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AGENCY AND DISCOURSE IN LABOUR HISTORY:

A CASE STUDY OF THE SEQEB DISPUTE

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is original and is my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. Also, I declare that the material contained in this dissertation has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

.....

Mark Sherry

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reviews many Australian labour histories and identifies common methodological and conceptual limitations with regard to the treatment of class, discourse, agency and gender. Those limitations include an institutional focus, a failure to integrate women and a failure to consult effectively with rank and file members of trade unions. A case study of the 1985 South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) dispute is presented in order to demonstrate that by consulting effectively with the rank and file of the union movement, moving away from a purely institutional focus and by emphasising the role of politics, agency and discourse, labour history can become descriptively richer and more theoretically rigorous.

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ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------|---|
| ACTU | Australian Council of Trades Unions |
| ALP | Australian Labor Party |
| ARU | Australian Railways Union |
| ATEA | Australian Telecommunications Employees Association |
| ETU | Electrical Trades Union |
| FCU | Federated Clerks Union |
| IS | International Socialists |
| ITFA | Independent Teachers Federation of Australia |
| MOA | Municipal Officers Association |
| QCI | Queensland Confederation of Industry |
| QATIS | Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools |
| QTU | Queensland Teachers Union |
| SEQEB | South East Queensland Electricity Board |
| SL | Socialist Left |
| TLC | Queensland Trades and Labour Council |

PREFACE

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE SEQEB DISPUTE

The dispute began as a conflict over the use of contract labour instead of permanent staff by the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB). Members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) placed bans on certain work and when negotiations with management broke down, they engaged in strike action. The dispute escalated when the Queensland Government became involved in the dispute, sacked 1002 striking ETU members and threatened to introduce fines of up to \$50,000 for individual unionists who took strike action. At the height of the dispute, over one million workers were either stood down or on strike. Mass industrial action, including power blackouts, ended on the 21st of February 1985 when the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland issued a directive to cease such actions...

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine some of the methodological and conceptual limitations of previous Australian labour histories and to develop an approach to studying labour history which avoids many of these problems. In this dissertation, I suggest that many previous Australian labour histories have been underpinned by:

- * a poorly theorised conception of class;
- * a gender-blind approach to politics and industrial relations;
- * a failure to consult effectively with workers and their families and a failure to accurately assess their discourses and political perspectives; and
- * a strong focus on the behaviour, leadership and policies of industrial relations institutions, often combined with simplistic assumptions about their unity and cohesion.

The dissertation presents a case study of the 1985 SEQEB dispute in order to demonstrate that by consulting effectively with the rank and file of the union movement, moving away from a purely institutional focus and by emphasising the role of politics, agency and discourse, labour history can be descriptively richer, more theoretically rigorous and more convincing than previous approaches.

My reason for focussing on the SEQEB dispute is that it was one of the most important industrial disputes in recent Australian history, with profound implications for

Queensland's political and industrial systems. Accordingly, it has been extensively studied by political scientists, historians and industrial relations experts. However, I was personally involved in the dispute and an abundance of previously untapped information has been made available to me. This evidence has led me to conclude that the existing literature on the strike has important empirical, theoretical and methodological weaknesses. My extensive reading in the area of Australian labour history suggests that these weaknesses reflect larger theoretical and methodological limitations. It is the purpose of this dissertation to explore these limitations and to demonstrate through the case study of the SEQEB dispute that an alternative approach may produce more accurate and credible results.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a brief outline of the structure of the dissertation in order to clarify the purpose of the dissertation and discuss how the approach differs from previous labour histories. I then explain my theoretical and methodological approach, with particular emphasis on the nature of the theoretical material used to inform the discussion of class and discourse within the case study of the SEQEB dispute. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of the topic and the contribution of the dissertation to the discipline of political science.

Dissertation Structure

In this dissertation, I suggest that many of the limitations within the literature on the SEQEB dispute stem from wider theoretical and methodological weaknesses within the

Australian labour history tradition. Accordingly, Chapter Two provides an overview of that tradition. The first section of the Chapter identifies the main elements of the Australian labour history tradition, examining in particular the institutional focus, poorly theorised conception of class and gender-blind approach to politics and industrial relations. The second section of the Chapter examines the changes within Australian labour histories following the rise of the New Left and the development of feminist and social history in the 1970s. These changes include increased attention to gender and ethnicity issues and attempts to write "history from below" (rather than institutional histories), often relying on oral history. The Chapter concludes by identifying some of the continuing weaknesses of Australian labour histories.

Chapter Three involves a review of previous literature on the SEQEB dispute and seeks to investigate whether previous histories of the dispute have reproduced the methodological and theoretical limitations of the Australian labour history tradition. Such limitations may mean that the literature on the SEQEB strike has underestimated working class activity in the dispute, over-estimated the strength and unity of the state and capital, failed to understand the discourse of the striking families, ignored the role of women, and failed to capture important political and industrial developments which affected the union movement, the Government and employers. By exposing such limitations within the existing body of literature, the Chapter identifies a number of areas for further investigation in the substantive empirical element of the thesis, Chapter Four.

The purpose of Chapter Four is to overcome the limitations within the literature on the SEQEB strike by incorporating alternative theoretical and methodological principles. One of the effects of the poorly theorised conception of class which has underpinned much of the literature on the SEQEB strike is that it has supported an overly pessimistic view of the dispute. Such a view presents the State Government and “big business” as firmly united behind the attack on the labour movement, while there was apparently little support for the striking families from the labour movement. It is the purpose of Chapter Four to challenge this conventional view of the SEQEB dispute and to suggest that a re-assessment of the strength of the state, capital and organised labour in the SEQEB dispute, utilising a more comprehensive conceptualisation of class, is necessary. Such a re-assessment involves both reviewing the support for organised labour (which was far greater than previous accounts have recognised) and acknowledging the divisions which occurred amongst capitalists and the State Government (which placed them in a weaker position than the existing body of literature has recognised).

Chapter Four examines whether the institutional focus of many histories of the SEQEB dispute led to the under-estimation of support for the striking families. This institutional focus, inherent in the Australian labour history tradition, is least impressive when there is large-scale activity occurring outside of formal trade union structures. Although it has not been recognised in the literature, this was precisely the situation which occurred in the SEQEB dispute. By demonstrating that the strikers and their families adopted an

independent course of action, mostly without the support of the official trade union movement, the Chapter will suggest that the institutional focus underpinning the existing body of literature on the SEQEB dispute has been inadequate.

In contrast to those accounts of the SEQEB dispute which suggest there was little support for the striking families amongst organised labour, Chapter Four seeks to demonstrate that such support was massive, often wildcat and was sustained for much longer than the previous literature has recognised. By acknowledging the large-scale activity which occurred without formal trade union sanction, and by recognising that the striking families developed an independent discourse which was adopted by thousands of other workers throughout Australia, this Chapter offers an alternative assessment of the strength of the labour movement. It seeks to demonstrate that industrial action by the labour movement, in the electricity industry in particular, had important political and industrial effects on the state and on capitalists which the previous literature has not recognised or investigated.

One of the aims of the case study on the SEQEB dispute is to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the perceptions of the people involved in the dispute by utilising discourse analysis. It seeks to investigate whether previous histories have been accurate in attributing a sense of demoralisation and passivity to the striking families. In this regard, the extensive use of oral history is seen as a methodological tool which facilitates a more effective understanding of the perspectives of the men and women

involved in the dispute. In analysing the discourse of the striking families, another limitation of the existing body of literature became obvious: the absence of women in previous accounts of the strike. Whereas women have traditionally been absent from accounts of the dispute, the case study demonstrates that they played a vital role in generating support for the strike. Not only were they highly visible on the picket lines, in the marches and in the rallies designed to muster support for the strike, they contributed significantly to the political discourse of the strike.

Chapter Five of the thesis, the Conclusion, summarises the results obtained and their importance to the discipline of political science. The case study of the SEQEB dispute suggests a number of important lessons for the broader study of class. These are that key elements of a study of class mobilisation must be an analysis of the discourses and experiences of workers and their families, combined with a focus on gender issues, an examination of the internal dynamics of the union movement and a recognition of the divisions amongst capitalists and the state.

Having outlined the structure of the dissertation, I now provide further information on the theoretical and methodological basis of the dissertation.

The Theoretical and Methodological Basis of the Dissertation

The thesis contains many criticisms of previous Australian labour histories for their inadequate conceptualisation of class and it therefore is appropriate to begin the dissertation by outlining the theory of class which underpins this dissertation and its consequences for the sources and methodology used. Like many social histories,¹ the thesis adopts the late E. P. Thompson's definition of class:

... the notion of class entails the notion of a historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead... The finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context... Class happens when some men(sic), as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men (sic) whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.²

An essential element of Thompson's conceptualisation of class is that class is viewed as a relationship, rather than a structure. Thompson rejected the orthodox Marxist position that classes could be defined simply by reference to the mode of production. While he accepted that the relations of production distribute people into class situations and create the possible conditions for struggle, he sought to identify the complex and contradictory processes which led to the development and maintenance of class dispositions. In this regard, he focussed on the patterns which emerged over time in

¹ Such as Rickard, J. Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth 1890-1910, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1976; Connell, R.W. and Irving, T.H. Class Structure in Australian History, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980

² Thompson, E.P. The Making of the English Working Class, Ringwood, Penguin, 1979 p.9

social relations, institutions and values.³ Thompson's absolute rejection of economism and mechanical determinisms and his emphasis on the cultural, experiential and ideological elements of class had profound implications for the study of class processes.

It resulted in increased emphasis being placed on working class cultural and political activities and more attention being paid to human agency.

Thompson recognised that there can be no satisfactory, general analysis of class because class forces are not unified, but fractured and fissured. He closely studied specific local cases, and stressed the complexity and historical specificity of the cultural, political and ideological struggles which he recorded.⁴ Partly as a result of Thompson's influence, many Marxist examinations of class acknowledged that it was not possible to "read off" political developments from the labour/capital dynamic and they moved away from their traditional essentialist character and increasingly emphasised indeterminacy, complexity, agency, and the autonomy of political and cultural developments.⁵

While Thompson's methodology certainly moved Marxist history beyond economism, it has nevertheless been subject to important critiques. Perhaps the most important

³ Meiksins Wood, E. "The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E.P. Thompson and His Critics" Studies in Political Economy, No.9, Fall 1982, p. 50

⁴ For more information on the so-called "culturalist" approach to history, see Johnson, R. "Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History", History Workshop, No.6, Autumn 1978, pp.79-100.

⁵ For more discussion about the essentialism of traditional Marxist approaches towards class, see Hindess, B. "Classes and Politics in Marxist Theory" in Littlejohn, G. et al (eds.) Power and the State, London, Croom Helm, 1978, pp.72-97

criticism has been made by Gareth Steadman-Jones, who has criticised Thompson's failure to fully recognise the importance of discourse in the production of shared experiences and identities. In Languages of Class, one of the most well known European attempts to analyse the language of historical actors in order to question the traditional Marxist emphasis on material causality, Steadman-Jones examined the language used by Chartists in order to gain a greater appreciation of Chartism as a political movement.⁶ He argued that a focus on language provided historians not only with an opportunity to understand the terms under which a political movement interprets its own oppression, but also a chance to examine the opportunities it saw and the boundaries it identified within the political environment. He felt that Thompson treated the notion of class inadequately, and that it was necessary to examine the assumptions underpinning the "languages of class". Steadman-Jones stressed that the popularity of Chartism was at least in part contingent upon its ability to explain existing economic, social and political conditions within its own language. The influence of Languages of Class was profound; almost immediately, it led to an increased focus on discourse within labour history.

Although Steadman-Jones has been labelled the "intellectual godfather of revisionism in labour history",⁷ his emphasis on language and discourse within labour histories is by no means unique. An important element of the "new social history" in Europe has been

⁶ Steadman-Jones, G. Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982, Cambridge University Press, 1983

⁷ Price, R. op cit p.254

the increased attention which has been paid to the language used by historical actors. It is now commonly accepted that language is more than a passive medium for expressing interests and that it actively constitutes social identities.⁸ Steinberg has provided an excellent justification for including discourse analysis in labour histories, suggesting that (unlike structuralist approaches to class) it can explain why people unite around a certain set of political goals:

...it is through discourse that we provide

- (a) generalised maps of relations among actors, contexts, and activities,
- (b) evaluative frames for these, and
- (c) possibilities for alternative social relations and situations.⁹

Discourse, in this context, is taken to mean "the process through which actors create propositional or evaluative accounts of the relations between themselves, other actors and situations, and larger social processes".¹⁰

Sewell's examination of the organisations and the ideologies of French workers prior to the Revolution of 1848 is another recent European labour history which demonstrates that it is insufficient to document workers conditions to understand their political ideologies. Although he recognises that economic changes are important, Sewell suggests that a "sense of class" stems principally from cultural practices and his focus is

⁸ See Berlanstein, L.R. "Introduction" in Berlanstein, L.R. (ed) Rethinking Labor History, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1993, p.11 and Gray, R. "The Deconstructing of the English Working Class" Social History, Vol. 11, No.3, October 1986, pp.363-373

⁹ Steinberg, M.W. "The Re-Making of the English Working Class?", Theory and Society, Vol.20, 1991, p.187.

¹⁰ Steinberg, M.W. ibid p.187

●n the "words, metaphors and rhetorical constructions" of political actors.¹¹ Joan Scott has also utilised discourse analysis to cast doubt on economic interpretations of history in her study of British garment workers during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹² While Marxist writers had previously suggested that economic relations and work were the central elements of the garment workers' struggles, Scott demonstrates that their discourse was not centred around economic relations but equally emphasised sexual and political elements of their lives. Representations of family and gender were related to their conceptualisation of work. She concludes that a shared discourse was the source of their collective identity.

In summary, discourse analysis must be incorporated into labour histories because "language functions within political struggles in a way which is 'prefigurative, not reflective'; political rhetorics - whether of class, the people, the nation, or whatever - construct constituencies rather than simply register their pre-given existence".¹³ Accordingly, discourse analysis is used in this dissertation and provides an interpretive framework within which the language of historical actors is assessed and analysed. While the increasing attention being paid to language has created many methodological difficulties, "there is little doubt that linguistic analysis enables us to better understand

¹¹ Sewell, W.H. Work and Revolution in France, Cambridge University Press, 1980

¹² Scott, J.W. Gender and the Politics of History, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, Chapter Five.

¹³ Gray, R. ibid, p.367

the sources of class consciousness, of how people make sense of the world around them".¹⁴

My methodological approach is also informed by an empathy with the actors who comprise the subject of the analysis. Like the theory of class and the discourse analysis techniques which are utilised throughout the thesis, these hermeneutics are inspired by European labour histories. Corfield has provided a summary of Thompson's influence in this regard:

One of Thompson's key techniques was the style of examination that is known technically as hermeneutics, also summarised by the code word of 'empathy'. This has been especially influential in cultural anthropology, but has increasingly had a marked impact in modern historical and cultural studies. It entails taking all ideas in the past or in other cultures with complete seriousness, and trying to understand them in their own terms.¹⁵

Thompson emphasised that histories must include the winners and the losers - historians must not ignore the feelings, motives and experiences of people who have been defeated, marginalised or otherwise "written off". Spurred on by the democratic principles of the New Left, his history of the Industrial Revolution focussed on groups whose histories may not otherwise have been written. Such principles of historical research were at the heart of his famous comment that "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan,

¹⁴ Price, R. "The Future of British Labour History", International Review of Social History, Vol.XXXVI, 1991, p.256

¹⁵ Corfield, P. J. "E.P. Thompson, the Historian: an Appreciation", New Left Review, September/October 1993, p.15

even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity".¹⁶

My work on the SEQEB dispute has a similar inspiration. For many years, I have been concerned about the manner in which the dispute has been recorded. My concerns revolve around the failure of the existing body of literature on the strike to accurately record the experiences and political perspectives of the striking families. The literature does the striking families a great disservice by failing to recognise that they struggled not only against the draconian position of the Queensland Government but also frequently against the servile attitudes of Queensland's trade union leadership. For many years I have felt that the level of anger amongst the strikers towards the trade union leadership has been seriously under-estimated in accounts of the SEQEB dispute. One of the aims of this dissertation is to correct these limitations within the literature by more accurately recording the agency and discourse of the striking families.

This thesis is not simply the product of an academic quest for information, it is a reflection of my personal commitment to the sacked SEQEB workers and their families.

It was their suggestion that I submit this material as a thesis. I spent almost eight years discussing the SEQEB strike with the people involved in it, both during and after the strike. I was Treasurer of the Staff and Students for Democratic Rights, a University organisation set up to support the SEQEB strikers, and attended many rallies and

¹⁶ Thompson, E.P. The Making of the English Working Class, Ringwood, Penguin, 1979, p.12.

meetings in support of the striking families. I was also editor of a national rank and file trade union magazine and this experience gave me both credibility and contacts which have been invaluable for this thesis. I have been involved with SEQEB strikers in supporting rank and file groups in a number of industries, particularly in the construction industry.

