



# The evolution of Australian unions

A brief history of Australian unions,  
key developments, and  
achievements of union movement  
in the last 200 years



**Australian  
Nursing &  
Midwifery  
Federation**  
VICTORIAN BRANCH



### 1788-1849

NSW was settled as an English penal colony, after the landing of Captain Phillip on 26 January 1788. Majority of the First Fleet were convicts, who certainly deserved to be called workers. Their struggles were a lead up to unionism in Australia.

- 1788 — Convicts Strike, demanding daily issue of rations, not weekly issue.
- Castle Hill Rebellion: protest on conditions and rations. — 1804
- 1822 — James Straighter, convict shepherd sentenced to 500 lashes, one month solitary confinement on bread and water, and five years penal servitude for 'inciting his Masters' servants to combine for the purposes of obliging him to raise the wages and increase their rations'.
- 1828 — Masters and Servants Act of NSW provided that 'servants could be imprisoned and have their wages forfeited for refusal to work or for destruction of property, and that Masters found guilty of ill-usage should be liable to pay damages up to 6 months wages'.
- 1829 — Typographers, supported by carpenters, successfully strike for payment in sterling, against currency reform, which threatened the value of wages.
- Shipwrights union formed. — 1830
- Boatbuilders union formed. — 1831
- 1833 — Cabinetmakers union formed.
- Society of Compositors strike and win wage increase of 5s5d per week. — 1838
- 1840 — Economic depression leads to the formation of the Mutual Protection Society to protect the interests of the middle and working classes of NSW.
- Society of Compositors campaign to restrict the number of apprentices. The government uses convict compositors as strike-breakers. — 1843
- 1844 — The Early Closing Movement seeks the reduction of working hours from 14 to 12 per day.
- Political activity of the working class leads to the formation of the Anti-Transportation League. — 1848

### 1850-1900

This period saw the early development of Australian trade unions. Legislation had existed in Britain outlawing unions, similar in intent to the *Masters and Servants Act*, until the passing of the *Trade Union Act* in 1871. The English and Irish anti-union legislation was not particularly successful in those countries, nor did it prevent union activity in Australia. Transportation ended in the eastern states in 1853, and in WA in 1868. Various craft unions were formed.



- 1850 — Stonemasons union formed.
- The Eureka Stockade results in the deaths of 10 Irish, 2 Scots, 2 Canadians, 2 English, 2 Germans and 1 Australian. — 1854
- 1856 — The 8 Hour Day Movement is formed by the Stonemasons in Melbourne and Sydney.
- Melbourne Trades Hall Committee help unions to cooperate with each other. — 1858
- The first recorded game of Australian rules football occurs between two schoolboy teams. — 1858

- Men of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station Victoria demand wage payments for their labour and official tenure of the station.

1869
- The Sydney Trades and Labor Council formed.

1870
- The Amalgamated Miners Association formed. The first Seamans Unions formed in Sydney and Melbourne.

1873
- The Seamans Union organises the maritime strike against the use of cheap Chinese labour by the Australian United Steam Navigation Company.

1878
- The Inter-Colonial Trade Union Congress - the forerunner of the ACTU - is formed. Congress unanimously opposes Chinese immigration.

1879
- The NSW Trade Union Act is passed, giving union rights and registration.

1881
- The Victorian Tailoresses Union is formed, as is the Waterside Workers Union.

1882
- The Intercolonial Trade Union Congress is attended by women delegates.

1884
- The first Board of Arbitration resolves the dispute in favour of the workers.

1885
- The Shearers Union is formed.

1886
- Employers form the employers' unions - the Pastoralists Union, the Chamber of Manufacturers, and the Steamship Owners Association.

1890
- The Shearers Union strike over freedom of contract.

1891
- Miners strike in Broken Hill over wage cuts and employment of scabs.

1892
- The Shearers Union strikes again on same issues. The Masters and Servants Act is used against the union - 23 years after England proclaimed the Trade Union Act. In South Australia women win the right to vote.

1894
- Intercolonial Trade Union Congress resolves to extend the restrictions on Chinese immigration to all non-European peoples.

