further clauses.

These were:

"The complete and effective organisation of wage and salary earners in the Australian workforce with the trade union movement" and

"The utilisation of Australian resources for the benefit of the people - to maintain full employment, establish equitable standards of living for present and past members of the work force which rise with increasing output, and full opportunities for the development of the talents and capacities of the individual".

The ACTU carries out a wide range of functions such as:

advocacy before the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in National Wage Cases and other national hearings;

making representation to the Australian Government on many issues such as the budget, economic policy, industrial legislation, social issues etc;

representing the Australian trade union movement internationally on such bodies as the ILO, the ICFTU etc;

coordinating industrial campaigns of a national character;

intervening in industrial disputes which affect workers in more than one state;

encouraging closer cooperation amongst unions; and

maintaining special units to carry out union policy on worker health and safety, working women, employment, migrant workers, education arts and leisure, and social welfare.

ACTU records held include those of the main policy-and decision-making bodies:

the Congress and the Executive;

records of past Presidents; and

series of records created by the Secretary, Industrial Advocate, Industrial Officers, Research Officers, Education Office, Publicity Officer, the Social Welfare Unit and the Library.

The Congress is the supreme policy-making body of the ACTU. Its decisions are binding on all member unions, and it is the body which speaks on behalf of the Australian trade union movement as a whole. It meets every two years and occasionally when convened by the Executive, Special Congress meetings are held.

Congresses are attended by delegates from affiliated unions (determined on a proportional basis of their membership), two representatives from the six metropolitan Trades and Labour Councils in the states (ACTU State Branches), representatives from certain provincial and territory Trades and Labour Councils and Officers of the ACTU determined by the rules adopted by Congress.

The Executive has the power to initiate and deal with all matters affecting the ACTU as a whole. It is the responsible body between Congresses. In 1927 when the ACTU was formed, the Executive comprised a President, two Vice Presidents, the Secretary and two members appointed by each State Labor Council.

This structure remained until 1957 when Congress decided to halve the representation of the State Labor Councils to one member each and added a representative from six Industry Groups. (When each federal union joins the ACTU it is assigned to an industry group of which there are 18 at present).

The Executive meets approximately four to six times a year. Because of the difficulty of raising finance in the early years the Executive met infrequently. Its functions at this time were partly taken over by an Emergency Committee consisting of the President, Secretary and two members of the Executive appointed by the Melbourne Trades Hall Council.

When processing the collection we found records relating to the Congress and the Executive scattered throughout various series. Because of the importance of these two bodies within the organisation it was decided to assist researchers by developing special tools to aid users of the material.

A complete set of Congress papers has been copied and brought together in one location. These include agenda papers, minutes, decision papers, Executive reports and supplementary papers. They date from the first Congress held in 1927 until 1985.

With reference to the Executive, we have compiled a special finding-aid to locate all copies of minutes of meetings from August 1927 until September 1979 in the collection.

To facilitate decision-making, both the Congress and Executive use committees to examine issues and make policy recommendations. Two important committees are the Executive subcommittee and the Interstate Industrial Disputes Committee.

The Executive Subcommittee meets at least once a month to deal with matters requiring immediate attention. Decisions made by this committee are subject to review by the Executive.

The Interstate Industrial Disputes Committee meets when the ACTU is notified of a pending dispute by an affiliated union.

While the Archives does not hold specific series created by these committees, copies of minutes and references to decisions made are scattered throughout the collection, mainly in the Secretary's files.

One of the most important series in the entire collection is the Secretary's subject files. These records date from 1927 until 1980 and the 2,662 files cover all areas of interest and involvement of the Council. There are files on specific strikes, social issues, correspondence with government departments, ministers, affiliated unions, Trades and Labor Councils and international organisations.

They were created in alphabetical order according to subject, and to facilitate access through the several transfers of files received, the titles have been placed onto a database and a single consolidated finding aid has been produced.

As mentioned above, one of the main functions of the ACTU during its history has been its role as the representative of the trade union movement in the Industrial and Arbitration Commission, particularly in the basic and later National Wage Cases. Up until the 1959 Basic Wage Case the ACTU used representatives from the legal profession to present its case.

On this occasion R J Hawke, who had been appointed Research Officer and Advocate in 1958, led a team of four unionists. Hawke held this position until 1969 and was succeeded by Ralph Willis 1969-72 and Robert Jolly 1973-79. Jan Marsh took over from Jolly and held the position until early this year (1988).

Papers relating to cases heard before the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration in the ACTU collection date from 1930 until 1977 and include working files where information and evidence is collected, applications and transcripts.

In 1966 it was decided to appoint Len Schurr as the Industrial Officer, and his working files have been lodged with the collection. They date until 1980 and cover such subjects as the airlines industry, the aluminium industry, apprentices, the Australian public service, the housing industry, naval dockyards, the oil industry and the pulp and paper industry. They include background papers as well as records dealing with formal negotiations such as minutes of meetings of relevant parties.

Records of other Industrial Officers include those of Bruce Hartnett and Peter Moylan. Hartnett's files mainly cover the areas of aluminium, Christmas Island, the glass industry, the 35 hour week and the vehicle industry. Peter Moylan's records relate to transport matters.

A collection of records has been received from the ACTU Research Officer, Chris Ryan. These include a series of Post Indexation Wage Movement survey files compiled in 1981. Each file usually contains information on awards and determinations, a sheet recording wage movement details, copies of arbitration material, and correspondence with various unions.

