



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.

Castle Hill Rebellion: protest on conditions and rations.

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'.

Shipwrights union formed.

Cabinetmakers union formed.

Economic depression leads to the formation of the Mutual Protection Society to protect the interests of the middle and working classes of NSW.

The Early Closing Movement seeks the reduction of working hours from 14 to 12 per day.

1788

Convicts strike, demanding daily issue of rations, not weekly issue.

1804

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'.

1822

1828

Typographers, supported by carpenters, successfully strike for payment in sterling, against currency reform, which threatened the value of wages.

1829

1830

1831

Boatbuilders union formed.

1833

1838

Society of Compositors strike and win wage increase of 5s5d per week.

1840

1843

Society of Compositors campaign to restrict the number of apprentices. The government uses convict compositors as strike-breakers.

1844

1848

Political activity of the working class leads to the formation of the Anti-Transportation League.



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.

Stonemasons union formed.

The 8 Hour Day Movement is formed by the stonemasons in Melbourne and Sydney. Melbourne Trades Hall Committee helps unions to cooperate with each other.

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

1850

1854

The Eureka Stockade results in the deaths of 10 Irish, 2 Scots, 2 Canadians, 2 English, 2 Germans and 1 Australian.

1856

1858

The first recorded game of Australian rules football occurs between two schoolboy teams.

1869

1870

The Sydney Trades and Labor Council formed.



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

1881

The *N.S.W. Trade Union Act* is passed, giving union rights and registration.

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

1882

1884

The Intercolonial Trade Union Congress is attended by women delegates.

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

1885

1886

The Shearers Union formed.

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

1890

1891

The Shearers Union strike over freedom of contract.

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

1892

1894

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.

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

1896

1900-1939

The experience of the 1890s 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.



Women in NSW and Commonwealth receive the vote.

1901

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

1902

Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission established.

1904

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

1907

1911

Union membership 364,700.

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

1912

1918

The Australian Workers Union formed by rural worker organisations.

44-hour week awarded to timber workers and engineers. Others follow suit.

1920

1921

Union membership 703,000.

The great taste of Australia - Vegemite - is developed by Cyril Percy Callister in Melbourne.

1923

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

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.

Australia declares war on emus. We lost!

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

1924

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

1926

1927

ACTU is formed.

1930

1931

Union membership 769,000.

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.

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).



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

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

Men replace women in industry. Childcare centres are closed. Union membership 1,284,300. Aboriginal peoples working on stations in the Pilbara, Western Australia, go on strike for better wages and conditions; the strike lasts until 1949.

The Coal Strike for 35-hour week and long service leave results 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.

1939

As a result of the Second World War, women replace male workers in a wide range of industries. Work-based childcare facilities are provided and most workers receive 90% of male rates. 200 Aboriginal peoples, of the Cummeragunga (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.

1941

1945

1946

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.

1949

1950

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.

1953

1956

Union membership 1,690,200.

1957

1963

Annual leave of 3 weeks becomes standard.

1965

1966

Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decides to grant Aboriginal peoples on Northern Territory cattle stations equal pay with Europeans, from 1 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.

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 the state, patient workloads were unsafe.

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.

1967

1969

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

1971

Union membership 2,436,600.

1972

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

1973

Four weeks annual leave becomes standard.

1974

Cyclone Tracy devastates Darwin on Christmas Eve.

1975

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

1977

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

1978

Sydney's first gay and lesbian mardi-gras.

1979

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.

1980

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.

1985

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.

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 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. Introduction of universal superannuation for Australian workers.

The High Court releases its Mabo judgement, re-establishing Indigenous native title to land. Enterprise bargaining is introduced into *Industrial Relations Act*. Union amalgamation accelerates. ACTU supports reconciliation with Australian Indigenous peoples. ACTU wins parental leave test case.

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

Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993 comes into operation.

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.

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

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.

2000-01

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.

1986

1987

1988

1989

1992

1993

1994

1995

1996

1998

1999

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* is 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.

1990s

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.

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.

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.

2000-01 continued

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 personal 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.

A union-led campaign for fair compensation for asbestos victims of James Hardie culminates in the largest personal injury settlement in Australian history.

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.

Global financial crisis. Labor Government bans new Australian workplace agreements (individual contracts).

Ged Kearney elected President of the ACTU. She replaces Sharan Burrow, who was elected General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation.

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.

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.

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.

Celebration of 100 years of maternal and child health nursing in Victoria.

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.

2001

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 ANMF (Victorian Branch) Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick was elected to the position in 2001, the same year as the Victorian nurses' union celebrated its centenary.

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

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.

2005

2006

Jeff Lawrence appointed Secretary of the ACTU. Rudd Labor Government elected as a result of massive public backlash against WorkChoices.

2007

2008

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.

2009

2010

2011

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.

2012

2013

Abbott Government elected. The Australian Nursing Federation changed its name to the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation to recognise the new separate registration and specialist skills and knowledge of midwife members.

2014

2015

Safe Patient Care Act passed by newly elected Andrews Government. Ratios 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

2017

Safe Patient Care Act 2015 Amendment Bill introduced to Parliament by a re-elected Andrews government.

2018

2019

2020

Declared *International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife*, celebrating 200 years since the birth of the world's most famous nurse, Florence Nightingale.

Continuing to grow in strength and numbers, the ANMF (Vic Branch) reaches over 90,000 members.