I believe that it was necessary to establish my credibility and earn the right to information over a long period of time. Unfortunately, researchers have often paid little attention to such matters and they have often suffered from a lack of cooperation as a result. Although the issue of protocol has been addressed by researchers working with Aboriginal communities, it has received scant attention from people researching topics relating to the working class. Protocol is important in determining the effectiveness of any meetings or interviews with workers. The fact that I established my credibility over a long period of time in many struggles had very important effects on the quality of information provided to me by SEQEB strikers. I have been placed in positions of considerable trust by SEQEB workers and their families, discussing topics such as the effects which the dispute had on their finances and marriages, as well as their participation in many illegal activities including industrial sabotage. This is the sort of detailed and personal information which is provided to labour historians who follow the correct protocol and establish their credibility over a long period of time.

The evidence used in this thesis stems partly from my first hand observations and also from hundreds of conversations with SEQEB workers and other trade union activists in various political contexts. In researching this thesis, I travelled as far north as Rockhampton, as far west as Emerald and as far south as Melbourne to interview workers involved in the SEQEB dispute and to gather information about their involvement. I travelled around Brisbane for two years interviewing sacked SEQEB workers and their supporters and contacted workers from nearly every SEQEB Depot. As a result, I believe this thesis to be unique amongst Australian labour histories in terms of its closeness to workers. To my knowledge, there has never been another working class history which has drawn information from and involved so many rank and file workers in so many industries.

I firmly believe that the rank and file of the trade union movement should be a central focus of labour history. The rank and file make up a union; they are its lifeblood - its heart and soul. Far too many labour histories have ignored the rank and file, or relegated its role to that of a historical footnote. This thesis hopes to restore the rank and file to their rightful place, as the centrepiece of the analysis. I felt that in order to do so effectively, my relationships with the workers being studied was one of the prime determinants of the quality of the information gathered. I knew that a research project which involved extensive consultations and involved the sacked SEQEB workers would enhance the credibility of the research.

In addition, I believe that people researching and writing working class history need to demonstrate certain personal skills and competencies in order to conduct their work successfully. They need an ability to effectively communicate with working class people, and a knowledge and understanding of their values and cultures, including an ability to identify the issues affecting their lives and to articulate their interests. This is much more likely when the researcher is a member of the working class, like myself, who is known and respected amongst the people being researched. No matter how earnest or good-intentioned a researcher is, working class people are unlikely to speak to them in the same terms as they would if they were speaking to a fellow member of the working class who they know, trust and respect. I was fortunate enough to have the trust and respect of many of the striking families. My experience in researching this thesis indicates that workers are far more likely to agree to an interview if they are introduced to the researcher by one of their workmates. In this respect, I was particularly lucky to have the support of members of both the Strike Committee and the Women's Committee. These people often introduced me to others involved in the strike.

As a corollary to adopting these research methods, I strongly believed that researching labour history should be a two-way process, involving a mutual exchange of information. In the past, labour history researchers have often acted like sponges, sapping information from working class people, being awarded their degrees or getting their books published, but giving nothing back to the workers whose lives and struggles they have recorded. This is often resented by working class people and this process of

exploitation must end. I went out of my way to share the results of my research with the sacked SEQEB workers, their families and their supporters. My methodology is therefore guided by the principles of empathy, observance of protocol and a focus on agency and discourse. It makes extensive use of oral history - an approach consistent with the aim of moving beyond established traditions of previous labour histories.

Murphy has defended the use of oral history in the following manner:

The political claims made for oral history - or strictly speaking for the oral mode of historical memory - are familiar enough. Firstly, it is argued that oral history provides a hearing for those previously unheard, to those not represented in written archives, such as the working class, minorities such as blacks and ethnic groups, or near majorities, such as women. Here oral history is a kind of methodological analogue of a people's history, a history from the bottom of the class structure... A second claim is that puts human flesh on the otherwise dry bones of historical argument, that by asking 'the people' or providing an opportunity for their voice to be heard, we uncover more of the lived texture and intimate experience of everyday life.¹⁷

While there is nothing new in using interviews and evidence which stems from oral traditions in historical research, oral history has become a central element of "new history" because it facilitates re-evaluations of established notions of the past. Morris comments that "Such re-evaluations have involved the recovery of new written source materials previously ignored or neglected as well as oral histories".¹⁸ This thesis certainly reviews a much wider range of sources than many previous accounts of the SEQEB strike - it records not only the broad details of events as recorded in newspapers

¹⁷ Murphy, J. "The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory" Historical Studies, Vol.22, No.87, October 1986, p.159

¹⁸ See Morris, R. "Making Histories/Living History", Social Analysis, No. 27, April 1990, p.83.

and industrial tribunals but also records the personal experiences of strikers and other workers in the dispute.

My list of sources include:

- * ●bservations from my long-term involvement in the trade union movement and personal involvement in the dispute, as well as personal contacts with many of the members of the Strike Committee and the Women's Committee;
- * interviews with key participants in the labour movement - including strikers and their families as well as trade union officials and ALP politicians;
- * a review of all the literature published by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Queensland Trades and Labour Council (TLC) about the dispute;
- * a review of all the literature published by SEQEB about the dispute;
- * a search of the files of the EIU, the TLC, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the Rockhampton Trades and Labour Council, the Municipal Officers Association (MOA), the Australian Railways Union (ARU), the Federated Clerks Union (FCU), the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association (ATEA), the Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools (QATIS) and the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU);
- * a comprehensive search of Courier-Mail, Australian, Telegraph and Queensland Times newspaper articles on the strike;
- * a complete search of the files of many left wing groups, including the International Socialists, the Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, the Staff

and Students for Democratic Rights, the Socialist Party of Australia and Socialist Action;

- * a review of all the minutes of the TLC from 9th September 1983 till the end of the dispute;
- * a review of the Commonwealth and State Parliamentary debates on the SEQEB strike;
- * material provided by the (then) Opposition Mines and Energy Spokesperson Ken Vaughan MLA who was kind enough to allow me unrestricted access to his files;
- * an analysis of all the ACTU circulars on the dispute;
- * transcripts of the court cases associated with the SEQEB dispute, including State Industrial Commission and Commonwealth Arbitration Commission transcripts;
- * a review of all the literature published by strikers during the dispute;
- * a review of other trade union accounts of the dispute including the minutes of various meetings around Australia about the SEQEB dispute and the resolutions which they passed;
- * a review of academic coverage of the strike;
- * personal diaries, letters and videos provided by the striking families and their supporters; and
- * internal trade union minutes, legal papers and other documents.

This range of sources indicates that the dissertation is premised upon the belief that oral history can be an invaluable source of historical documentation, if the material is

reliable and if the material is presented within a sufficiently rigorous interpretive framework. It is the task of the researcher to develop this interpretive framework within which oral evidence can be understood.¹⁹ Murphy stresses that "although oral history techniques have doubtless opened a huge reservoir of historical detail, the oral mode has no franchise on the warmth and intimacy of everyday experience".²⁰ This thesis accepts Murphy's argument and does not rely exclusively on oral evidence. Oral history is treated as one of many competing sources of information about lived experiences and such evidence is used both to supplement other material uncovered in the course of the research and to identify new areas for investigation. The dissertation combines three distinct types of historical documentation: first, immediate records, such as tapes of union meetings, the minutes and resolutions of meetings, copies of speeches and videos of news clippings, which give fairly direct representation of the events as they occurred; second, less immediate records such as newspaper records, which were nevertheless still written within a short time of the events; and finally, comments on the strike in retrospect from participants. The reliance on such material is necessary because the thesis not only seeks to provide a description of the events but also attempts to investigate the analyses and collective memory of the participants.

¹⁹ The studies found in Shields, J.(ed) All Our Labours: Oral Histories of Working Life in Twentieth Century Sydney, Sydney, 1992 adopt a similar "cross-analysis" technique which rely both upon oral testimony and the analyses of researchers.

²⁰ Murphy, J. op cit, p.159

Many methodological and epistemological questions can be raised in relation to the use of oral history. Questions regarding the reliability of the evidence uncovered in oral history are perhaps the easiest to answer. Oral history should be accepted as one of many historical sources and should be critically evaluated just like other historical documentation. As with other historical sources, research which relies on oral history must examine the veracity, reliability and representativeness of arguments made by participants. However, Lowenstein suggests that the question "Is it true?" is "academic". She argues that:

There are many truths, and the truths of the poor are not the truths of the rich. The voices of the past are no less true than written records. Oral history is different, allowing us to clothe with flesh the all-too-often bare bones of history. Informants are not on oath, but neither are clerks, newspaper reporters or politicians. Oral history is that part of the truth which people can bring themselves to tell.²¹

A further possible shortcoming in works which rely heavily on oral history is their tendency to become descriptive rather than analytical. While this thesis relies heavily on descriptive material gained through oral history, it is not simply a descriptive record of the dispute. Rather than provide a descriptive oral history, I have engaged in discourse analysis, where evidence uncovered through the use of oral history techniques is integrated into a theoretical framework which recognises the importance of language in the construction and interpretation of social reality and accordingly analyses the discourses adopted by participants in order to interpret their experiences. In such discourse analysis, the emphasis is on the construction of collective understandings of

²¹ Lowenstein, W. Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia, Melbourne, Scribe, 1989, pp.xiv-xv.

historical events by those involved in the events. The interpretations of the past provided through oral history is "seen as a cultural artefact, a text embedded in language and which attempts to make sense of a life history".²² One of the roles of the political scientist in this context is the analysis and interpretation of competing discourses.

As a large part of my analysis is based on personal interviews with people involved in the dispute, I will now discuss the techniques used to gather and record the information. My initial contact with interviewees was usually in the form of a telephone call. At this time, I would explain the nature of the research I was conducting and would ask if they would like to be interviewed. Sometimes the people I interviewed would refer me to another person, or arrange further interviews for me. This was a particularly effective way of contacting the strikers. The majority of interviews were taped, with the date and name of the person recorded at the start of the tape. Basically the interviews were unstructured and informal. I asked the general questions, "What is your general analysis of the dispute?" and "What were the main issues involved in the strike?" in order to generate a conversation about the dispute. I allowed people to discuss any aspects of the dispute which they considered important, but my own research agenda meant that I required certain questions to be answered. If interviewees did not answer these questions in the interview, I would specifically ask questions about them.

²² Murphy, J. *op cit*, p.161.

Those questions which were important to my research agenda were:

- What was your (or your Union's) involvement in the dispute?
- Why was the strike lost?
- How much support was there for the strike?
- Why did the power blackouts stop on the 21st of February 1985?
- What is your opinion of the tactics of the TLC?
- What is your opinion of the tactics of the ETU?
- What is your opinion of the tactics of the ACTU?
- What is your opinion of the tactics of the Strike Committee?
- What is your opinion of the role of the ALP in the dispute?
- Do you think the "old style of struggle" is dead?
- Could the strike have been won? If so, how?

I also asked interviewees if they had any documents which could assist me in my research. When I interviewed people who were particularly active in the strike, I would ask more detailed and specific questions which probed their role in the strike and their analyses of the dispute.

Besides using personal interviews as a source of historical documentation, the resolutions passed by workplace meetings throughout Australia are recorded at length in the thesis as a part of my commitment to broadening the established notions of useful sources in labour histories. As far as I am aware, there has never been a labour history in Australia which has recorded the resolutions of so many workers from so many industries. Very few histories of the labour movement quote workers' resolutions.

However, I believe that quoting the resolutions passed by workers is vitally important in gaining an effective understanding of working class experiences and outlooks. It captures the spontaneous feelings of workers and it facilitates a more accurate understanding of their discourses. Reliance on such historical documentation not only avoids the false attribution of feelings to workers, it also can greatly enhance a political scientist's conception of the historical processes involved in working class mobilisation.

Histories of this sort are political acts in themselves. The evidence used in this thesis has often been provided by the workers who organised the actions documented. Such information has been provided to me as a comrade in struggle. Those workers have sometimes requested anonymity, for fear of continuing political reprisals against them. The years of oppression of the labour movement under the Bjelke-Petersen Government, combined with the threats some had suffered from trade union officials, explained this reluctance. As a result, many of the quotes in this thesis simply state "As one striker said...", or "As a member of the Women's Committee stated...". A list of the people who allowed their names to be recorded as interview subjects can be found in Appendix One. Subjects for oral interviews were chosen from a number of sources. Almost all of the trade union officials who were involved in the senior ranks of the ETU or the TLC were interviewed due to their obvious importance. Other interview subjects were chosen on the basis of their personal involvement in the dispute and drawn from contact registers of people who had attended meetings about the SEQEB dispute. As a personal friend of many of the SEQEB strikers, I have been able to draw on information

which does not just rely on one or two structured interviews with key participants. This thesis reflects countless hours spent discussing the strike with strikers at both formal and informal meetings. They occurred during visits designed to discuss tactics in union battles, and during social visits, discussing the subject when we got together as friends.

I was lucky enough to have sufficient credibility established so that many people involved in the strike trusted me with their personal records, including court transcripts, meeting attendance sheets and personal stories of suffering, including their marital problems and financial hardships. I was given a list of the addresses and telephone numbers of every SEQEB striker by representatives of the ETU Strike Committee and contacted hundreds of the strikers and their families in the course of the research. Often strikers were more than willing to help with this research. Many strikers agreed to interviews and the vast majority of these interviews were conducted in an informal and unstructured manner as this was the most appropriate means of obtaining the sort of detail required for this analysis.

This overview of sources and methodological approach has indicated that this dissertation is based on quite specific ideas about the most appropriate means of researching labour history. In concluding this Chapter I offer a number of justifications for the selection of the SEQEB dispute as a focus of analysis and reiterate the ways in which the thesis contributes to the discipline of political science.

The Importance of the Topic

As noted earlier, I have chosen to study the SEQEB strike because of the opportunities it provides to apply a different method of researching labour history, and because of its significance in Queensland's industrial history. The industrial and political effects of the loss of the SEQEB dispute should never be under-estimated. The dispute exposed the weakness of the political and industrial leaders of the labour movement. This had long-term effects which are still being felt. Since the SEQEB dispute, the trade union leadership in Queensland has adopted the position that it cannot defeat the Government and that it must place all its hopes in the Labor Party. The parliamentarians within the Labor Party believe that the dispute exposed their own weakness. Senior members of the ALP admit that the reason for major organisational and leadership changes in the ALP since 1985 was because of the failures of the ALP in the SEQEB strike. Anne Warner, Minister for Family Services, Aboriginal and Ethnic Affairs in the Goss Labor Government, believes that the SEQEB dispute was the catalyst for the changes in leadership and perspective which have occurred in the ALP since 1985:

After the 86 election and after the experience of the SEQEB dispute, the Socialist Left in the Labor Party changed its tack in terms of its alliances that it held. And we went [on] a frankly, pragmatic, political path into an alliance with the so-called Right of the Party to effect a leadership change with the idea that would get us into Government and that was probably the most important thing that we could do at whatever cost. So instead of propping up relatively left-wing leadership in here, we went for the frankly pragmatic, hard-nosed forces that ... may be able to deliver the political win when we lost the industrial one. So it wasn't hard for the SL, it wasn't as hard for the SL to move away from those TLC unions as it would have been had there been no SEQEB dispute. Because the TLC unions as a group,

delivering the political goods. So we had to turn elsewhere for political goods, which is victory, at some level. So that's why Goss is leader.²³

ALP power brokers such as Warner admit that during the SEQEB dispute, the leadership of the Labor Party exposed itself as weak, incompetent and driven by an "Opposition mentality". Anne Warner said:

I think the biggest political blunder the Labor Party made at that early part of the dispute was the involvement of Warburton in the strategy to turn the lights back on. That was sheer and utter fuckwitness because it was the beginning of the end. It was the trade union movement saying OK, we ain't got no more muscle and here's our political leader to tell the world that we're as weak as piss.²⁴

Other senior figures in the ALP agree that the SEQEB dispute had massive ramifications on the labour movement in Queensland. ALP State President and Secretary of the Queensland Branch of the ATEA, Ian McLean, said that the failures of the ALP leadership in the SEQEB dispute led the Socialist Left faction to enter into the "Unholy Alliance" with the AWU faction of the ALP:

We were just swimming around fucking getting nowhere. You know, internal divisions, no discipline, no direction, people like Peter Beattie playing their own game, a publicity sort of game, just getting nowhere. So the Alliance was deliberate, sort of a 'What do we do about it? Well, let's try this, let's create a bit of stability.' So I think that's a direct consequence of SEQEB. I mean, if there hadn't been a SEQEB dispute, we'd still be wafting around, with the same faces and the same attitudes and without a bit of freshness. A pretty moribund type of outfit. And the freshness has come from Goss, who's not a left-winger and not even that well educated in trade union matters and Swan, who is the 'academic' campaign director-manager, and from the fact that we had some dough and we could do it as the scientists say we should do it. Got us there...²⁵

²³ Personal interview, 28 September 1989.

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ Personal Interview

The SEQEB dispute also exposed many of the weaknesses of the contemporary trade union movement in Australia. The defeat of the SEQEB strike had enormous ramifications, according to Plumbers and Gasfitters Secretary, John Thompson:

There were a lot of things that followed that. What happened to the meatworkers followed that, Dollar Sweets followed that, the Plumbers Union itself nationally embarked on a campaign for a seventy dollar a week increase and we ended up being fined two hundred and eighty thousand dollars in the Federal Court because we refused to lift bans on fourteen building projects in Sydney. In Queensland, we still have writs outstanding against us that were initiated by the National Party Government that people are trying to settle now with us, three years after, over that dispute, under the Commercial Practices Act.²⁶

Furthermore, the topic has continuing relevance because the issues raised in the SEQEB dispute (such as workers concerns over job security, the threat which contract labour poses for public sector employees and management's push for enterprise-based bargaining) continue to dominate the political and industrial agenda of the 1990s. The effects of the SEQEB dispute are still being felt in contemporary Queensland politics.