1896

## 1900-1939



The experience of the 1890's convinced unionists that legislation establishing arbitration and conciliation courts was required. During the period to 1904 the Australian Labour Federation was formed, the first Labor government in the world was elected in Queensland and the first federal Labor Government was formed in 1904

- Victorian Trained Nurses' Association formed. The Victorian Trained Nurses' Association was primarily concerned with the training and registration of nurses. Melbourne's first nursing school opened in 1926, offering a six to eight-week program. The trainee nurses were also taught manners and etiquette and not to have intercourse (friendly conversation) with doctors.

1901
- Women in NSW and Commonwealth receive the vote.

1902
- Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission established.

1904
- Union membership 97,200 (population 3,774,000). *NSW Industrial Arbitration Act* passed.

1907
- The Minimum Basic Wage is established by Mr Justice Higgins in the Harvester Award.

1911
- Union membership 364,700

1911

**1912** — Strikes in Brisbane over the Tramways Co. refusal to recognise members' right to wear union badges.

The Australian Workers Union formed by rural worker organisations.

**1918**

**1920** — 44 hour week awarded to timber workers and engineers. Others follow suit.

Union membership 703,000.

**1921**

**1923** — The great taste of Australia – Vegemite – is developed by Cyril Percy Callister in Melbourne.

Australian Nursing Federation formed - a national body established to unite the state and territory nursing organisations.

**1924**

**1926** — Federal Crimes Act amended to apply to unions - known as the 'Dog Collar Act'.

ACTU is formed.

**1927**

**1930** — Women are receiving 54% of male wage rates. During the Great Depression the Industrial Court abandons the 'needs' concept of wage fixing and introduces a 10% wage cut.

Union membership 769,000.

**1931**

Australia declares war on emus. We lost!

**1932**

**1934** — Royal Victorian College of Nursing replaces Royal Victorian Trained Nurses' Association. Formed to improve nurse education, but activities became increasingly like those of other trade unions.

The 'Dog Collar Act' is applied to waterside workers who refuse to load scrap iron for shipment to Japan.

**1937**

### 1939 - 1983

The Second World War greatly impacted the Australian workforce. Women joined the workforce in greater numbers and for the first time many earned wages close to men's. High volume post-war migration started changing the nature of the workforce and added to Australian culture. The Liberal-Country Party was elected and would govern Australia for almost 30 years.

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War generated a mass anti-war movement involving some unions. The short term of the Whitlam Labor Government (72-75) saw a number of significant reforms including equal pay (in principle).

**1939** — As a result of the second World War, women replace male workers in a wide range of industries.

Annual Leave of one week becomes standard. Union membership 1,076,600.

**1941**

**1945** — 200 aboriginal peoples, of the Cumeragunga (NSW) Reserve's 300 residents, pack their bags and leave. The mass desertion is both a spontaneous protest about life on the reserve and an industrial action to deprive the management of their agriculture labour.

Total membership of unions affiliated with the ACTU reaches 300,000. Two weeks annual leave is introduced.

**1945**

Men replace women in industry. Child care centres are closed. Union membership 1,284,300.

**1946**

Aboriginal peoples working on stations in the Pilbara, Western Australia, go on strike for better wages and conditions; the strike lasts until 1949.

**1948**

Queensland Railways strike runs for 9 weeks. Queensland meat dispute follows a campaign organised by the ACTU. 40 hour week is gained. Prime Minister Chifley restores penal provisions.



State branch of the Australian United Nurses Association became the Australian Nursing Federation Employees Section Victorian Branch.

This became the 'employees' section of the Royal Victorian College of Nursing, which was the professional organisation. The female wage rate is lifted to 75% of the male wage rate.

Union membership 1,690,200.

Annual Leave of 3 weeks becomes standard.

Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decides to grant Aboriginal peoples on Northern Territory Cattle Stations equal pay with Europeans, from 1st December 1968.

A Federal referendum gives a massive 'yes' vote for Aboriginal peoples to gain Australian citizenship and federal control of Aboriginal affairs. Aboriginal peoples are to be included in the census.

Union membership 2,436,600.

The ACTU's second equal pay case results in the principle of equal pay for equal work being established.

Four weeks annual leave becomes standard.

Cyclone Tracy devastates Darwin on Christmas Eve.

Wage indexation is introduced as the main method of wage fixing. Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) established.

The first work related child care centre since the Second World War is opened at Ryde.

Sydney's first gay and lesbian mardi-gras.

The Royal Australian Nursing Federation's no-strike clause was discarded in 1983. The first Victorian nurses' strike – of five days – followed in 1985. The handmaiden days were over. Nurses now had a professional, industrial and political voice.