Another substantial collection of research records relate to the preparation of the ACTU's involvement and written submission on the Committee of Enquiry into Technological Change in Australia (CITCA). These records include working files, returns of an ACTU questionnaire on hours and working patterns in industry, copies of submissions to CITCA, transcripts of the public hearing, and a collection of the CITCA technical and background papers and commissioned reports.

While the ACTU has been concerned primarily with wages and conditions, during the late 1960s and early 1970s it expanded its role into new areas including the environment, status of women, education, Aboriginal persons, and commercial ventures such as Bourkes Store, ACTU Solo and ACTU New World Travel. It also became more heavily involved in political issues eg the Springbok Rugby Tour, French nuclear tests in the Pacific, mining of uranium and the Vietnam War.

Along with these wider functions came a more complex administration. As well as the positions of Advocate and Industrial Officer mentioned above, a Publicity Officer and an Education Officer were first employed in 1969, and a Librarian and an Administrative Assistant in 1971. A Social Welfare Research Unit was established in 1974/75, and in 1979 an Occupational Health and Safety Unit was started and a Legal Office opened. A full-time Arts Officer was appointed in 1981. In the 1980s a Social Welfare Officer, an Ethnic Liaison Officer, and an ACTU/VTHC Occupational Health and Safety Officer were appointed and a Research Section (Economic) was started. The Working Womens' Centre, founded in 1975, merged with the ACTU in 1980.

These expanded functions are reflected in the main administrative records of the ACTU archives such as the Secretary's subject files and minutes of the Executive and Congress records. The Archives also has the series of subject files created by the Education Officer 1968-74, the Social Welfare Research Unit 1970-1979 and the Publicity Officer 1969-1981. The Publicity Officers records also include a group of photographs dating from 1977 to 1983.

Records have been received from the Library including an extensive collection of newspaper cuttings dating from 1968 to 1982. These have been been placed in order according to subject and are a good starting point for researching particular issues that occurred during this period.

Membership of the ACTU was considerably widened when the 'white collar' peak unions Australian Council of Salaried & Professional Associations (ACSPA) and Council of Australian Government Employee Organisations (CAGEO) amalgamated in 1979 and 1981 respectively. The entry of these two organisations was accompanied by changes to the composition of the Executive and Industry Groups. The Archives holds substantial records from both of these bodies.

Communication between the ACTU and their affiliated unions and TLC branches has been carried out by various means. Circulars are regularly used for this purpose. They detail policy decisions, provide information on specific industrial disputes, negotiations with the government etc. These are held by the Archives for the years 1944 to 1977, with a few gaps. The circulars, together with the Executive minutes, are excellent sources for providing a broad understanding of current issues that are of concern to the ACTU and the directions taken.

The ACTU has also produced various publications throughout its history. These include the ACTU Bulletin, held by the Archives for the years 1954-1985 (with gaps), ACTU Newsbrief 1969-70 (with gaps), ACTU Newsletter 1979-1981 (with gaps) and the ACTU Review 1970 and 1972.

In the 1970s the ACTU began to circulate documents relating to specific issues. These cover a wide variety of topics eg 'Maternity Leave - The Award Explained (1979), 'Background Paper on Productivity' (1980), 'Submission to the Commission of Inquiry into the Viability of the Christmas Island Phosphate Industry (1980),and 'The Relationship between the Australian Labor Party and the Trade Unions: Discussion Paper' (1980).

Perhaps one of the most disappointing aspects about the collection is the paucity of Presidential records. Only a small quantity of Bob Hawke's records have been deposited. These are fairly inconsequential and comprise a series of letters received from the public 1971-73 and 1977, unannotated copies of various ACTU meetings and circulars and working papers used in preparing the 1969 Equal Pay Case. The records of Cliff Dolan include minutes, correspondence and supporting papers of various government committees of which he was a member.

The archives of the longest serving President, A E Monk (1932-43) (1949-69), who was also the first full-time Secretary (1943-49), have been deposited with the Victorian Regional Office of the Australian Archives and those of RJ Hawke (1960-80) have been lodged with the National Archives of Australia in Canberra.\*\*

Another gap in the records relates to the Industry Groups. While there are records relating to the original six groups in the Secretary's subject file series ie Building, Food & Distribution Services, Manufacturing, Metal, Services and Transport, we have not yet received any records created by groups established after the group structure was expanded in 1981.

Because of the continuity of the major series eg Congress records, Executive minutes and Secretary's records, the ACTU collection is an excellent source for researching broad continuous themes as well as specific isolated issues relating to the Australian trade union movement.

To date the records have been used for a wide variety of topics including:

a study of the changing power structure within the ACTU;

the social and economic policy of the trade union movement and the ALP 1973-1987;

a biography of Albert Monk;

1950 railway strike;

the politics of Australia's trade with Japan;

postwar immigration;

the 1974 and 1982 Prices and Incomes Agreements;

the politics of unemployment; and

a comparative study of the Curtin, Chifley and Whitlam Labor governments

The NBAC Bibliography contains a selection of published works based on research using the collections of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre.

Because of the size of the collection we encourage those interested in using the records to contact us before visiting the Archives so that we can advise on the most relevant series for their research.

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\*\* Since this article was written in 1988, the records in the National Archives of Australia and other sources have been transferred to the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library at the University of South Australia.

Major additions have been made to the ACTU collection since this article was published. Records received after 1988 include: Congress papers, Executive minutes, ACTU publications, Secretary's subject files, files of Industrial and Research Officers and Committee papers and reports.

ACTU records are also held at the University of Melbourne Archives and information about them may be obtained by accessing the Australian Trade Union Archive (ATUA) online gateway.