The Contribution of the Thesis to the Discipline of Political Science

Overall, there are a number of challenges for political science and the study of industrial relations implicit in this analysis. Most broadly, the thesis has value as a study of the theoretical and practical implications of different approaches to labour history. The theoretical and methodological approach developed in this thesis differs from previous labour histories not only in its emphasis on extensive consultation with workers and their families, but also in its more detailed analysis of the discourse of the striking

²⁶ Personal interview, 5 December 1989

families. Such an emphasis on discourse is consistent with some recent North American and European literature which is increasingly focussing on the language used by men and women in struggle, while simultaneously stressing the complex, contingent and constantly changing relationships between political, cultural and economic factors.²⁷ As a result of the adoption of this theoretical and methodological approach, the thesis is able to document the massive, sustained support for the SEQEB workers amongst the Australian working class which previous histories of the dispute have not recognised. Similarly, by analysing the roles and discourses of the strikers and their families, the thesis is able to demonstrate the inaccuracy of the image of SEQEB strikers and their families as "demoralised" and apathetic, which has been developed in previous histories. My research documents their tireless efforts in mobilising support amongst the wider working class and emphasises the key role played by women in generating and sustaining such alliances. Whereas previous histories have suggested that the striking families were passive victims of forces far greater than themselves, my dissertation focuses on working class agency and is able to document the extent to which they created history and had remarkable success mobilising support for their cause, even though their struggle was ultimately unsuccessful. The extent to which the approach adopted in this dissertation is different from many previous Australian labour histories will become evident after the Australian labour history tradition is reviewed in the following Chapter.

²⁷ For instance, the collection of essays in Berlanstein, L (ed) Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1993

CHAPTER TWO

AUSTRALIAN LABOUR HISTORIES

This Chapter begins by identifying and critically reviewing the Australian labour history tradition, highlighting its institutional focus, its simplistic conception of class, its failure to analyse the perspectives of trade union members, and its historical gender-blindness. The second section of the Chapter demonstrates that this tradition was challenged somewhat by the criticisms of New Left scholars and the rise of feminist and social history in the 1970s and that an element of Australian labour history has attempted to move beyond the limitations of the traditional approach. The concluding section of the Chapter seeks to establish whether it has nevertheless been common for Australian labour histories in the 1980s and 1990s to ignore the criticisms of the traditional approach and to produce labour histories replete with the traditional limitations. By considering the methodological and theoretical approaches of a number of significant labour histories published in the last twenty years, this section of the Chapter investigates whether the limitations inherent in the early history tradition have been reproduced in many recent Australian labour histories.

The Australian Labour History Tradition

This section of the Chapter will outline the historical development of labour history in Australia in the post-War era and will seek to define the central characteristics of the

Australian labour history tradition.²⁸ Many authors suggest that modern Australian labour historiography should be traced from the work of Brian Fitzpatrick, Robin Gollan and Ian Turner.²⁹ This Chapter will suggest that the Australian labour history tradition which arose from their pioneering work focussed primarily on the organisations of the labour movement, their factional politics and their political inclinations. Very little attention was paid to the experiences of the members of the union and almost no attention was ever given to their families. In general, such labour histories displayed an institutional focus, an empiricist methodology, and a failure to examine the dynamics of class in any meaningful sense.

The work of Brian Fitzpatrick was fundamental to the development of the Australian labour history tradition and his influence on labour historians in Australia should not be underestimated. Ian Turner suggested that his work was "the most influential of all... among students of Australian history and the most fruitful in providing starting points for a new generation of researchers".³⁰ His Short History of the Labor Movement virtually became a textbook for an entire generation of the Left, even though he

²⁸ While Australian labour history contains hundreds of biographies and autobiographies, a consideration of this enormous area of scholarship is beyond the reach of this dissertation. Instead, the dissertation focuses on works within the labour history genre which had a major impact on the discipline or were otherwise noteworthy.

²⁹ For instance, Merritt, J. "Labour history" in Osborne, G. and Mandle, W.F. (eds.) New History Studying Australia Today, George Allen and Unwin, 1982, pp.113-141; Wells, A. "The Old Left Intelligentsia" in Head, B. and Walter, J. (eds.) Intellectual Movements in Australian Society, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 214-234; Pascoe, R. The Manufacture of Australian History, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1979.

³⁰ Turner, I. quoted in Watson, D. op cit p.164

described it as "only a sketch", and engaged in far more detailed historical analysis in his other works such as The British Empire in Australia and The Australian People 1788-1945.³¹ Like many later Australian histories, Fitzpatrick's Short History of the Labor Movement was based on mechanistic notions of class which presented the working class, capital and the state as unified political actors with coherent and consistent class positions determined by their structural position in the capitalist economy. The conflicts, divisions and disjunctures within the working class, capital and the state were largely overlooked in his work.

Fitzpatrick's history of the Seamen's Union of Australia may be regarded as an archetypal Australian labour history.³² The book focuses on the organisational and leadership dynamics of the union, examines the Union's relationships with the Labor and Communist parties, records the wages and working conditions experienced in the industry and examines the implications of changes in the economic, social, legal, technological and political environment in which the union operated. Fitzpatrick's methodology did not include an analysis of the discourses of seamen and therefore he

³¹ Fitzpatrick, B. A Short History of the Australian Labour Movement, Melbourne, Rawson's Bookshop, 1940; Fitzpatrick, B. The Australian People, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964; Fitzpatrick, B. The British Empire in Australia: An Economic History 1934-39, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1941. On Fitzpatrick's influence, see Fry, E. "The Writing of Labour History in Australia" in Fry, E. (ed.) Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p.145, also Watson, D. Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, pp. 182-183

³² Fitzpatrick, B. and Cahill, R.J. The Seamen's Union of Australia, Sydney, Seamen's Union of Australia, 1981.

could offer no explanation for their historical militancy except for their harsh working conditions.

The hostility and vehement criticism which accompanied Fitzpatrick's books, alongside the refusal of academics to grant him a doctorate and a university job, had important ramifications for labour historians. They were widely interpreted as an attack on his radicalism. Fry suggests that in response to such perceptions, many labour historians in academia adopted a conservative methodology, accepting that labour history "would not be recognised unless it was studied by the orthodox methods applied to other institutions".³³

Two of the more prominent academics who followed Fitzpatrick's lead in establishing the discipline of labour history were Robin Gollan and Ian Turner. Gollan's Radical and Working Class Politics³⁴ was another landmark in Australian labour history. In his study of the development of democratic, radical and liberal ideas in the period 1850-1910, Gollan focussed heavily on organisational developments within the industrial and political wings of the labour movement. Most historians at that time simply ignored the labour movement, so Gollan's emphasis on the labour movement as a source of change, ideas and vitality was innovative. The failure of previous historians to study the

³³ Fry, E. op cit, p.148.

³⁴ Gollan, R. Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia 1850-1910, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1960.

institutions of the labour movement created a vacuum which labour historians such as Gollan sought to fill. "With so much to be done in labour history these institutions were the natural starting points, the first step seeming to be at least to establish the outlines of their history".³⁵

Like many other early labour historians, Gollan paid little attention to the details of class. It is indeed ironic that in Radical and Working Class Politics, he offered no definition of either the "working class" or "radical" politics. While Gollan suggested that Australian society in the 1890s "had been sharply divided in class conflict, in which the very basis of the capitalist system had been brought into question", he failed to explain what he meant by "class conflict". Connell has criticised the laxity with which Gollan used the term "class", commenting that in Gollan's work, "class is not being used as a consistent theoretical category" and "the diverse usages of 'class' in the book... reflect the language of class in the period itself".³⁶ Gollan treats "the working class" and the "privileged class" as class-conscious monoliths. His radical nationalism also meant that he treated the terms "Australian" and "labour" virtually synonymously.³⁷ Despite his poorly theorised conception of class, however, Gollan's influence on Australian labour

³⁵ Fry, E. op.cit p.148

³⁶ Connell, R.W. Ruling Class, Ruling Culture, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p.11

³⁷ Garton, S. "What have we done? Labour History, Social History, Cultural History" in Irving, T. (ed.) Challenges to Labour History, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994, p.45

history was remarkable and his work was central to the development of an Australian labour history tradition.

Both Radical and Working Class Politics and Gollan's history of the Coalminers Union of New South Wales share a narrow focus on the institutions of the labour movement.³⁸

However, Gollan actively encouraged other historians to pursue wider issues in the study of labour history. He argued that labour history should include:

a study of the working class situation taken in terms of health, leisure ... social history in the fullest sense, including politics ... class relations, the impact of other classes and class organisations on workers ... economic history of labour ... individual histories of major unions, the history of ideas and opinion and the history of popular culture.³⁹

Even though Gollan did not intend the study of labour history to be confined to the study of institutions, the Australian labour history tradition generally developed a narrow focus on the history of institutions, principally trade unions and political parties. Thus the problem of analysing what actually constitutes "classes" and how they are generated was side-stepped by the traditional emphasis on institutional behaviour. The theoretical details of class, the constitution of a class structure and the relationship between class activity and discourse were ignored. Gradually, the attitudes,

³⁸ Gollan, R. The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963.

³⁹ Gollan, R. "Labour History", Labour History, No.1, 1962, p.4

experiences and behaviour of workers and their families also became a secondary consideration.

Turner's Industrial Labour and Politics was another early landmark in Australian labour history. Like Gollan and Fitzpatrick, Turner focussed on the relationship between the "industrial" and "political" wings of the labour movement, examining conflicts between the Labor Party, left-wing parties and trade unions. Demonstrating the characteristic institutional focus of the early labour historians, he analysed the rise and fall of the Industrial Workers of the World and the origins of the Communist Party and recorded the tensions which existed within the labour movement over such issues as conscription and the general strike of 1917. Turner's approach to class has been summarised by Connell:

We find that class exists in these histories by *allusion* - either as a statistical category that provides an abstract backdrop to the drama of the political actors, or through the shadows it casts on the minds of the actors themselves.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most important contribution which Turner made, however, was his emphasis on working class agency. He claimed that the difference between labour history and traditional histories was that "Labour history is history of a new kind: it introduces the concept of masses rather than elites as the moving forces in the historical process".⁴¹ While Turner later recognised that his simplistic notion of working class

⁴⁰ Connell, R. W. op cit, p.12

⁴¹ Turner, I. Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921, Australian National University, Canberra, 1965, p.xvii

agency as the driving force in history was inadequate and that his work had been undermined by the adoption of a mechanistic Marxism, his emphasis on agency was innovative and established precedents which many future labour historians followed.⁴²

Turner, like Fitzpatrick and Gollan, paid little attention to the relationship between class activity and discourse. Given his institutionalist orientation, he made few attempts to capture the moods and perspectives of workers. Likewise, early in his career, he paid little attention to gender. A great deal of the labour history he wrote tends to be masculinist and sexist. Turner's (now infamous) remark that domestic workers and shop assistants "are not relevant to the labour movement since they gave rise to no significant trade unions"⁴³ was a reflection of this masculine bias. Likewise, Fitzpatrick's and Gollan's treatment of women is similarly inadequate.

The development of labour history as a recognised discipline in the History Departments of Australian Universities increased the tendency to study labour movement institutions without regard to wider sociological concepts. Institutional research facilitated easily manageable research projects for post-graduate history students, organised into such topics as origins, growth, structure, and policies. The

⁴² Wells, A. "The Old Left Intelligentsia" in Head, B. and Walter, J. (eds.) Intellectual Movements and Australian Society, Melbourne, 1988, p.228

⁴³ Turner, I. op cit p.3

empiricist focus of many historians has re-enforced the tendency to study institutions.

As Merritt notes:

The empiricist/positivist methodology increased the appeal of these practical considerations as it encouraged the view that a thesis writer should reveal his/her capacity to use a variety of sources, relate his/her topic to the existing literature, add to a field of knowledge and/or offer a careful revision of an established interpretation or part thereof. The narrower labour history which offered plenty of literature for revisionary inspiration and plenty of sources from which to make 'an original contribution to knowledge', met all these requirements.⁴⁴

Such an empiricist methodology and institutional orientation continued in the mid-1970s with the publication of Hagan's history of Australian printing unions from 1850 until 1950 and Sheridan's study of the Amalgamated Engineering Union.⁴⁵ Both of these works begin with a broad introduction into the nature of the industry under investigation and then seek to establish the differences between the workers they studied and the wider (undefined) "working class".⁴⁶ Hagan and Sheridan, keen to demonstrate their abilities as empiricist historians, dutifully recorded changing awards, working conditions, wage rates and working hours. They paid a great deal of attention to the structure, policy and outlook of the Union, but also acknowledged the sparsity of information from rank and file workers in their accounts.⁴⁷ Given their failure to analyse

⁴⁴ Merritt, J. *op cit*, p.121

⁴⁵ Hagan, J. Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1850-1950, Australian National University Press in association with the Printing and Kindred Industries Union, Canberra, 1966; Sheridan, T. Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920-72, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975.

⁴⁶ For example, Hagan, *op cit*, p.52, p. 295

⁴⁷ For example, Sheridan *op cit*, pp.34-35.

the discourses of the workers they studied, both Sheridan and Hagan rely on simplistic notions of "skill" to explain the industrial and political orientations of workers in their respective industries.

Sheridan and Hagan also continued the masculinist tradition of Australian labour history. While they leave "class" undefined, there is a strong implication that men work and women do not. At best, they are gender-blind; at worst, sexist. For instance, Sheridan emphasises the importance of the apprenticeship system and the "tradition of son following father"⁴⁸ to the "lads" in the trade; his only reference to women is in a discussion of the Union's opposition to their continued involvement in the industry after the War. He uncritically notes that women were seen as a threat to the wages of the men employed in the trade.⁴⁹ Hagan also studies men exclusively; women are completely absent in his account.

The focus on the institutions of the labour movement inherent in the methodology developed by Fitzpatrick, Gollan and Turner was also adopted by conservative labour historians. Ford and Plowman's study of Australian trade unions and Martin's history of trade unionism in Australia, typical examples of the conservative industrial relations approach to Australian labour history, continued the empiricist tradition and

⁴⁸ Sheridan ibid p.37

⁴⁹ ibid p.159

institutional focus developed by the early radical labour historians.⁵⁰ They saw the role of industrial relations experts as investigating the actions, leadership and policies of political parties, employer associations, unions and government instrumentalities. From their perspective, it was unnecessary to utilise sociological concepts such as class in the analysis of industrial relations.

Not surprisingly, feminists and New Left scholars quickly became very critical of the limitations of the Australian labour history tradition. It is the purpose of the next section of the Chapter to discuss the challenges to labour history from the development of feminist and social history.

The Challenges of New Left, Feminist and Social History

In the mid 1970s, New Left authors such as Humphrey McQueen, Stuart Macintyre and Terry Irving criticised the empiricist-positivist methodology and poorly theorised conception of class within the labour history tradition and feminists such as Miriam Dixon, Edna Ryan, Anne Conlon, Anne Summers and Beverly Kingston exposed the sexism of a great deal of labour history.⁵¹ Their criticisms echoed the position of

⁵⁰ Ford, B. and Plowman, D. Australian Unions: An Industrial Relations Perspective, Melbourne, Macmillan, 1983; Martin, R.M. Trade Unions in Australia, Second Edition, Melbourne, Penguin, 1981.

⁵¹ McQueen, H. A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970; Macintyre, S. "Radical History and Bourgeois Hegemony", Intervention, No.2, Oct. 1972; Irving, T. "What is Labour History?", Labour History, No.12, May 1967, pp.67-71; Dixon, M. The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788 to 1975, Penguin, Ringwood, 1976; Ryan, E. and Conlon, A. Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788-1974, Nelson, Melbourne,

feminists and New Left scholars internationally who developed "new social history" in order to challenge outmoded and oppressive practices, concepts and methodologies. Key elements of the "new social history" were: an emphasis on human agency in making history; the treatment of "class" as a relationship rather than a structure; and a willingness to utilise unorthodox sources of information about the past.⁵² "Class" increasingly became seen as a dynamic process which was culturally and historically specific. Adopting Thompson's definition of class as a relationship rather than a structure, both Rickard and Connell and Irving sought, in different ways, to outline the history of class relations in Australia.⁵³ Other labour historians responded to these international trends by seeking to expand the focus of their work in order to ensure that previously marginalised groups received proper representation. The discipline of social history was born in Australia. Reflecting this change in focus, one of the main journals of labour history was renamed A Journal of Labour and Social History.

The development of social history also encouraged some labour historians to attempt to write "history from below", as opposed to institutional histories. Oral history was a

1975; Summers, A. Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia, Penguin, Ringwood, 1975; Kingston, B. My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975

⁵² Scott, J.W Gender and the Politics of History, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988 .p.68; also Eade, S. "social History in Britain in 1976 - A Survey", Labour History, No.31, 1976, pp.38-52

⁵³ Rickard, J. Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth 1890-1910, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1976; Connell, R.W. and Irving, T.H. Class Structure in Australian Society Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980

central component of such "history from below". Wendy Lowenstein has been active in using oral history techniques to record Australian labour history. Weevils in the Flour, an oral history of the 1930s Depression, and Under the Hook, a history of the lives and struggles of Waterside workers, provided a welcome alternative to previous institutional histories by recording the views of men and women whose perspectives may otherwise have been ignored.⁵⁴ Lowenstein's work, in common with many histories inspired by the aims of "new social history", seeks to personalise historical forces by presenting issues as they appeared to people at the time and by drawing on contemporary vocabularies. However, a key limitation of her work is that she fails to integrate the material into a sufficiently rigorous interpretive framework and reverts to a style which is descriptive and atheoretical. Even though Lowenstein's work is centred on perceptions of working class experiences, she does not integrate the material into a broader theoretical framework which would allow her to address such themes as the power relationships between various classes and the state or the relationship between class activity and discourse.