The Coal Strike for 35 hour week and Long Service Leave result in the use of troops under the "National Emergency (Coal Strike) Act".

Cost of living increases are abolished by the Australian Commission. Penal powers over unions give "teeth to the Act", allowing heavy fines and jail sentences to be applied to unions, officials and members who participate in industrial action.

ACTU restructures its executive to allow unions from each industry group to elect a representative member.

ACTU files claims to remove the discriminatory clauses in the Federal and State awards relating to the employment of Aboriginal peoples:

- Pastoral Industry Award
- Station Hands Award
- Cattle Station Industry (NT) Award.

The ACTU's Equal Pay Case paves the way for women to receive pay equal to that of men performing same duties by 1975.

### 1970s – Groovy baby!

Australian Nursing Federation Employees Section Victorian Branch changes name to the Royal Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch). It wasn't until 1975 that the Royal Victorian College of Nursing and the Victorian Branch of the federation merged to become a combined professional and industrial organisation.

They ran a series of successful Wage Board cases, arguing that nurses deserved wage rises to reflect increased workloads. For the first time, nurses' wages were being debated in Parliament. Newspapers were calling the rise an 'insult' and for nurses to be paid at least the same as teachers. At the end of the 70s student nurses were responsible for entire hospital wards, experienced nurses were paid the same wages as cleaners, and with an acute shortage of 1300 nurses across VIC, patient workloads were unsafe.

ACTU expands after the merger of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Association (ACSPA). The right of women workers to 12 months unpaid maternity leave is achieved. Skylab re-enters the earth's atmosphere and debris crashes into the Western Australian town of Esperance – the council charges NASA \$400 for littering. NASA has yet to pay.



## 1939 - 1983

The Accord between the ACTU and the ALP, and election of a federal Labor government, ushered in a new phase in industrial relations. Unions became involved in tripartite processes and significant changes were made to industrial relations legislation. Maternity leave, occupational superannuation, then later, family leave became award entitlements. Structural problems in the economy were addressed by unions through award restructuring. Strategic unionism saw the amalgamation of some 300 unions into 20 'super' unions. Enterprise bargaining became the main avenue for wage increases. In the latter part of this era, conservative State and Federal Governments initiated anti-worker and anti-union legislation

1981 Wage Indexation is abandoned. 38 hour week is achieved in federal Metal Industry and other awards. ACTU expands after the merger of the Council of Australian Government Employee Organisation (CAGEO).

1983 The Accord ushers in a new era for industrial relations and economic management. Cost of living adjustments and a centralised system of wage fixation are introduced. ACTU Congress elects first woman to the ACTU executive.

1984 Job Protection Case. National Occupational Health & Safety Commission is established. Union membership 3,028,500.

1986 In October 1986, Victorian nurses began their longest strike after the failure of repeated talks with the health minister, David White, over the implementation of the state industrial relations Commission career structure decision. Skeleton staff were left in many wards while picket lines, tents and caravans were set up outside hospitals across Victoria. The Cain state government threatened to bring in the police and the Industrial Relations Commission threatened to arbitrate on the issues in dispute without the nurses' union present. After more talks failed, Royal Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch) Secretary Irene Bolger announced the strike would escalate and nurses at a number of emergency departments joined colleagues on the picket line. Finally, in December, after 50 days, nurses returned to work. The ANMF ran its case before the State Industrial Relations Commission and in January 1987 it handed down a decision giving nurses and midwives many of the pay rises, conditions and career structure they had fought for.

The Accord Mark II.

1981



1983

1984

1985

1986

1987

1988

1989

1990s

Queensland power industry dispute leads to draconian anti-union law passed by State Parliament. ACTU Congress expands to incorporate State public service unions. The ACTU's test case on adoption leave is successful.

ACTU Congress elects 5 women to the ACTU Executive. The two tiered wage system is introduced. Unions begin a drive for industry and award restructuring.

ACTU/CAI issue joint statement on participative practices (industrial democracy). *Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904* replaced by *Industrial Relations Act 1988*. Structural Efficiency Principle is introduced.

Unions embark on Award Restructuring process. ACTU drive to reform the Australian education and training system.

Despite attempts by governments to downsize and privatise the health sector, the Australian Nursing Federation remains one of few unions to maintain a steady increase in membership. Other successes in this period included a program to reduce the high number of nurses' back injuries caused by lifting patients.

