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# Researching industrial relations on the New South Wales railways: the contribution of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre

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From 1978 to 1984 I made extensive use of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. Initially I examined the history of the National Union of Rail Workers of Australia 1917 to 1946. The predecessors of this union were several unions formed by loyalists after the 1917 strike in New South Wales. Railway management assisted the promoters of these unions. The Australian trade union movement condemned these scab unions and Lang Governments in New South Wales tried to deregister them on two occasions. The results of this research were incorporated in an honours thesis and a subsequent article in Labour History.

Broader research for a PhD covered industrial relations on the NSW Government Railways from 1855 to 1929. This was not a union history but focused on how railway management organised its labour force and dealt with the rise of trade unionism and state intervention, especially compulsory arbitration.

The sources for this research were diverse. There were management, trade union and shop committee minutes, correspondence and circulars. The trade unions published journals for varying periods, while railway management produced a journal for its employees from 1892 to 1930. New South Wales Parliament and the press subjected the NSW Railways to intense scrutiny.

Parliamentary debates and papers were a valuable source of information. I examined the Sydney Morning Herald for the whole period and extensively used the index for the Newcastle Morning Herald. The Bathurst Times and Goulburn Herald were consulted for varying periods. The newspapers were especially valuable for the period prior to 1883 when there was little unionism and periods when there were few union records. There were interviews with union officials and activists for the period after 1915.

The Noel Butlin Archives Centre contains many union collections that are crucial for researching industrial relations on the New South Wales Government Railways. These include the NSW Branch of the Australian Railways Union (E89), the National office of the Australian Railways Union (N5), the NSW Division of the Australian Federated Unin of Locomotive Enginemen (E99), the National Office of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen (T60), the National Union of Rail Workers of Australia (E80, N7), the Amalgamated metal Workers' Union (T23, E162, M24) and the Federated Ironworkers' Association (E175 et al).

While these records dealt primarily with the central office activities of these unions, there were also some useful sub-branch records. These include the Sydney Branch of the Locomotive Engine Drivers' Firemens' and Cleaners' Association (E99/4-5) and the Cardiff Branch of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (E162/50/1).

The Union deposits also contained valuable management records no longer held by the State Rail Authority Archives. This material includes correspondence, circulars and staff magazines. The National Union of Rail Workers of Australia has several circulars issued by the Chief Mechanical Engineer appealing to 'high class skilled workmen' and the aristocrats of labour' to improve productivity (E80/59/3).

There are also arbitration and Royal Commission trancripts in the union deposits. While some of these records may be obtained elsewhere, these collections provide accompanying correspondence and documents.

The collection of the NSW Division of the AFULE contains the transcript of the union's first state award (E99/35/2). The National Union of Rail Workers deposit contains the transcript of the Edmunds Royal Commission (E80/51/1), which provided the evidence of railway management assistance to the 1917 loyalist unions.

Another important feature of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre is its serials collection. Sheehan's Bulletin of Proceedings in the Commonswealth Arbitration Court was especially useful. This provided a day to day account of the Court's proceedings. Sheehan's Bulletin helped me trace the progress of particular logs of claims and prcoeedings.

The Noel Butlin Archives is an extremely rich source of data on the NSW Government Railways. Its union deposits, not only provide important insights into their acitivities, but are a useful guide for understanding the role of management and the state in railway industrial relations.