Lowenstein's labour histories therefore embody a tendency towards an atheoretical and descriptive approach to history. In her work, as with many oral histories, the emphasis has often been on recording, but not analysing, the language people have used to

⁵⁴ Lowenstein, W. Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia, Melbourne, Scribe, 1989; Lowenstein, W. and Hills, T. Under the Hook: Melbourne Waterside Workers Remember 1900-1980, Melbourne, Melbourne Bookworkers and Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1982.

describe their own experiences. This methodology, I believe, leaves the most important work undone: the analysis of the discourses through which men and women view their shared experiences. Such a discourse analysis is a central feature of two recent Australian labour histories: David Atkin's study of the way gender shaped the discourse of class and industrial relations for meatworkers and Joan Shield's study of the importance of the apprenticeship system in producing a masculinist culture of craft.⁵⁵ Like the European labour histories reviewed in Chapter One, these authors have used discourse analysis to identify the assumptions underpinning the "language of class". The value of such discourse analyses is that they offer the chance to identify and analyse the political perspectives and assumptions which underlie popular conceptions of industrial issues. Discourse analyses may therefore enable a political scientist to identify factors which influence the nature of class dispositions. Nevertheless, these studies are exceptions; it is far more common for Australian labour history to simply ignore discourse analysis. It is hoped that the case study of the SEQEB dispute will further demonstrate in a practical manner the advantages of utilising a methodology which regards the analysis of such discourses as centrally important.

Some Australian historians responded to the rise of social history by including issues which had previously been ignored in their analysis. For instance, Eddie Butler-

⁵⁵ Shields, J. "Craftsmen in the Making: The Memory and Meaning of Apprenticeship in Sydney between the Great War and the Great Depression" in Shields, J. (ed.) *op cit*, pp.86-122; Atkin, D. Aristocracy of Muscle: Meatworkers, Masculinity and Trade Unionism in the 1950s, Master of Arts Thesis, La Trobe University, 1991.

Bowden's In The Service: A History of Victorian Railway Workers and their Union attempts to incorporate a methodology which utilises oral and documentary history to address gender and ethnicity issues and to present a more detailed picture of the perspectives of rank and file workers.⁵⁶ One of the merits of this book is its focus on the integration of women and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds into the railways workforce and the responses of the Union to this change in the composition of the workforce. Unfortunately, however, the oral history is used only in a descriptive, rather than analytical, context. As a result, little attention is paid to analysing the political discourses of railway workers and their families. Also, Butler-Bowden's failure to theorise class in a sufficiently rigorous manner leads him to develop a simplistic notion of class consciousness, whereby affiliation with the Labour Council is seen as indicating heightened class consciousness.⁵⁷

The development of social and feminist history has also provided an impetus for the examination of women's unions and the relationships between unions and gender issues, areas which were ignored in the early Australian labour histories. For instance, Marian Simms focuses on gender in her analysis of public sector unions, as do three studies of unions with a majority of female members - O'Brien's examination of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, Ellen's history of clothing trades unionism in

⁵⁶ Butler-Bowden, E. In The Service? A History of Victorian Railways Workers and their Union, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1991.

⁵⁷ ibid p.27

Australia and Dickenson's history of the New South Wales Nurses' Association.⁵⁸ All Our Labours, a collection of oral histories about work in Sydney early this century, is another recent attempt to broaden the focus of Australian labour history.⁵⁹ It includes many topics which have traditionally been excluded from Australian labour histories, such as the experiences and working lives of prostitutes, the social and cultural significance of workers' reading habits, and the experiences of domestic servants in Woollahra during the Depression.

In summary, feminist and social histories have exposed many limitations within the traditional Australian labour history framework. Oral historians have been able to expose the inadequacy of a narrow institutional focus; feminists have highlighted the inadequacy of the traditional approach in terms of gender issues; and social historians have clearly demonstrated the need to move beyond simplistic notions of class. Despite these achievements, however, the influence of the traditional approach to labour history is still apparent in many recent Australian labour histories. It is the purpose of the next section of this Chapter to review a number of recent labour histories in order to

⁵⁸ Simms, M. Militant Public Servants: Politicisation, Feminisation and Selected Public Service Unions, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1987; Ellen, B. In Women's Hands? A History of Clothing trades Unionism in Australia, Kensington, New South Wales University Press, 1989; O'Brien, J. A Divided Unity: Politics of NSW Teacher Militancy since 1945, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1987; Dickenson, M. An Unsentimental Union: The NSW Nurses Association 1931-1992, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1993

⁵⁹ Shields, J.(ed) All Our Labours: Oral Histories of Working Life in Twentieth Century Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, 1992.

evaluate the extent to which they retain the essential elements of the Australian labour history tradition.

The Continuing Influence of the Australian Labour History Tradition

Many recent labour histories have retained the essential ingredients of the tradition established by Fitzpatrick, Gollan and Turner. For instance, Bowden's history of the Transport Workers Union⁶⁰ and Bray and Rimmer's history of the New South Wales Branch of that Union⁶¹ clearly adopt many of the main elements of the Australian labour history tradition. Both books were given the organisational and financial support of the Union. Their primary focus is on the political inclinations of the Union's leaders and the organisation's political direction, resources and financial situation. The difference between such an approach and a focus on the lives of workers and their families is summed up best in Bray and Rimmer's attitude towards the 1930s Depression, where they simply state that "The Union had done well".⁶² Once again, there are no women in the history. The histories are essentially descriptive rather than theoretical; the focus is on the institution, its membership figures, resources and its leaders; and the rank and file are present only as a backdrop responding to (but not initiating) political, economic and industrial developments. While both books provide

⁶⁰ Bowden, B. Driving Force: The History of the Transport Workers' Union of Australia 1883-1992, Allen and Unwin, 1993

⁶¹ Bray, M. and Rimmer, M. Delivering the Goods: A History of the NSW Transport Workers Union, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

⁶² ibid p.90

useful information on the ramifications of changes in the labour process, they continue the simplistic dichotomy of a "choice" between reliance on arbitration or direct action as a preferred industrial strategy.

The history of the Australian Workers Union by Merritt⁶³ is another labour history written in the 1980s which replicates the style of the Australian labour history tradition. It also focuses almost exclusively on the organisational resources of the Union, rather than the lives and struggles of the members of the Union and their families. Even when considering changes in the labour process, Merritt concentrates on the AWU's efforts to establish organisational stability. Such an approach limits his focus to the narrow confines of institutional history. Merritt also fails to incorporate gender considerations in any meaningful way. He details the union's inability (and refusal, in some circumstances) to recruit women members but fails to examine the implications of such practices or to suggest that the Union's ideology and practice were masculinist or sexist. His treatment of class is similarly problematic. Merritt suggests that "a more working class workforce"⁶⁴ could have assisted the AWU during the 1890s, but like so many other Australian labour historians, he never defines the term "class".

⁶³ Merritt, J. The Making of the AWU, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁶⁴ ibid p.361

The history of the Ship Painters and Dockers Union by Issy Wyner⁶⁵ is another labour history which fits squarely within the tradition established by Fitzpatrick, Gollan and Turner. It provides an excellent descriptive record of the appalling working conditions, lousy wages and the "monotonous record of accidents"⁶⁶ in the industry. Wyner's discussion of working practices in the industry provides a useful introduction into the patterns of labour market segmentation which left painters and dockers in limbo between the position of labourer and tradesperson. Nevertheless, the distinct limitations of the Australian labour history tradition are once again apparent: the book is based on a poorly theorised and structuralist conception of class; there is no discussion of gender; and very little attention is paid to the rank and file of the union. (Of course, it should be acknowledged that the lack of rank and file input was partly imposed on Wyner by the fact that none of the Union's founders was still alive and nearly all of the material recording the Union's earliest history had been lost or destroyed. As a result, the book is based on "newspaper files, Labour Council minutes, Industrial Registrar's records, transcripts of Arbitration proceedings, (and) books on various aspects of the history of the labour movement.")⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Wyner, I. With Banner Unfurled : The Early Years of the Ship Painters and Dockers Union, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1983.

⁶⁶ ibid p.62

⁶⁷ ibid p.12

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to unions which operate outside traditional 'blue collar' areas. Hill's history of the Australian Bank Employees Union⁶⁸ and Juddery's history of the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association⁶⁹ are two examples of this burgeoning area of labour history. Yet they too have adopted a narrow institutionalist methodology consistent with the Australian labour history tradition, rather than adopting a broader sociological perspective. Both authors limit themselves to such issues as: the history, policies and structure of the union; factional infighting within the union; and the major economic, political and social developments which their respective unions have confronted. In short, these books retain the basic elements of the labour history tradition, namely: an institutional focus; extensive study of the growth, structure and policies of the union; an introduction into the special characteristics of the industry being studied; an atheoretical approach which leads to a failure to define key concepts such as "class" or "militancy"⁷⁰; and a masculinist outlook.

A number of other recent labour histories have focussed narrowly on the political orientations of the leadership of trade unions. Murray and White's history of the

⁶⁸ Hill, J. From Subservience to Strike: Industrial Relations in the Banking Industry, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983.

⁶⁹ Juddery, B. White Collar Power: A History of the ACOA, Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1980.

⁷⁰ This is a particularly important omission for Hill, whose central argument is that the Bank Employees Union has been transformed from a timid and conservative union into a militant and aggressive one. Hill, C. op cit, e.g. p.269

Ironworkers Union,⁷¹ for instance, is perhaps the exact opposite of the Gollan's dream of "social history in the fullest sense". Their history focuses exclusively on the leadership and the rank and file are completely ignored.⁷² Analytical concepts such as gender, class, and ethnicity are absent in their account, which instead represents the history of ironworkers as a battle between Communist and anti-Communist leaders. Even in discussing individual strikes, there is a strong tendency within recent Australian labour histories to focus on the behaviour of major institutions such as Trades and Labour Councils, the ACTU or the ALP; to neglect the roles of rank and file workers; to ignore gender considerations; and to rely on descriptive rather than theoretically-informed analyses. For instance, Norrington's descriptive record of the pilots strike focuses on the actions of Pilots' Federation, the ACTU, Government leaders and the airline bosses; Greg Giles' history of the 1987 Newcastle State Dockyard dispute focuses narrowly on the political and industrial analysis of the Newcastle Trades Hall leadership, and Lockwood's history of the Pig-Iron Dispute focuses almost exclusively on the leadership of the Waterside Workers' Federation and the Government.⁷³

⁷¹ Murray, R and White, K. The Ironworkers: A History of the Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1982.

⁷² While simplistic general dichotomies between the "rank and file" and the "union bureaucracy" are clearly inadequate, it must be acknowledged that under some circumstances, significant differences may emerge between ordinary union members and their union leaders.

⁷³ Giles, G. Bitter Bread: The Fight to Save Newcastle Dockyard, Newcastle Trades Hall Council, Newcastle, 1987; Norrington, B. Sky Pirates: The Pilot's Strike that Grounded Australia, ABC Books, Crows Nest, 1990; Lockwood, R. War on the Waterfront: Menzies, Japan and the Pig Iron Dispute, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1987.

Conclusion

This Chapter has analysed the Australian labour history tradition and has outlined its main characteristics. Although the Chapter makes no claim to provide an exhaustive coverage of all Australian trade union histories, it has been suggested that most Australian labour histories developed with an institutional focus, a poorly theorised conception of "class", a failure to analyse the discourses of workers and a failure to integrate gender issues. Some Australian labour historians attempted to move away from institutional histories by writing "history from below", utilising oral history techniques. However, this often led to a descriptive and atheoretical approach to history. Other labour historians, informed by the critiques of the new Left and of feminists, relied on a broader conception of class and paid more attention to gender issues. A tiny minority of Australian labour historians have incorporated discourse analysis into their histories. Most, however, have continued the methodological and theoretical approach of the Australian labour history tradition. The next Chapter seeks to identify whether the literature on the SEQEB dispute is also subject to the same methodological and theoretical limitations.

CHAPTER THREE

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE SEQEB STRIKE

This Chapter seeks to examine whether the literature on the SEQEB dispute continues the standard limitations of the Australian labour history tradition. In the first section of the Chapter, the question being investigated is whether the literature places excessive attention on the leadership of the trade union movement and under-estimates the experiences, roles and perspectives of rank and file trade unionists. The previous Chapter indicated that literature within the Australian labour history tradition was likely to focus on the institutions of the labour movement, in particular, the impacts of various events on an organisation's political direction, resources, leadership and financial situation. Traditional Australian labour histories are largely descriptive rather than theoretical, with a focus on institutions, their membership figures, resources and leaders. They frequently amount to little more than a detailed study of the growth, structure and policies of a Union, with scant attention paid to the roles and experiences of the Union's ordinary members. The Australian labour history tradition typically focuses on a narrowly defined range of "industrial" issues and rarely addresses wider sociological concerns. Consequently, there has been very little study by Australian labour historians of the struggles and political discourses of rank and file trade unionists. If it were true to suggest that the literature on the SEQEB strike has been inhibited by the adoption of a narrow institutional focus, then one would expect to find extensive discussion of a narrow range of industrial topics, such as the effects of the

dispute on the union movement's leadership, political orientation, resources and financial situation. One would also expect to find very little attention being paid to the lives, discourses, experiences and political perspectives of rank and file trade unionists in such an account. Traditionally, the Australian labour history tradition relegated such concerns to that of a historical footnote.

Another feature of the Australian labour history tradition outlined in the previous Chapter was the typically poor treatment of class. The second section of the Chapter seeks to establish whether much of the literature on the SEQEB dispute has been underpinned by simplistic and mechanistic conceptions of the working class, capital and the state. It will be suggested that the failure to conceive of *class as a relationship* has led to a myopic focus on the effects of the Bjelke-Petersen Government's anti-union strategies on the union movement without considering the effects of actions by the trade union movement on the Bjelke-Petersen Government and on leading capitalists. Finally, the Chapter investigates the literature on the SEQEB strike in order to establish whether it contains a third fundamental flaw which characterises the Australian labour history tradition, namely, a gender-blind approach to politics. Chapter Two suggests that women were invisible in the Australian labour history tradition prior to the advent of feminist and social history. The purpose of the third section of this Chapter is to investigate whether the literature on the SEQEB dispute has fully recognised the role of women in the dispute or whether, like the Australian labour history tradition, it may also have largely ignored the roles, experiences and outlooks of women.

If it is true that the literature on the SEQEB dispute has suffered these limitations, then this thesis has exposed a number of areas requiring more detailed treatment in the case study of the dispute in Chapter Four. Principally, it will have demonstrated the need to move beyond a narrow institutional focus and to include a detailed study of the discourses of rank and file trade unionists involved in the dispute, as well as a need to reconsider the balance of class forces during the strike and to re-assess the role of women in the dispute.

The adoption of a narrow institutional focus

In analysing the effects of the SEQEB dispute on the trade union movement, many previous histories of the strike have adopted an institutional, descriptive and legalistic approach which amounts to little more than an atheoretical description of the implications of the dispute for the institutions of the labour movement, and a complete failure to address ramifications of the dispute on the political outlooks of ordinary trade union members. This is a particularly disappointing methodological limitation given that many authors suggest the dispute radically altered the attitudes of Queensland workers towards industrial action. In this way, the literature on the SEQEB strike parallels the work of early Australian labour historians in terms of its reluctance to utilise oral history. Workers' reactions to the SEQEB dispute are often neither sought nor recorded, and sometimes it seems that the authors regard them as insignificant. For instance, Guille asserts that the dispute marked the nadir of labour's collective power since the 1930s, but he does not recognise the massive and continuous industrial,

economic, political and social support which sustained the SEQEB strikers and their families for two years.⁸¹ He also suggests the dispute had massive long-term effects on workers' willingness and capacity to take industrial action. Such an argument cannot possibly be sustained without evidence about the level of working class mobilisation in the dispute and the effects of the dispute on the political and industrial outlooks of Queensland workers. Nevertheless, Guille makes this argument without investigating the level of support for the strikers or asking one group of workers whether such an argument is consistent with their lived experiences.

Guille is not alone, however, in concentrating exclusively on the financial and political costs to the ETU and the TLC. McQueen, Gardner and Quinlan also adopt a legalistic perspective which concentrates simply on the legislative and judicial implications of the dispute.⁸² Similarly, Creighton, Forest and McCarthy focus exclusively on the effects of the dispute on labour law and its implications for the institutions of the labour movement. The effects of the dispute on the workers involved are assumed, it seems, to perfectly correlate to those of trade union institutions. Similarly, both Forrest and McCarthy outline the provisions of Queensland's anti-union legislation and describe

⁸¹ Guille, H. "Industrial Relations in Queensland", Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 27, No.3, September 1985, pp. 383-396.