A financially strong union proved to be vital following the 1992 election of the Liberal Kennett Government when nurses faced mass redundancies and critical staff shortages. After eight years under the Kennett Government, the nurses' campaign 'Nursing the system back to health' secured the world's first mandated minimum nurse-to-patient ratios and won back conditions and positions that had been lost during the Kennett years.

Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993 comes into operation.

Conservative Howard Government elected - introduces *Workplace Relations Act*, reducing workers' entitlements under awards and severely limiting unions' capacity to organise and pursue members' interests.

### 2000s

Unions and the ACTU led a community campaign against the Howard Government's industrial relations laws – 'WorkChoices'.

The introduction of ratios in 2000 resulted in a need to employ additional nurses to fill 1300 vacancies. By 2006 an additional 7000 nurses had been recruited into the public system, as nurses returned to practice. Despite the proven success of ratios, Victorian nurses had to fight to keep them in subsequent enterprise agreement negotiations.

ANMF (Victorian Branch) membership has increased from 43,000 in 2005 to 70,000 in 2014, further consolidating the Victorian branch of the ANMF as an effective industrial and professional voice for Victorian nurses, midwives and carers.

Australian economy receives an uplift with the start of a mining boom, mainly out of Western Australia. Sharan Burrow elected President of the ACTU.

Several high-profile corporate collapses, including Ansett Airlines, results in union movement to secure workers' entitlements. Federal Government responds by introducing workers' entitlement safety net scheme – GEERS. ACTU takes landmark Reasonable Hours Test Case to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. Current State Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick was elected to the position in 2001, the same year as the Victorian nurses' union celebrated its centenary.

1990s

The High Court releases its Mabo judgement, re-establishing Indigenous native title to land.

1992

Enterprise bargaining is introduced into *Industrial Relations Act*. Union amalgamation accelerates. ACTU supports reconciliation with Australian Indigenous peoples. Universal superannuation introduced 1<sup>st</sup> July 1992. ACTU wins Parental Leave test case.

1993

Victorian government introduces legislation to reduce award and union coverage. ACTU Congress launches the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Trade Union Employment Development Strategy.

1994

1995

Jennie George elected as first woman President of the ACTU. ACTU wins Personal Carers' Leave Test case. First Organising Works Program begins to train new organisers.

1996

1998

MUA dispute - union movement stands together and, with community support, wins a great victory against employer and Government attacks on the right to organise and be a union member.

1999

Second wave of anti-union legislation from the Howard Government is defeated by a combination of union and community activity. Unions @ work adopted by ACTU as blueprint for renewal and rebuilding of the union movement. Greg Combet appointed Secretary of the ACTU.

2000s

The union scorecard:

- The right of workers to form a union which elects its own independent representatives
- Award to ensure that employers observe minimum wages and working conditions
- Equal pay
- Long service leave
- Pay loading for evenings, nights and weekends
- Paid public holidays
- Periodic wage increases
- Maternity/adoption/parental leave
- Annual leave and leave loading
- Protective clothing and equipment provided by the employer
- Occupational health and safety laws
- Compensation for injury
- Occupational superannuation; The right to be given notice and to be consulted about changes at work
- Personal carer's leave.

2001

2002

Cole Royal Commission into the building and construction industry targets unions and their members. ACTU holds Working Hours Summit. Unions in the construction industry begin securing 36- hour week for members.