⁸² McQueen, R., Gardner, M. and Quinlan, M. op cit pp.159-165.

their intended effects on trade unions without analysing in any detail the resistance to that legislation from the trade union movement.⁸³

The institutional approach has led to a drastic under-estimation of the working class mobilisation in the SEQEB dispute. It is commonly recognised within the trade union movement that the SEQEB dispute involved the largest mobilisation of working class people in Australia in the post-World War Two era. Surprisingly, however, most accounts of the dispute have been very shallow in terms of their recognition of the scope and intensity of working class industrial and political action over the two years of the SEQEB struggle. Many previous histories of the SEQEB dispute, including those by Ferguson, the Seamen's Union, Russell, McCarthy, Dawson, Blackwood and Hamilton have only recognised the major state-wide mobilisations which were endorsed by the Union leadership - the power blackouts in February, the blockade of Queensland in May and the mass stop-work meetings held throughout Queensland on August 20, 1985.⁸⁴ Such literature can provide very little information about the level of support

⁸³ Creighton, B. op cit pp.58-66, Forrest, J.L. "Administrative Chronicle - Queensland", Australian Journal of Public Administration, 1985, pp.148-156; McCarthy, P. The Queensland Electricity Dispute: A Chronology, the Legislation and its Ramifications, Discussion Paper No.12, Business Research Centre, Brisbane College of Advanced Education, July 1986; and McCarthy, P. op cit pp.364-382.

⁸⁴ Ferguson, R. "Lessons from the SEQEB Dispute", Australian Marxist Review, New Series No.14, March 1986, pp.17-20; Seamen's Union of Australia SEQEB Dispute Self-published, Brisbane 1986; Russell, B. A Spark of Hope: The SEQEB Dispute and the Bjelke-Petersen Government, Queensland, 1985, Honours thesis, Department of History, University of Queensland, 1992; McCarthy, P. loc cit; Dawson, W. op cit; Blackwood, S. op cit; and Hamilton, H. A Plea for Common Ground, Paper presented to Broad Left Seminar, Brisbane, March 9, 1986

from workers in any industry, aside from their involvement in these three major statewide mobilisations. The impression is created that such support did not exist. Many authors have not acknowledged that the dispute continued for more than two years, but have instead fostered the impression that it ended in 1985.

As a result of adoption of an institutional focus and a concomitant failure to consult widely with working class people, existing literature on the strike has failed to recognise that working class mobilisation was massive, continuous and sustained in many regions throughout Australia for two years. The literature does not recognise that support for the SEQEB strikers was so widespread that references to the three statewide mobilisations are inadequate and that the level of mobilisation requires far more detailed investigation on a local, regional and industry-by-industry basis. Instead, the impression is created that such support did not exist. For instance, not one previous history has recognised the massive level of support for the SEQEB strikers in Western Australia, nor the support which existed within regional Queensland. Also, it has not been acknowledged that workers in the power industry continued to take actions for months after the power blackouts finished. Nor has the literature recognised the level of militancy in the construction, coal, transport or telecommunications industries, to name a few isolated examples. Instead, many authors have attributed passivity to workers and have significantly underestimated the degree of support. For instance, Hamilton emphasises that throughout the strike, workers would not "down tools, pen or pencil for someone else's fight" and comments that "evidence of this lack of solidarity was as

plain as day".⁸⁵ Similarly, Blackwood, Birmingham and MacLennan suggest that the SEQEB strikers were defeated because "the working class has lost the tradition of responding militantly in decisive struggles".⁸⁶ In neither case has there been any attempt made to investigate the extent of working class mobilisation in the dispute. The next Chapter will provide an alternative assessment of working class mobilisation within the SEQEB dispute which will demonstrate that such an approach is clearly inadequate. By extending the boundaries of the treatment of working class mobilisation in the SEQEB dispute to include a wide range of actions which were not officially endorsed by the trade union movement but which were organised by the striking families, the case study will demonstrate that the literature has drastically underestimated the degree of support for the strike.

The treatment of the SEQEB dispute as simply an industrial, rather than a political, event has also led much of the literature away from an accurate understanding of the discourse of the striking families. Such misunderstandings are particularly evident in the treatment of the political motivations of the striking families within the literature. One of the most significant limitations of the literature has been the failure to analyse the political discourse of those families. The literature has tended to instantly dismiss suggestions that the strike was a political battle against fascism; it has inaccurately

⁸⁵ Hamilton, H. ibid p.12, emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Blackwood, S., Birmingham, L. and MacLennan, G. The Labor Movement in Queensland and the SEQEB Dispute, Conference Paper, SAANZ, 1985. p.14.

attributed demoralisation to the striking families; and it has frequently misunderstood the differences in outlooks between trade union officials and the striking families.

Given the industrial ramifications of the SEQEB dispute, it is not surprising that the literature has generally analysed the dispute from an industrial rather than a political perspective. Yet to produce an accurate history of the struggle, the political dimensions of the strike cannot be ignored because these political dimensions were one of the main reasons why such massive mobilisations occurred. For instance, none of the literature on the strike examines one of the key reasons why people mobilised in such large numbers against the Government - the perception that it was fascist. While there has been an understandable reluctance from academics to describe the Government as fascist, given that term's specific historical meanings, the failure to recognise the importance of the term to the discourse of the striking families indicates a significant failure to appreciate the political perspectives of those involved in the dispute. Without examining such political considerations, the literature cannot explain why this dispute erupted into such a massive confrontation between organised labour and the state.

Other significant political elements of the struggle are also ignored. For instance, the institutional approach cannot (and does not attempt to) explain why one of the most significant protest actions of the SEQEB dispute was a march from the SEQEB Greenslopes Depot to the Greenslopes Abortion Clinic. Surely an Abortion Clinic is not a typical venue for protests by the labour movement? The answers to such questions

must be found in political analyses of the discourse of the striking families - yet this contradicts one of the key operating assumptions of the paradigm within which much of the literature operates - an institutionalist (and gender-blind) orientation which focuses on a narrowly defined range of "industrial" issues.

Another problem which has stemmed from the institutional approach of much of the literature is the inaccurate attribution of demoralisation and a sense of apathy to SEQEB strikers and their families. Such attribution has occurred without any systematic or detailed empirical investigations being undertaken which would permit confirmation or denial of these claims. For instance, Blackwood, Birmingham and MacLennan attribute the following feelings to strikers: "They remained passively on strike expecting as it were to consume a victory delivered to them by the Power Operators".⁸⁷ Barbara Russell also attributes a "sense of rank and file demoralisation" as "the enduring legacy of the SEQEB dispute".⁸⁸ This incorrect attribution of demoralisation to the strikers by Russell occurred because not one member of the Strike Committee or Women's Committee was interviewed in the course of her research. Had Russell spent sufficient time with the workers involved in the dispute, she would have recognised that the dominant emotion amongst strikers, their supporters and their families was anger, rather than demoralisation. One of the most important political dynamics of the SEQEB

⁸⁷ ibid p.14

⁸⁸ Russell, B. op cit p.vi

dispute was the remarkable degree of hostility which existed between the striking families and the union officials who were representing them.

Much of the literature on the dispute has not addressed the internal divisions within the union movement and has ignored the implications of these divisions on the political and industrial strategies adopted. Instead, many accounts of the dispute are underpinned by simplistic notions of the internal workings of trade unions, implying that the trade union leadership directly followed the wishes of rank and file workers. A result of this uncritical appraisal of the role of trade union officials in the dispute is that there have been no investigations into whether the political analysis of the trade union leadership was truly reflective of the desires of the union movement's rank and file. A comparison of the attitudes of the leadership vis a vis rank and file trade unionists may have uncovered interesting differences in their analyses of the power of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and their attitudes towards the mobilisation of the working class. Instead of undertaking such investigations, however, these authors simply assume that the leadership accurately represented the wishes of the union movement's rank and file.⁸⁹ Even amongst many left-wing commentators who recognise that the leadership of the trade union movement did not properly represent the interests of the rank and file, there has been a consistent failure to investigate the political, financial and organisational pressures upon the leadership which led to the failure to follow the

⁸⁹ Blackwood, S. *op cit* pp.68-76.

demands of the rank and file. For instance, Dawson, Russell, Ferrier and Ferguson all point to a betrayal of the sacked SEQEB workers by the trade union leadership, but none of them investigate such organisational, financial or political pressures as: the internal political dynamics within the ETU; the financial pressures which influenced the leadership in developing the union movement's strategy during the strike; or the political deals with Labor leaders which occurred during the strike.⁹⁰ They do not even analyse the differences in the political analysis of the trade union leadership and the rank and file in any detail.

The institutional focus of many works has led to many misunderstandings of the discourse and actions of the striking families. For instance, although Ian Curr stresses the need for rank and file organisation, his failure to consult sacked SEQEB workers and their families leads him to incorrectly suggest that there was very little rank and file organisation in the SEQEB dispute.⁹¹ Similarly, although McDonald's history of the dispute is sympathetic to the rank and file and seeks to demonstrate that "when called on to take action and rally in support of the SEQEB workers, they responded admirably",⁹² he has not investigated the actions and political ideologies of the rank and file workers involved in the dispute. As a result, his work incorrectly implies that the three statewide mobilisations of support were the only actions organised during the

⁹⁰ Dawson, W. *op cit*, Russell, B. *op cit*, Ferrier, C. *op cit* and Ferguson, R. *op cit*

⁹¹ Curr, I. How to Defeat the Petersens of this World, Workers Unit Library, Brisbane, 1987, p.2.

⁹² McDonald, M. SEQEB and Beyond, Self-published mimeo, Brisbane, 24 April 1986, p.2.

dispute. McDonald does not recognise that workers took action on far more occasions than "when called on" by the trade union leadership. Instead of recording that strikers and members of the Women's Committee mobilised massive support throughout Australia, he simply represents the strikers and their families as passive victims, waiting for the trade union leadership to mobilise support for their cause.

Although the striking families are usually represented in the literature as demoralised, passive and doomed victims of forces far greater than themselves, actual quotes from members of the Strike Committee and the Women's Committee (and for that matter, from other workers who took solidarity action with the striking families) which might support such a claim are conspicuous by their absence. It is one of the contentions of this thesis that this image of the striking families is inaccurate. In my case study of the dispute, I intend to use discourse analysis and oral history techniques to analyse the experiences and political perspectives of the striking families in order to demonstrate that those families actually played a very important role in initiating struggle, often against the wishes of the trade union leadership. Without exception, previous analyses of the SEQEB dispute have failed to recognise the extent of resistance to the Bjelke-Petersen Government in the dispute because they have not recognised and effectively incorporated the experiences and views of the striking families and of rank and file workers from many industries who supported them. By abandoning an institutional focus, utilising oral and documentary sources and consulting widely with the men and

women involved in the SEQEB dispute, I will demonstrate in the next Chapter that there was a far greater level of working class mobilisation than previous accounts have recognised. I also seek to demonstrate that there were important institutional, financial, political and organisational pressures which led to significant differences in the discourses of the striking families and the Unions which represented them.

It is the purpose of the next section of this Chapter to outline the limitations in the treatment of class in previous histories of the dispute and to outline areas for further exploration in the case study.

A Poorly Theorised Conception of Class

In this section of the Chapter, I will demonstrate that much of the literature on the SEQEB dispute has relied on a poorly theorised conception of class which assumes that a direct relationship exists between the mode of production and the subjective experience of class. An instrumentalist conception of the state has also featured heavily in the literature. As a result of this structuralist conception of class and instrumentalist theory of the state, the possibility that industrial and political action by the Queensland labour movement could defeat the Bjelke-Petersen Government was never seriously considered within the literature. It is the purpose of this section of the Chapter to suggest that by failing to acknowledge the importance of politics, agency and discourse in the process of class mobilisation and the determination of state policies, such conceptions of class greatly understated the strength of the labour movement in the

SEQEB dispute. This section of the Chapter will also demonstrate that the inadequate theories of the state which have frequently accompanied these poorly theorised conceptions of class have resulted in an exaggeration of the degree of support for the anti-union strategies within the Bjelke-Petersen Government and amongst capitalists.

As I indicated in Chapter One, my conception of class is derived largely from the work of the late E.P. Thompson, who placed a great deal of emphasis on the cultural and experiential elements of class. Blackburn has explained the difference between Thompson's approach and those which assume a more direct relationship between the economic base and class activity: "For Thompson, social class, and the potential agency stemming from it, were not defined or realised mainly by economic processes but required the cultural and political construction of a collective identity".⁹³ An examination of those factors which led to the disposition to behave as a class was an integral element of Thompson's work. While I largely accept Thompson's methodology, particularly his emphasis on human agency and the historically specific factors which limit that agency, I have also tried to improve upon it by including a study of the political discourses which affect the nature and development of such class dispositions. A focus on discourse is necessary because it is through discourse that the labour movement seeks to mobilise solidarity from a constituency which has no essential unity in terms of experiences or political consciousness. Steadman-Jones has provided an

⁹³ Blackburn, R. "Edward Thompson and the New Left", New Left Review, No.201, September-October 1993, p.5

excellent summary of the reasons for focussing on political discourse: "A political movement is not simply a manifestation of distress and pain, its existence is distinguished by a shared conviction articulating a political solution to distress and a political diagnosis of its causes".⁹⁴ In my case study of the SEQEB dispute in Chapter Four, I will provide a detailed examination of the discourses used by the striking families in mobilising such political support. In this section of the Chapter, however, I intend to expose the failure of the literature to adequately deal with the discourse and agency of the striking families.

Unfortunately, much of the left-wing literature on the SEQEB strike seems to assume that classes exist as an objective reality with predetermined interests and an essential unity, defined simply by the relationship to the means of production. As one would expect, typical examples of this approach in the SEQEB dispute came from left wing parties such as the Communist Left:

In Queensland a significant proportion of the economy is under the control of multinational capital. Queensland also has a significant rural sector and a large proportion of the population are farmers. Farmers are a sector of the petty bourgeoisie with distinct material interests. Politically they gravitate to the class which shows the most independent strength. In Queensland this is multinational capital. The party that represents multinational capital directly is the National Party which was formerly the Country Party. The Liberal Party, their coalition partners, represents multinational capital indirectly - through the comprador bourgeoisie. The fact that the alliance between farmers and multinationals is cemented so tightly is a reflection of the political weakness of the working class... It is only when the working class acts as a strong independent political force will the Queensland farmers take them seriously.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Steadman-Jones, G. Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.96

⁹⁵ Communist Left, Queensland Unionism Under Attack, self-published mimeo, 1985, p.1.

Members of left-wing parties, such as Carole Ferrier, also viewed the dispute in terms of objective class interests. She suggested that the labour movement in Queensland was always likely to be defeated in the SEQEB strike because of the relatively small size of the working class in Queensland:

The working class in Queensland is a smaller proportion of the population than in the southern states. This is largely related to the different composition of capital: graziers, farmers and the mining industry all provide a base for Petersen's National Party Government. There are far fewer big concentrations of workers, and much production is relatively capital-intense...⁹⁶

Ferrier also argued that there was an international "downturn" in working class activity which made it much harder to mobilise support for workers campaigns. The problem with such a structuralist approach to class is that it leaves very little room for human agency and in the context of the SEQEB dispute, ignores the possibility that the striking families may have succeeded in developing political discourses which mobilised a wide constituency around their demands.

Unions with historically strong ties to left-wing parties, such as the Seamen's Union, also analysed the dispute in terms of objective class interests. Although they began by suggesting that "there is nothing that can overcome or defeat the unity of purpose of the working class", the Seamen's Union also argued:

In a confrontation the State has untold billions of dollars to lose, dependant of course on how far reaction is prepared to go and how much capitalism can recoup out of the confrontation of opposing Labor. Many people cannot accept

⁹⁶ Ferrier, C. "I.S. and the SEQEB Dispute: How Real Were The Opportunities?" Self Published, 1985, p.1

that the State can lose so much and prepared to lose more, in a struggle where class positions are taken...The State knows no limits when smashing the working class, in particular the union movement.⁹⁷

The 'vulgar Marxist' comments of the Seamen's Union are crude, mechanistic and ahistorical. Yet they are symptomatic of the paradigm in which many left-wing people operated during the Bjelke-Petersen era. The crude assumptions about the determinant role of objective class relations in the production of state policies completely ignores the role of politics, struggle and agency in the making of history.

Yet structuralist approaches to class were not confined to members of left-wing parties or the union movement. Many academics were also influenced by a structuralist approach to class. For instance, Birmingham and Wynn reduced the State Government's industrial relations policies to the economic demands of multinational corporations, particularly the mining companies.⁹⁸ They combined an exaggeration of the unity of the state and capital with an under-estimation of the strength of organised labour in order to suggest that the dispute heralded a period of "free reign to reaction" in Queensland.⁹⁹ Their structuralist conception of class meant that they simply ignored the labour movement's internal dynamics, political orientations, strengths and

⁹⁷ Seamen's Union of Australia *op cit*, p.11.

⁹⁸ Birmingham, L. and Wynn, P. "The Petersen Offensive Against Trade Unionism via the SEQEB Dispute", QCDR Seminar Papers, Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, 1985, p.15

⁹⁹ ibid p.16

weaknesses. The assumption that class consciousness has direct ties to the economic base suggested that detailed studies of the political ideologies used by the striking families to mobilise support were either unnecessary or superfluous. Indeed, they paid no attention to the attempts by the striking families, through their own agency, to construct and mobilise a political movement which would defeat the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Instead, because of their economic reductionism, instrumentalist theories of the state and their structuralist conception of class, Wynn and Birmingham simply assumed that the State Government was in a position of unmitigated strength, the labour movement was in a position of weakness and civil liberties and trade unionism were about to be destroyed in Queensland. In such a structuralist paradigm, very little room was left for the intervention of human agency.

Gary MacLennan was another academic who applied structuralist conceptions of class to the SEQEB dispute. Like Wynn and Birmingham, he placed no emphasis on the agency of the striking families, or indeed on the agency of other workers. Instead, he simply assumed that the process of mobilisation was unproblematic. MacLennan's structuralist approach to class, combined with his complete neglect of human agency and the factors which limit it, meant that he made bold predictions about the labour movement's response to the SEQEB dispute without examining the political barriers to their realisation. Indeed, he predicted that a mass movement would provide power workers with the confidence "to turn off and keep off the power until Petersen resigns or calls an election which Labor would win if the power was kept off during the

campaign".¹⁰⁰ In this context, MacLennan's unrealistic political solutions were not an aberration from an otherwise sound methodological approach to class activity. They were actually symptomatic of the limitations of the structuralist paradigm in which he operated. His treatment of the state was also flawed, being undermined by unqualified economic reductionism (such as the comment that "Petersen's actions are sparked off by a desire to solve the current economic crisis by increasing dramatically capital's ability to rip off the workers")¹⁰¹ and a complete failure to acknowledge the conflicts within the state over the industrial relations strategy adopted by the Queensland Government.

It is indeed ironic that although many authors, like MacLennan, suggest that the Government was responding to the needs of capitalists, they do not analyse the positions of leading capitalists or the internal dynamics of the Government during the SEQEB dispute. Instead of undertaking detailed investigations, many authors have assumed that the Government and the business community were unified over the strategies employed in the SEQEB dispute. A poorly-theorised conception of the state has led many authors to focus on Joh Bjelke-Petersen as the driving force behind the Queensland Government's policies, ignoring other members of the Government. Indeed, it is common to see the State Government's actions attributed to Bjelke-Petersen alone. For instance, Davis emphasises Bjelke-Petersen's personal anti-union convictions

¹⁰⁰ MacLennan, G. The SEQEB dispute, self-published, Brisbane, 1985, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ MacLennan, G. ibid, p. 2.

as the central factor in his explanation of the Government's tactics; Barnett suggests that Bjelke-Petersen's "lifetime goal" of smashing trade union power determined the Government's tactics; Smith stresses "Bjelke-Petersen's clear anger and hatred toward the strikers, his refusal to negotiate with the ETU, and his reduction of the powers of the State Industrial Commission"; and McCarthy suggests that "there has been an element of orchestration by the Government throughout the dispute, with the Premier, as conductor, leading the players through a tumultuous symphony".¹⁰²

Overestimation of the Government's cohesion was encouraged by the Trades and Labour Council leadership, which regarded the Premier as a tyrant both within his Party and within the political life of Queensland.¹⁰³ The myopic focus within much of the literature on Bjelke-Petersen has led to a failure to examine whether it was correct to assume that the Government was strong and united behind the Premier. There is no discussion within the literature of the internal dynamics within the Government. Previous histories simply do not investigate whether there were significant divisions within the National Party over the industrial relations strategy adopted in the dispute. It is commonly assumed that because the dispute ended in a defeat for the labour movement, the Queensland Government was in a strong position throughout the

¹⁰² Davis, K. "The Queensland Power Dispute: An Industrial Watershed?", Quadrant, Vol.29, No. 6, June 1985, pp 57-60; Barnett, D. "Union Power Waning: Joh Shows How Militancy Can Be Broken", Bulletin, September 10, 1985, pp.28-33; Smith, R. "Church - State Conflicts in Queensland", Social Alternatives, Vol. 5, No.4, 1986, p.54; McCarthy, P. op cit p. 364

¹⁰³ Dempsey, R. What Bjelke-Petersen is all about: Point of View, Brisbane, Trades and Labour Council, August 1985.

dispute and the labour movement was in a position of weakness. It is one of the purposes of the case study in the next Chapter to adopt a wider focus than previous histories and to examine whether the labour movement was able to exert any pressure on the Queensland Government which would have made it more vulnerable than previous accounts have suggested. One of the purposes of the next Chapter is to make an alternative assessment of the positions of the State Government and business leaders in the SEQEB dispute, demonstrating that they were internally divided and that the Government faced conflicting pressure from capitalists during the dispute.

In summary, this section of the Chapter has demonstrated that the adoption of a structuralist definition of class often leads to an assumption that "the working class" has a pre-determined unity, a position which I find untenable. Rather, I would suggest that it is more fruitful to accept that any mobilisation of "the working class" is likely to be piecemeal, fragmented and a contingency of political agitation. The role of a political scientist in this context is to seek to identify the unifying and fragmenting forces which operate upon those who have a disposition to behave as a class. It is therefore vital to focus on the efforts by those involved in the SEQEB strike to construct and mobilise a political movement which would defeat the anti-union policies of the Bjelke-Petersen Government. However, this has not been done in the past. Instead, there has been a consistent failure within the literature to record the enormous level of activity generated independently of the trade union leadership and an associated neglect of the roles and political perspectives of the Sacked SEQEB Workers Strike Committee and the Women's

Committee. My own case study of the SEQEB dispute in Chapter Four seeks to rectify these deficiencies in the literature. Before moving on to the case study, the final section of the Chapter aims to demonstrate another limitation of the literature: the adoption of a gender-blind approach. Chapter Two suggested that a gender-blind approach to politics and industrial relations had been common in previous studies of Australian labour history and there is therefore an expectation that the literature on the SEQEB dispute will be similarly constrained.

A gender-blind approach to politics

It is the purpose of this section of the Chapter to investigate whether the literature on the SEQEB dispute also adopts a gender-blind approach to politics. It will be suggested that the literature on the SEQEB dispute has drastically under-estimated the role and impact of women. The role of women in the dispute is then recognised as an area which requires further attention in the case study in the following Chapter.

One important failure implicit in the approach adopted by much of the literature on the SEQEB dispute is that it renders invisible the thousands of women who participated in the SEQEB strike. By focussing on the outcomes of the dispute for the major institutional players, previous histories of the SEQEB dispute have completely ignored the role of women in the dispute and the impact of the strike on those women. Despite the diverse political perspectives adopted by such writers as Creighton, Blackmur, Gardner and McQueen, McCarthy, Russell, Dawson, Hinkson and Doyle one theme is

constant: the invisibility of women.¹⁰⁴ At best, they may have assumed that women were involved in the dispute alongside male members of the labour movement, but their failure to examine the role of women harks back to the early days of the masculinist Australian labour history tradition. This major failure within the literature will be redressed in the next Chapter, where an alternative history of the SEQEB strike is constructed which recognises the key role of women and which examines their impact on the dispute.

One of the key improvements in labour history which has resulted from the challenge of feminist and social historians is the recognition that an examination of gender and cultural differences may lead to important revisions in labour history and that it is simply inadequate to imply that "the working class" is a homogenous group, with shared outlooks and experiences. Yet by failing to examine whether the women in the SEQEB dispute had different experiences and outlooks, this is precisely the misconception which is fostered in much of the literature. The failure to record the involvement of women and to examine their impact on the dispute is partly a result of a (masculinist) focus on institutions and on end-results rather than process. Much of the literature focuses on the legal and industrial ramifications of the dispute for male dominated institutions. Women's interests, involvement and discourse are simply

¹⁰⁴ See Creighton, B. *op cit*, Blackmur, D.E. *op cit*, Gardner, M. and McQueen, R. *op cit*, McCarthy, P. *op cit*, Russell, B. *op cit*; Dawson, W. *op cit*; Hinkson, J. *op cit*; Doyle, R. "Bjelke-Petersen and the Labour Movement" *ACOA Journal*, No.815, May 1985, pp.1, 7-9.

ignored within this frame of reference, or are assumed to equal those of men. The case study in the next Chapter seeks to challenge this misconception.

Conclusion

The next Chapter will investigate many areas identified in this review of the literature on the SEQEB dispute. Instead of ignoring the workers involved in the dispute, as previous institutional approaches have done, they will be the central focus of the Chapter. By utilising oral history and examining the discourse of the striking families, the case study will reassess working class agency in the SEQEB dispute and will attempt to overcome some of the limitations imposed by poorly-theorised structuralist conceptions of class. This discourse analysis will also investigate whether the sacked SEQEB workers and the members of Women's' Committee should be regarded as passive and demoralised victims who simply waited for the trade union leadership to help them, or as people who initiated political action and who actively mobilised support for their cause. In contrast to previous histories of the SEQEB dispute where women have been invisible, the following Chapter will recognise the vital role women played in mobilising support throughout the dispute and the importance of their roles throughout the two years of the SEQEB struggle. Whereas previous accounts of the SEQEB dispute have suggested that there was very little support for the strikers outside the three major statewide mobilisations, my extensive contacts with the striking families and use of oral history will enable me to suggest that the strikers received massive

support in many regions, states and industries. Indeed, this support was so extensive that the Government was very nearly defeated in the SEQEB strike.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CASE STUDY OF THE SEQEB DISPUTE

The previous Chapters have identified significant limitations within Australian labour history literature and more specifically, within the literature on the SEQEB dispute. Principally these limitations involved an institutional focus which has led to a failure to integrate the perspectives of rank and file trade unionists, as well as the adoption of a poorly theorised conception of class and a gender-blind approach to politics. It is the purpose of this Chapter to provide an alternative analysis of the SEQEB dispute which overcomes these limitations. The Chapter provides a new analysis of the dispute which focuses on the rank and file, drawing on new material obtained through close association with the participants, and emphasising the contribution of women. By acknowledging the level of unity amongst the striking families, documenting the massive level of support which they mobilised and identifying significant divisions in the State Government and the business community over the anti-union strategies, the case study suggests the labour movement had far more strength, resolve and opportunities for victory than previous analyses of the dispute have recognised.

The Chapter attempts to overcome previous failures to record working class agency in the SEQEB dispute by moving away from an institutional focus and a structuralist approach to class. Relying on oral history techniques and discourse analysis, I seek to re-assess the discourse of the strikers and their families, investigating whether they

were far more radical and politically active than previous accounts have suggested. The first section of the Chapter therefore re-evaluates the mood of the striking families using oral history techniques and discourse analysis. The second section of the Chapter, which examines the agency of the striking families, challenges the traditional portrayal of the sacked SEQEB workers as passive victims of history. A measure of the success of the discourse adopted by the strikers and their families was the massive, sustained and often wildcat support they mobilised. Documenting such support is necessary in terms of providing an accurate representation of the strength of the labour movement and accurately assessing the agency of the striking families. In the third section of the Chapter, I consider the political and industrial effects of this mobilisation of support. Not only has the existing literature misread the discourse of the striking families and ignored their agency, it has also ignored the ramifications of such mobilisation for the trade union leadership and the State Government. Therefore, the third section of the Chapter examines the effects of the agency of the striking families on the trade union leadership and the State Government. I suggest that the strikers and their families were remarkably successful in their mobilisation of political and industrial support, to the extent that they considerably undermined the authority of both the trade union leadership and the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Finally, the Chapter examines some of the factors which led to the defeat of the strike. It focusses on the forces which constrained the agency of the striking families and mitigated against the development of a political and industrial campaign which may have defeated the Bjelke-Petersen Government.

Throughout this case study of the SEQEB dispute, one of my aims is to overcome the gender-blind approach to politics and industrial relations which has characterised previous accounts of the SEQEB dispute. The case study demonstrates that, rather than being invisible, women played a key role throughout the dispute, mobilising actions against both the Queensland Government and the trade union leadership. Often the women assumed the role of sole income earner for the household, provided volumes of unpaid work in the home and then adopted an active role in supporting the strike, attending meetings, rallies and pickets, as well as providing personal and financial support to their companions. Women organised themselves into a separate lobby group, known as the Women's Committee, and their organisation was recognised as one of the two pillars of the strike, alongside the Strike Committee organised by the sacked workers. It will become evident in the discussion of the agency and discourse of the striking families that the women demonstrated an unflinching commitment to the strike and its political aims. Given that the women and strikers often referred to themselves as "striking families" and identified their struggle as one which affected all of them, this Chapter will integrate the perspectives and experiences of women into the analysis of the actions and political discourse of the "striking families".

Consistent with the emphasis of this dissertation on the lives and experiences of working class people, the next section of this Chapter contains an analysis of the discursive processes through which the sacked SEQEB workers and their families mobilised broad working class support for their struggle. By focussing on the agency

and discourse of the striking families, the case study presents a detailed account of the ways in which the men and women involved in the strike understood and challenged their situation. Drawing on the experiences, perspectives and vocabularies of those involved in the struggle is also consistent with the broad aim of the thesis, that is, helping to restore workers to their rightful place in their own histories.

The discourse of the striking families

The following evidence demonstrates that the SEQEB strikers and their families developed a radical discourse which allowed them to tap into elements in the community with a strong working class consciousness and a sense of solidarity, and to stimulate support across the labour movement in spite of the hostility of the union leadership to a continuation and extension of the dispute. The major elements of this discourse were: the suggestion that the unreasonable conditions under which they were expected to return to work constituted an attack on trade unionism itself; an appeal to working class consciousness and traditional symbols of working class unity, loyalty and strength; an emphasis on the emotional and physical hardships which the families of the strikers suffered as a result of the Government's vindictiveness; a suggestion that contract labour destroyed job security and working conditions; a characterisation of the Queensland political system as "fascist"; and an assertion that the striking families were being "sold out" by the trade union leadership.

The striking families always emphasised that they were expected to return to work under unreasonable conditions. They argued that in order to be re-employed by SEQEB, they were required to sign away their industrial rights. They pointed out that they would only be reinstated if they signed a Statutory Declaration which said that they would have returned to work earlier, or indeed refused to go on strike, if it were not for threats and harassment from unionists. The Statutory Declaration had to answer the following questions: "Were you forced to go out on strike?" and "Who forced you?" If the workers were not prepared to do for their fellow workers, they had to agree to the working conditions listed below.

1. Signing of a no strike clause.
2. 38 hour week, 10 day fortnight.
3. No bans or limitations.
4. No demarcation.
5. No union membership (preferred).
6. Rostered shift work: 2 Shifts per day: 6am - 2pm and 2pm -10pm to be worked any five in seven days.
7. Workers must be able to start or finish in any depot in the Board area. (That is, they would have to commence work at any of the 40 SEQEB Depots spread over 1,000 square miles without any reimbursement for travelling).
8. Must be prepared to live away from home.
9. Industry payment deleted.

10. Employees would be treated as new employees, i.e. no experience payments, no sick leave entitlements, no annual leave and no superannuation.

As well as having to agree to these ten conditions, the workers were told that there would be no 6 or 8 hour breaks following call-outs; that no alcohol was to be brought onto Board premises at any time without the express permission of the Board; that no alcohol was to be consumed during lunch breaks; and that all previously agreed local conditions would cease to exist.

The strikers also referred to the State Government's introduction of draconian anti-union legislation in order to demonstrate that their dispute was an attack on the entire trade union movement. The Government introduced five pieces of anti-union legislation. They were the Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act 1985; the Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act Amendment Act 1985; the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act Amendment Act 1985; the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act; and the Electricity Authorities' Industrial Causes Act. Strikers suggested that these laws attempted to cripple the trade union movement in Queensland. They prohibited a union from encouraging a "strike" (which was defined so broadly that it included almost any form of industrial action); they removed the power of the Industrial Commission to reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers; they gave the Electricity Commissioner the power to conscript labour to provide, maintain or restore the supply of electricity; they gave the police massive powers to arrest people harassing or

annoying scabs; and they introduced provisions similar to Sections 45D and 45E of the Trades Practices Act, meaning that unionists would suffer penalties of \$50,000 for individuals and \$250,000 for unions if they took strike action. Any statements attributed to a unionist in the media were sufficient evidence to convict that unionist. The assumption that a person was innocent until proven guilty was taken away.

The strikers were fully aware of the significance of this anti-union legislation. To quote from the Rank and File Strike Bulletin Number 3:

After the lights went back on, and whilst some unions were still on strike, the Queensland Government introduced the most repressive anti-union legislation seen in Australia since the 1930's. The Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act empowers the State Electricity Commissioner to direct any person to "provide and maintain or restore" power. Refusal to do so would lead to instant dismissal and a \$1000 fine. Other sections deprive workers of any recourse against dismissal, restricts power unions access to their members and their right to discuss disputes with their members, places the power industry under permanent state of emergency regulations, and over-rides award conditions. The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act applies to all unions and all workers under State Awards. Sections redefine "strike" to cover almost any activity by two or more union members, over-rides preference-to-unionists clauses in awards, and each union's rules on membership and coverage, prevents unionists from informing the public about industrial injustices, and hands to the Government substantial power to deregister unions.⁸¹

The anti-union legislation introduced by the Bjelke-Petersen Government served to reinforce the idea that a defeat for the SEQEB workers would be followed by further attacks on other trade unions. The sacked workers responded to the legislation by stepping up their campaign for reinstatement, relying on images of class conflict and

⁸¹ ETU Strike Committee, Strike Bulletin, No.3, Brisbane, self-published, 1985.

traditional notions of working class solidarity. The members of the SEQEB Strike Committee and the Women's Committee were militant and very class conscious, openly appealing to other members of the working class for industrial action in support of their strike. The speeches of Strike Committee members usually began with a call for solidarity from "fellow workers" and situated the dispute in an international context of attacks on trade unions. Comparisons between the SEQEB strike and the British miners strike were common.