- 2004 A union-led campaign for fair compensation for asbestos victims of James Hardie culminates in the largest personal injury settlement in Australian history.
- 2005 Unions launch the Your Rights at Work community campaign against the Howard Government's proposed new workplace laws. On November 15, more than half-a-million Australians, many linked by a Sky Channel broadcast, gathered in capital cities and towns in a national day of protest.
- 2006 Howard Government's WorkChoices laws come into effect in March, ripping away protection from unfair dismissal, reducing basic workers' entitlements, and neutering the independent industrial umpire.
- 2007 Jeff Lawrence appointed Secretary of the ACTU. Rudd Labor Government elected as a result of massive public backlash against WorkChoices.
- 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Labor Government bans new Australian Workplace Agreements (individual contracts).
- 2009 Fair Work Laws replace *Workplace Relations Act* (WorkChoices) and provide Australian workers with strong collective bargaining rights, protection from unfair dismissal and a robust safety net. An 18-week universal paid maternity leave scheme is announced in Federal Budget following 30-year union campaign.
- 2010 Ged Kearney elected President of the ACTU. She replaces Sharan Burrow, who has been elected General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.
- 2011 National paid parental leave scheme begins. Unions launch the Secure Jobs Better Future campaign to improve the rights and working lives of the 40% of the Australian workforce employed in insecure work.
- 2012 Labor Government passes legislation to abolish the Australian Building and Construction Commission. A Fair Work Australia ruling gives social and community sector workers pay increases of between 23% and 45% over the next eight years.
- 2013 Abbott Government elected. The Australian Nursing Federation changed its name to the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation to recognise the specialist skills and knowledge of midwife members.
- 2014 Government establishes Royal Commission into union corruption; blames major job losses in manufacturing industries on "excessive wages and conditions" rather than Howard-era economic policies.
- 2015 Safe Patient Care Act passed by newly elected Andrew's Government. Ratio's no longer up for negotiation during enterprise agreement negotiations, something that has been prevalent during all negotiations since the implementation of ratios. Focus shifts, improving wages, entitlements and work conditions.
- 2016 With ratios no longer an item for negotiation, public sector nurses and midwives finally recognised with pay parity with their NSW counterparts as a result of 2016 enterprise agreement negotiations.
- 2017 Celebration of 100 years of maternal and child health nursing in Victoria. Unions, including ANMF, were actively involved in the Same Sex Marriage Campaign which led to a non-compulsory postal survey resulting in the legalisation of same sex marriage after 62% respondents voted 'yes'.
- 2018 Victorian nurses and midwives reach net pay parity with NSW counterparts. *Safe Patient Care Amendment Act* passes and 50 per cent rule begins to be abolished.
- 2019 *Safe Patient Care Act 2015 Amendment Bill* introduced to Parliament by a re-elected Andrew's government. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety is established by the Australian Government.



## 2020

The world is impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic, in 2020 and 2021 ANMF Members worked despite the lack of vaccines. Lisa Fitzpatrick wrote in the book 'Head On':

*"Of course, they were afraid. We all were. But despite their fear, they stepped out of their comfort zones every day and met the challenges before them head on. Healthcare in the time of COVID needed new ways of thinking and doing. It demanded creativity, flexibility and dexterity – and our members and their colleagues delivered. They made personal sacrifices – often moving away from their families so they could keep caring for the community as COVID spread and their risk of exposure intensified."*

A candle-light vigil Australian and New Zealand nurses and midwives honoured those colleagues lost to Covid on International Nurses Day.

ANMF Vic Branch published most up to date Covid-19 information daily, negotiated with the State and Federal Governments, to ensure members were well informed and had Covid-19 entitlements to access.

An Aged Care Work Value case, resulted in the FWC awarding a 15% pay rise for Aged Care Award Workers.

ANMF Vic Branch went on to successfully fight for the full amount of the wage increase to go into the pockets of aged care workers.

The Federal Government passed the Climate Change Bill.

The Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Bill passed- this placed a positive duty on employers to ensure workplaces are free of sexual harassment.

The Secure Jobs, Better Pay Bill passed - brought in extensive reform in the Fair Work Act which will allow 'multi-enterprise bargaining'.

## 2020

After 25 years of ANMF and members working to see improvements to aged care The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety was established in 2018 and the final report was released on 1 March 2021

## 2021

The Labor Party won the Federal Election, Anthony Albanese became Prime Minister. Anthony Albanese's Election promises aligned with the national ANMF's Aged Care Campaign 'It's not too much'. Aged Care legislation Bills were passed which required:

- Registered nurses in aged care facilities 24/7
- Mandatory 200 minutes of care time per resident per day (including 40 RN Minutes).
- Revised Aged Care Quality Standards.
- New Governance requirements.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022 came into effect; with this Act comes significant reforms in Public Sector Mental Health.

## 2022

Closing the Loopholes Act :

- general protections for all Job reps in all sectors when carrying out their role.
- Reasonable access to paid leave to attend Union training.
- Right to disconnect.

## 2023

ANMF Vic Branch membership exceeds 1000,000.

## 2024

The Allan Victorian Labor Government approve changes to work cover entitlements reducing access to compensation payments for burnout and stress.