For two years, the SEQEB workers and their families threw their wholehearted efforts into educating people about the nature of the anti-union strategies being implemented by the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Women were central to generating and sustaining support for the SEQEB strike. As Pat Spence, a member of the Women's Committee, acknowledged during the dispute:

To the wives, mothers and their families and womenfolk of unionists we address our plea that you become personally involved in the events which may engulf your men. We have learnt in our dispute that women can offer constructive help. Over the last year SEQEB women have: written acknowledgments for thousands of donations from other unionists; stood in the forefront of picket lines (and been arrested often); and staged sit-ins at venues ranging from Queensland Parliament House to the Queensland TLC Building (both Petersen and Dempsey received equal treatment).⁸²

⁸² Spence, P. copy of speech given to author

Pat Spence did not mention that women were doubly active on the picket lines because they attended the pickets organised by the sacked workers and they organised their own pickets as well.

Robyn Burrow, another member of the Women's Committee, said that she thought about the strike every day from 1985 until 1991. It is not surprising that she constantly stresses the emotional costs of that dispute. She has tried to force herself to get on with her life but she still thinks about it roughly every second day. The strike has left scars which will not heal. "I don't think it is something we will ever forget," she commented. She knew at least five families which split up due to the pressure of the strike. "The pressures of that dispute were too much". It is a reflection of the commitment and energy which women like Robyn brought to the strike that she said "If anything I did, it was bleed. I couldn't have bled another drop".⁸³ Like many members of the striking families, Robyn's comments revolve around notions of loyalty. She feels that in the strike, the striking families learnt "who your allies are". In this context, she told how she recently went to a barbecue where a man introduced himself and said that he knew her husband, Neil, a sacked SEQEB worker. She thought it must have been an acquaintance from softball until the man admitted that he was a SEQEB scab. She abused him and swore at him and told him that she would never forgive him. When her friends asked her why she got so angry, she replied "He may as well have raped me for what he did to

⁸³ Robyn Burrow, member of Womens' Committee, interview with author, 30 July 1992

my family". Robyn added that even today, if she was driving down the road and a scab walked in front of her car, "it would be very hard to put my foot on the brake".⁸⁴

Another woman who was heavily involved in the strike shared Robin's anger towards the scabs. She also stressed the threat to the conditions and job security of public sector workers posed by contract labour and the need to unite and fight for a strong public sector in order to provide jobs for future generations of working class children. She believed that the SEQEB workers were simply protecting their jobs and the extremist Bjelke-Petersen Government robbed them of their rights and entitlements, setting a precedent for attacks on the jobs of other public sector workers and leading to rising unemployment for working class children.⁸⁵

One of the consistent political messages from the striking families was that contract labour attacked job security and working conditions and that self-respecting workers could not possibly allow the Queensland Government to unilaterally erode their conditions in this way. Responding to the support of workers in Canberra, the late Dennis Crompton explained this was the reason he was on strike:

I am one of the sacked SEQEB workers. I worked for them for 15 years, and then I was sacked because I would not allow them to take my job security away from me. They say I can have my job back if I bow down to their contract system. If I did this I would be losing most of the conditions I fought for over the years I worked for them. This is not acceptable for obvious reasons... I would like to take this opportunity to thank you personally on behalf of myself and all the rest of

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Personal interview, September 24 1993

the strikers. Without your support we would not be able to beat Petersen's Fascist Government...⁸⁶

Like Dennis Crompton, many strikers labelled the Bjelke-Petersen Government "fascist". This was a very effective element in the discourse of the sacked workers because it suggested that barbarous consequences would follow if the Government was not immediately confronted and defeated. In a similar vein, the ETU Strike Committee used the term fascism to evoke an emotional response from audience of 1500 construction workers in April 1985:

Fellow workers, let there be no doubts about what is facing us. Life without trade unions. FASCISM. This is what we are facing and this is what we must fight against. There can be no holding back in this struggle. Either we fight back or we go under. And if we go under our children will live under barbarism. We should never forget, here are the lessons that history can teach us. Fellow workers, Hitler was allowed to take over in Germany and the union movement did not call a general stoppage. The talk was of the need for new and flexible tactics and the result of that talk was the gas chambers of Belsen and Auschwitz.⁸⁷

Identifying the Bjelke-Petersen Government as "fascist" was an incredibly effective mobilising tool employed by the strikers to pressure for militant action. The preferred strategy of the trade union leadership involved making a "deal" with the Bjelke-Petersen Government to resolve the dispute, but the strikers likened this to the tactics of the Allies in appeasing Hitler. As Strike Committee member Bernie Neville stated, "You

⁸⁶ Copies of this letter were passed around the strikers as a mark of respect for Dennis Crompton.

⁸⁷ Strike Committee of the ETU, "Appeal to April 30 Stopwork", self-published, Brisbane, 1985.

don't make deals with Fascists. You crush them. The only way to get rid of this government is industrial muscle".⁸⁸

The discourse of the striking families also linked the Bjelke-Petersen Government's anti-union strategies to the "attacks" on other trade unions, such as the Meatworkers and the Builders Labourers Federation. The sixth Strike Bulletin of the sacked workers, for instance, located the SEQEB dispute in an era which had "seen a host of savage anti-union attacks unprecedented in Australia's history". The SEQEB dispute was seen as part of a series of attacks on the right of workers to organise and to protect their jobs by taking industrial action. Outlining these attacks, the Strike Bulletin said:

The Queensland Electrical Trades Union has been in dispute for 8 months now over the sacking of over 1000 workers by Bjelke Petersen and the introduction of incredibly repressive anti-union legislation. The Meatworkers Union (AMIEU) recently held a national 24 hour stoppage to protest the continuing use of the secondary boycott sanctions against its members in 3 abattoirs in the Northern Territory. On the basis of the legislation introduced by the Queensland State Government, Bjelke-Petersen is threatening to take action against those meatworkers who stayed away from work on September 30. The Builders Labourers Federation is under attack from both the Federal and a number of State 'Labor' Governments. Norm Gallagher, the BLF's National Secretary, has been jailed for four years and three months - union militancy being his only crime. Cain's 'De-recognition Bill' and Hawke's 'Building Industry Act' are designed to destroy this fighting union. Brisbane Council garbage workers are currently under threat of losing their jobs as Liberal Mayor Atkinson re-writes the garbage contracts and threatens to write in no-strike clauses...

FIGHT-BACK NEEDED NOW!

We could go on and on listing the attacks occurring now and those we know to be coming down the line but you can see just from those mentioned that they are

⁸⁸ Copy of speech given to author by Bernie Neville

not confined to Queensland and union-bashing Petersen. If ever there was a time for a generalised National stoppage - it is now!...

We must act to protect our jobs, our right to organise. No matter that Labor's precious Accord might be placed in jeopardy. We must insist on a concerted industrial campaign against the attacks coming from all quarters.

WE WILL WIN !

We will not be dumped after 8 months of struggle. Now is a time when workers must unite to fight the attacks on the union movement. The attacks on the ETU, the Meatworkers, the BLF, the Council garbage workers and the many other unions must not be allowed to succeed. A defeat for any one of these struggles weakens the entire trade union movement. Our struggle is one struggle and the ETU Strike Committee pledges here and now that we will fight this through to victory.⁸⁹

Such a discourse represented the SEQEB strike not as a struggle between a group of electricians and tradespersons' assistants and their employer, but as a battle for the survival of trade unionism and workers rights, which should therefore be a fundamental concern of every trade unionist. This argument was very effective in mobilising support and was maintained in much of the literature of the strikers.

Despite its absence in previous accounts of the dispute, gender was quite central to the discourse of the striking workers. Early on in the dispute, their appeals to other workers were mainly couched in terms of the dispute's potential flow-on effects for male blue-collar workers. Thus in the example given above, garbage workers, meatworkers and builders labourers are mentioned, but no female-dominated industries. Members of the striking families often tapped into traditional notions of the

⁸⁹ ETU Strike Committee, Strike Bulletin, No.6, Brisbane, self-published, 1985.

rights of labour when confronted by arbitrary abuses of power. The Oppression of the SEQEB Striker, written by an anonymous SEQEB striker and distributed in April 1985, placed the dispute in the context of Australian working class traditions of resistance against oppression. It asked "Do you realise, generations of Australians, your Grandfathers, their Grandfathers, Brothers and Sisters all fought against the threats of tyrannical employers to get the basic rights of striking, to hold meetings and to picket".⁹⁰

Like many strikers, Eric Vogt refers to traditional, masculinist working class rallying points such as the Eureka stockade when he discusses the dispute. He contrasts the "old style of struggle" with a new and bureaucratic concept of trade unionism:

Only through the old style of struggle will you get a struggle. You look at the new style of struggle. What's the new style - go to court, pay millions of dollars in Court costs, and get nothing, get a slap in the face. Or you go back a hundred year ago - what was the Eureka stockade all about? It was about a struggle to get decent working conditions for the worker. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have had it today. We'd have nothing. The bosses would still be working us 80 hours a week for about two or three dollars. That's what they want. I'm not about to give up everything they fought for and what we fought for through the years, you know, that's just not on.⁹¹

Likewise, Women's Committee member Pat Spence placed the strike in the context of the struggles of working people for improved working conditions and job security. She

⁹⁰ The Oppression of the SEQEB Striker, Brisbane, 1985.

⁹¹ Eric Vogt, sacked SEQEB worker, Interview with author, 22 December 1990

also stressed the flow-on effects of a loss in working conditions for future generations of working class people:

Workers today enjoy the fruits of 150 years of struggle for improved working conditions in Australia. If we fail to guard these hard won conditions we will fail our forefathers who struggled and dared to win, but more significantly we will fail future generations of Australians, our children and our grandchildren. It's time the union movement got back to grassroots level and served the workers - union leaders loyalty must be primarily to the rank and file and not to politicians, and most definitely not personal ambitions...

The whole union movement is under attack, not merely the ETU in Queensland or the BLF down here. We are merely the most obvious examples of an insidious action against unions Australia wide, indeed world-wide! This means the responsibility of our generation of working class people is probably greater than at any time since the formation of the Australian Trade Union Movement. It's time for rank and file to take stock and analyse what we want in our work situation, job safety and conditions. Are we prepared to let ACTU policies erode our hard won conditions? It's a case of sink or swim ...⁹²

Other women emphasised a range of concerns which gained widespread sympathy for the striking families, such as the financial and emotional strains on their families which had occurred as a result of the dismissal of the sacked workers. Robyn Burrows suggested to me that these elements of the women's discourse actually secured more financial and emotional support for their cause than many of the men's statements. The women's discourse was no less political than their male counterparts - it identified a political cause to their problems (the vindictiveness of the Bjelke-Petersen Government) and offered political solutions to these problems. These political solutions ranged from the simple demand for the re-instatement of the sacked workers to the broader political

⁹² Copy of speech given to Mark Sherry by Pat Spence

demand for the removal of the Government , but they also included more personal political solutions, such as becoming involved in one of the support groups. Amongst themselves, they stressed the political solutions which lay in their own hands - the need for them to band together as women and to show each other friendship and support. This element of their discourse reinforced their mutual commitment to the struggle and helped to develop a caring, nurturing environment within which the emotional and financial problems caused by the strike could be addressed. As a result, many lifetime friendships were formed during the strike amongst people who scarcely knew each other when the struggle began.

The intervention of women in the dispute through the formation of a Women's Committee altered the discourse used to secure support for the striking families. They linked their own experiences as women and family members to the struggle against Bjelke-Petersen. As a member of the Women's Committee said in a speech to the International Women's Day rally in Brisbane in 1986:

Apart from having the title of mother and wife I have had letters added to my titles which spell out 'of sacked SEQEB workers'. It is a title which I am proud to carry because although it has cost us dearly in pain, heartbreak and hardship, it has also become a thing of pride which carries many rewards especially of personal enrichment and we know that history will mark it down as such.

I have a husband and brother who are sacked SEQEB workers and also have the privilege of having friendships of those people who also stood beside them to try to protect their jobs, which we believed to be the right of any worker in the world and indeed should be a duty in a democracy like Australia. The attacks on the working class are becoming more and more widespread as we find governments willing to exploit us at every turn to pander to their 'big business backers' who keep them in power. Sadly Queensland is a perfect example of this as we see our State and our rights sold down the drain to appease these people.

I have been offered the opportunity to stand here today and tell you of some of our thoughts and observations after thirteen months of struggle against these attacks. We have been treated as criminals, slandered and robbed of our future and about \$90 million in superannuation entitlements and therefore left with no security. Many of our men are black listed and others told they are too old to be employed as tradesmen but not too old to go out and do jobs on a casual basis in back-breaking conditions with no safety standards for wages as low as \$5 per hour for twelve hours a day with only twenty minute breaks. This is the type of conditions that exist here now in Queensland and it will get worse. Do you seriously believe that employers will provide you with proper working conditions and reasonable wages if there is nobody there with any power to protect you? Contract labour means 'dog eat dog' as every worker is forced to claw and struggle and undercut each other just to earn a few dollars an hour. Surely any fool can see who is going to get rich and benefit from these conditions.⁹³

Although she emphasised the terrible financial hardships which had been imposed on the striking families, this woman did not confine her remarks to "industrial" issues. She and the other women involved in the SEQEB dispute adopted a broader political perspective which encompassed many other issues besides "industrial" ones. Their political interventions linked the oppression experienced by the striking families to other forms of oppression:

I am also a mother so the implications of what is happening concerns me greatly not just because of the immediate injustices to us as a family but for the wider consequences for the working class now and the dismal future my children face. One does not have to look too far afield to see the appalling results of corrupt government. Families are forced to send their children out to fend for themselves which is either into a life of drugs and prostitution or into slave labour houses. If you think we are still far removed from that then go out into the streets and take a look at our unemployed and especially our young unemployed. Talk to them. Hear their hopelessness. Believe me it is later than most think. I am also concerned at the standard of education my children are receiving especially here in this State where funding is mismanaged and I especially resent the bigoted

⁹³ Copy of speech given to author by the woman, who asked to remain anonymous.

ensorship of the material my children are allowed access to for a balanced education. They are perfect subjects for the propaganda methods used by this Government and the biased media presentations we get saddled with and which for many are their only source of information. Reading is a key to knowledge and truth. It is vital that these skills are not lost to our children especially the nous to be critical and open minded about what they read and are taught.

As women and mothers I beg you to pursue this end relentlessly and to speak up and be heard on any issues which concern you. Women have been repressed for far too long and I feel that the society we have today and the lack of quality in our Governments is a reflection of this. I urge you to keep up the good work already begun. It is encouraging to know that there are many who are already concerned enough and have the courage to speak up against apathy and ignorance which exists about the injustices not only in the working sphere but in many other areas as well. So come on - stand up and be heard - there is no shortage of causes ... especially here in Queensland.

Human rights, women's rights, world peace, racism, bigotry, child abuse, neglect of the old and needy - the list is long but I know there will be many here today addressing these problems and I am proud that women are taking their rightful place in society and demanding to be heard on all these issues. Until people respect each other as individuals there is not much hope for a better or brighter future. The motto of our brothers and sisters in struggle in the BLF sums it up neatly for us all - 'Dare to struggle, Dare to Win'...

The women were so effective in linking the struggles of the striking families to others struggling against oppression that they were able to organise joint actions with other women's groups, such as the Women's Abortion Campaign and the Union for Australian Women. Around the same time as the SEQEB workers were sacked, the Greenslopes Abortion Clinics were raided and women's files were taken away and photocopied by the police. The women involved in the SEQEB dispute organised a protest march from the Greenslopes SEQEB Depot to the Greenslopes Abortion Clinic. Previous histories have not recorded that this event occurred, but even if they had, it is unlikely that their institutional focus and gender-blind approach to politics would have

enabled them to explain it. Only by recognising the key role of women in the SEQEB struggle can such events be accurately interpreted.

Strikers responded to the women's broadening of the campaign by developing similar links with other oppressed groups. For instance, a number of the strikers became active supporters of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA). FAIRA published a formal notice of support for the sacked workers on the 17th of April, 1985, which declared their support for the sacked workers and called on the State Government to reinstate them. The press release from FAIRA also stressed the links between the sacked workers and other oppressed groups:

The Aboriginal and Islander people of this country have long experienced brutal repression especially from the Petersen Government. We recognise that the union movement is now being attacked by the State Government. We declare that we are with the workers in this struggle. Moreover we call upon all progressive sections of the community to join us in stating support for the sacked linesmen's campaign to win back their jobs with full entitlements. Petersen's attack on the rights of these SEQEB workers parallels exactly the attacks he has made on the human rights of Aboriginal and Islander people and other sections of the community. We face a common enemy in Petersen. Let us now campaign for a common victory.⁹⁴

The linkage of the SEQEB struggle with broader campaigns against oppression was an important dynamic which served to prolong the dispute, but previous histories have adopted a narrowly "industrial" focus which has led them to ignore such political elements of the dispute.

⁹⁴ Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action "Press Release on SEQEB Dispute", 17 April 1985.

Another element of the SEQEB dispute which previous histories have not fully explored has been the differences between the perspectives of rank and file workers and union officials. The degree of conflict and hostility between union officials and the strikers has been vastly understated, resulting in sanitised histories of the strike. One of the central threads of the discourse of the striking workers was their identification as rank and file members of the trade union movement, with experiences and interests quite distinct from those of the trade union officials. The notion of a dichotomy between the rank and file and the union officials underpinned the political and industrial analysis of the SEQEB Strike Committee and the Women's Committee. The strikers commonly asserted that the reason for their lack of success in the dispute was the refusal of trade union officials to heed the demands of the rank and file for more militant action. Indeed, many of the people involved in the strike said they felt "sold out" by the trade union leadership. When they use the phrase "sellout", I have found that the members of the striking families basically refer to an act of betrayal, in opposition to trade union principles of solidarity. They may, but do not necessarily, imply the corrupt use of union funds for personal gain.

An accurate history of the dispute must recognise that the striking families were incredibly bitter towards the trade union leadership. Striker Bill Rudolph compared the ETU to a decapitated person - while the body was strong, there was no head. He was very bitter at the failures of the ETU, TLC and ACTU leadership in that dispute and

now he has no faith in union officials at all.⁹⁵ Keith Rohweder is another bitter striker. He said that if the dispute happened again, he would use different tactics. In the early stages of the dispute, he would get one of the officials and really hurt him, in order to convince the other officials that the rank and file were serious about the campaign and that any sellouts will be dealt with severely.⁹⁶ Similarly, one of the women involved in the dispute said she is very disillusioned with the union leadership:

They kept standing up in public and saying 'Support the SEQEB workers', that the ACTU was behind us and that the TLC was behind us and that they were going to get the men their jobs back and all that sort of thing. And that was a load of garbage. It had been sold out and lost long, long, long before that. But even up until after August 20th, if the ACTU had've supported us then and pulled out the national support that they always promised and never come across with, I think we could have still probably done something. But they never had any intention of ever doing it...⁹⁷

The dispute changed the way she looked at unions and politics "very radically":

Before, we'd always sort of been brought up as Labor supporters and we just accepted that you must belong to a Union and support a Union - and I still basically subscribe to that concept - but I also think that you need to know a lot more than that.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Bill Rudolph, ETU Strike Committee member, Interview with author, 6 February 1991

⁹⁶ Keith Rohweder, ETU Strike Committee member, Interview with author, 19 December 1992

⁹⁷ Personal interview, 15 November 1992.

⁹⁸ ibid

She said that before the dispute, she was complacent, but now, "the complacency has gone". She said that workers can't be complacent - they "really need to know what their unions are doing and who is representing them".⁹⁹

Likewise, Pat Spence spoke of the "treachery" which sacked workers faced during the strike:

Threats to unions today come from many quarters, from Fascist governments like Bjelke-Petersen's in Queensland, and unfortunately from ultra-conservative politicians amongst whom we must, sadly, include Crean, Kelty, Willis and Hawke. Of special concern is the ineffectual leadership of our Trades and Labor Council and the ineptness of a number of union leaders who should know better. Honest leadership for workers and their unions involves courage. It is our role as rank and file unionists to ensure that future leaders of our unions are of the highest calibre - there must be complete trust and absolute integrity. Some Australian leaders today certainly don't have that integrity...

The 800 SEQEB strikers and their families have struggled for some 13 months - but dare we hope to win when incompetent leaders and an ineffectual TLC in Queensland condemn us to oblivion. Our experience in Queensland should never again happen to rank and file unionists, our betrayal by those in whom we should have been able to place the utmost confidence amounts to treachery.¹⁰⁰

Eric Vogt repeated the common theme that strikers were sold out by the trade union leadership. "It was a total sellout of the hierarchy. Not only the ETU side but I reckon the Labor Party as well". As far as the Trades and Labor Council was concerned:

They are the hierarchy. I put them in with all the hierarchy, the mongrels that sold us out. Especially that slimy bloody toad Dempsey ... I reckon they should have shot the man the day he sold us out. Especially the day where he was going to come up in front of the cameras and say, yes, the dispute is over. And I think

⁹⁹ ibid

¹⁰⁰ Pat Spence gave me a transcript of this speech

about a dozen of us charged in and said, 'What's this we're hearing?' and the man went white in the face. We should have shot him like a mongrel dog then and I don't think anyone would have minded at the time.¹⁰¹

The ETU Strike Committee collectively wrote a speech which striker Bernie Neville delivered outside the ACTU Conference in Sydney on September 9, 1985. The speech tapped into workers' anger over the oppression they had suffered under Bjelke-Petersen and also reflected their anger towards the leadership of the trade union movement, who they believed were selling out trade union members. It also identified the ALP leadership as "traitors" siding with "the enemy" in a class struggle. However, it optimistically suggested the possibility of an alternative future, based on traditional notions of working class solidarity:

Fellow Workers, I want to thank you for the opportunity to address you today... We were sacked by Bjelke-Petersen's Government on February 11. The union movement responded by turning off the lights. The lights were off for 10 days. We were close to victory. We were so close to a victory that would have meant the end of that bastard Petersen. But the TLC under the Secretary Ray Dempsey folded and turned on the lights. The decision to retreat and turn on the lights had the backing of every union official (left and right) in Brisbane... Yet the truth is that when the lights were turned on, we the striking workers were betrayed and sold out. The Labor movement retreated and of course Bjelke-Petersen advanced. He passed his anti-union legislation which will make it very difficult for unions to survive in Queensland. And he has publicly called for similar laws to be used against workers in every state in Australia.

The ACTU responded to Petersen's anti-union crusade by putting on a trade blockade of Queensland in May. The blockade was very effective. It was starting to hurt Petersen. Once more he was down and almost out. Once more we were close to a great victory. But the Federal ALP intervened and forced the ACTU to lift the blockade. Bob Hawke, the leader of the Federal ALP, the Prime Minister of this country, promised the union officials federal awards if they would lift the

¹⁰¹ Eric Vogt, sacked SEQEB worker, Interview with author, 22 December 1990

blockade. Well they lifted it and once more we the strikers were abandoned and sold out.

Why did Bob Hawke sell us out? You might as well ask: Why did he attack the Food Preservers Union? Why is he standing idly by while the Meat Workers are being crushed? Why is he leading the attack on the BLF? The answer is that Hawke, Keating and Willis are not on our side. They are Labor traitors who have gone over to the enemy. They are working for the rich and powerful. They are working for the bosses. That is why they are attacking us...

If we put an end to the Labor Party treachery and betrayals, Howard will not get his chance. There will be no Thatcherism in Australia if we show Crean and Hawke that we will not cop their attacks on us. We must confront the betrayals and the sellouts. We must show Crean and Hawke that we will not give in. We must demand Victory to the Meatworkers, Victory to the BLF, Victory to the ETU. Fellow workers if we join together WE will win.

I will finish then with another warning. In Queensland, we have heard a lot of calls from Crean and Dempsey and Company for unity in the Labor Movement. Fellow workers, it's always the same. When union officials are under attack from the rank and file they call for unity. But I would like to say to you today that when you hear the likes of Crean and Hawke call for unity, watch out. Watch out, for the kind of unity they want is the kind of unity you find in a graveyard. It is the kind of unity of death, of defeat, above all, the unity of the sellout. We the workers must spit on their false unity. We must demand instead the kind of unity you find on the picket line. We must demand the kind of unity that comes from organisation, solidarity and struggle. For that fellow workers, is the kind of unity that will lead the working class to victory.¹⁰²

Through these comments alone, it should be obvious that to suggest that "demoralisation" was the central feeling of the strikers is quite incorrect. It would be more accurate to suggest that the striking families were both angry and optimistic. They were angry at the people who had attacked their rights as workers, they were

¹⁰² Bernie Neville gave me a copy of this speech

angry at the trade union leadership and they were optimistic that other working class people would show the solidarity necessary for them to win their struggle.

The competing discourses adopted by the trade union leadership and the rank and file are particularly evident in their analyses of the power of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and their attitudes towards the mobilisation of the working class. The striking families called for the full mobilisation of the working class because they were optimistic that an industrial response to the attacks on the SEQEB workers would defeat the Bjelke-Petersen Government. As they argued in a Strike Bulletin:

INDUSTRIAL ACTION NEEDED

Action is urgently needed to put the Government of Joh Bjelke-Petersen under the defensive. Industrial action is the only way to do this. Over the last 19 weeks the only times when the Queensland Government has been on the defensive has been during periods of industrial action. The ETU workers need more of the same.¹⁰³

In contrast, the central theme of the discourse of the leadership of the union movement in Queensland during the SEQEB dispute was that the trade union movement could not possibly defeat the Bjelke-Petersen Government. The TLC leadership believed that once the forces of the State were marshalled against the Union movement, these forces would be too strong to resist. The vast majority of trade union officials in Queensland refused to actively support the SEQEB strike because they believed that it could not be

¹⁰³ ETU Strike Committee, Strike Bulletin, No.6, Self-published, Brisbane, 1985.

won and that in those circumstances, it would be foolish to mobilise support for the sacked workers.

TLC President Harry Hauenschild explained that the TLC feared an all-out confrontation with the State Government because they believed that the union movement could not defeat the Government in any industrial dispute. "You can't withstand what the state can throw against you," he commented.¹⁰⁴ Hauenschild's arguments on the power of the state are typical of those trade union officials who argued that the power of the state, combined with the ruthlessness of the Bjelke-Petersen Government, meant that the union movement could never win the SEQEB dispute. Another TLC Executive member, Austin Vaughan, the State Secretary of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union, agreed that the union movement simply cannot defeat a determined Government in any industrial dispute: "You can't beat the Government if they introduce legislation to shackle unions. I mean that's a known fact all round the world. And that's what people failed to understand. Once the Government legislates against an industrial action, you're just defeated".¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Harry Hauenschild, President, Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, Personal Interview, 20 December 1989.

¹⁰⁵ Austin Vaughan, State Secretary of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union and member of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, Interview with the author, 16 July 1990

Few trade union officials offer any suggestions as to how the SEQEB dispute could have been won. Wilf Ardill, the Secretary of the Miscellaneous Workers Union, commented:

There's no recorded case in history of a trade union beating a Government that was determined to beat them... And the way industrial relations has developed since 1985, I would doubt whether unions could win such a dispute in the future... You see, when you're dealing with government, you're dealing with people who are not spending their own money. They're spending the State's money and they're prepared to spend every last cent of the State's money to win the dispute.¹⁰⁶

BWIU State Secretary and TLC Executive Member Hugh Hamilton concurred: "We were taking on an organisation with unlimited resources and funds that were itching to be used against the trade union movement".¹⁰⁷

In summary, the TLC developed its strategies in the SEQEB dispute on a mechanistic and ahistorical model of the relationship between capital, labour and the state. In this view of the relationship between capital, labour and the state, the state looms as all-powerful and organised labour lacks the ability to force the State into any meaningful concessions. The concluding section of this Chapter, which documents divisions within the State Government, suggests that the TLC's vision of a unified Government was inaccurate. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to note that the strikers firmly

¹⁰⁶ Wilf Ardill, Secretary, Miscellaneous Workers Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, Interview with the author, 14 February 1990.

¹⁰⁷ Hugh Hamilton, Secretary, Queensland Branch, Building Workers Industrial Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, Interview with the author, 2 November 1989.

believed that the Government could be defeated whereas the trade union leadership adopted a more pessimistic outlook.

In contrast to the pessimism of Queensland's trade union leadership, the discourse of the striking families was underpinned by an optimistic belief in the solidarity of other workers, suggesting that sustained working class mobilisation could defeat the State Government. A classic illustration of the optimism of the strikers was the "Sacked SEQEB Workers' Song", composed by one of the strikers during the course of the struggle. This song exposes the confidence which strikers held and their belief that industrial support from other workers would lead them to a victory over the Bjelke-Petersen Government:

Old Bjelke says in Qld there aint no industrial strife
 He knows it for a fact because he heard it from his wife.
 All his cronies must agree, or resign forthwith - you see
 He thinks the whole games sewn up.

What a fool to think it's over,
 What a fool to think it's over,
 What a fool to think it's over,
 When its only just begun.

We're not gonna 'Go Down Fighting', cause we bloody won't 'Go Down'
 We've been tripped up 'just a bit', But we bloody well won't quit.
 We're workers, we're not criminals, We're fightin' for our 'Rights'.
 The battle Must be Won!

14 weeks without a paycheck
 14 weeks without a paycheck
 14 weeks without a paycheck
 But we're bloody rich with 'PRIDE'.

However long this takes we know 'We're gonna win this fight'.
 Other unions are behind us now - to help us in our plight.

We'll crush the anti-union laws and re-instate the men
'Oh, Yes, We're gonna WIN'.

Glorious victory to the Workers
Glorious victory to the Workers
Glorious victory to the Workers
For united we are STRONG! ¹⁰⁸

While they were optimistic that an industrial victory was possible, the striking families felt that they would have to organise such actions independently from the union leadership because they felt they were being sold out by union leaders. Sacked workers from the Gold Coast produced a poster which summarised this theme:

The Clayton's Team : Union leaders you have when you don't want to have leadership ... Dempsey, Barton, Hauenschild, Hamilton. How many more traitors must be added to the list before rank and file unionists achieve competent leaders in Queensland? Workers must organise ... Only Rank and File Will Win! ¹⁰⁹

The strikers felt that they were being "sold out" by the trade union leadership because the ETU leadership decided very early in 1985 that they did not want the dispute to continue whereas the strikers wanted to continue their struggle. An ETU Executive meeting decided on March 7th 1985 to end the strike. Sacked SEQEB worker Rob Druery explained that he heard of this decision when he was in Melbourne collecting money for the strike. "I was down there when they had made a decision in the ETU in Brisbane that they were going to return to work. They contacted us in Melbourne and

¹⁰⁸ A copy of this song was given to me by Warren Bowden of the Trade Union Support Group

¹⁰⁹ A copy of the poster was given to me by one of the sacked SEQEB workers from the Gold Coast

told us that this was so, but to keep raising money just the same". Rob Druery said he was told by Wayne Randall, an Assistant State Secretary of the ETU, that the strike was going to be called off on that day and this was confirmed by ETU State Secretary Neil Kane in a telephone conversation to a Victorian ETU official, Ron Luckman.¹¹⁰

Other strikers heard about the intention of the union officials to end the dispute and fought against it. TLC Secretary Ray Dempsey was about to announce this decision at a press conference when he was interrupted by striking workers who thwarted his plans. He was publicly abused by strikers at the press conference. Striker Bernie Neville pointed at Ray Dempsey and told the media "If we go down, he goes down". Bernie suggested that Dempsey did not even deserve to be in charge of the Titanic, let alone the trade union movement in Queensland. The anger of the strikers was reported in the local and national press under headlines such as "Angry SEQEB Men Storm Trades Hall", "Sellout Charges Fly as Power Workers Sweat" and "We Were Sold Out, say sacked power men".¹¹¹ Fearing a similar rebuke from its rank and file, the ETU Executive did not continue with its plan to recommend a return to work under the no-strike conditions. The importance of working class agency should be immediately apparent in this context.

¹¹⁰ Rob Druery, sacked SEQEB worker, Interview with the author, 27 October 1990.

¹¹¹ "Sellout Charges Fly as Power Workers Sweat", Australian Financial Review, 8 March 1985, "We were Sold Out, say Sacked Power Men", The Australian, 8 March 1985, and "Angry SEQEB Men Storm Trades Hall", Telegraph, 8 March 1985

The strikers regarded this unsuccessful attempt to end the dispute as a signal that they were being sold out. In order to avert any further attempts to close the dispute down, they immediately formed a Strike Committee, which met the following morning in the ETU offices. The ETU officials had lost their respect and trust, so they walked into the union offices and took over the running of the dispute. The rank and file SEQEB strikers, without the support of ETU officials, decided to conduct pickets outside SEQEB Depots. During the early weeks of the strike, officials of the Queensland Branch of the ETU did not participate in any of the picketing activities. They had not joined the sacked workers on the picket lines until they were criticised by ETU officials from Western Australia and Victoria for failing to support the sacked workers. Striker Bill Rudolph explained:

Before the Western Australian ETU blokes came over here, not one ETU official was arrested. It was only when they came over here because they weren't happy with what was happening (that forced the ETU officials to attend pickets)... They were saying "What the hell are these blokes doing over there?" They came over here, told these buggers to get off their arse and get out there and get arrested. On the picket lines. Where the workers were.¹¹²

Instead of seeking to broaden the dispute, however, the ETU and the TLC decided to isolate the striking families. The hostility of the strikers to those union officials who failed to support them should not be underestimated. Indeed, some strikers characterise ETU organisers as strike-breakers. According to members of the striking families, Bob Hendricks, who was Assistant State Secretary of the Queensland Branch of the ETU in

¹¹² Bill Rudolph, ETU Strike Committee member, Interview with author, 6 February 1991

1985, acted as a strike breaker in the earliest stages of the dispute. He suggested to workers at the Greenslopes Depot that they should go back to work while other workers were continuing with their strike action. Nearly all of the strikers from that Depot followed his instructions and scabbed. Rob Druery explained that Hendricks "Went and told the fellas that they couldn't win and if they wanted to go back to work, yep, no worries". Although Hendricks was confronted by the sacked workers about this "many times", Rob Druery said that "he'd just wipe his arse on you".¹¹³

Women's Committee member Robyn Burrow gave another example of Hendricks encouraging workers to scab. She said that very early in the dispute, Hendricks called a meeting of workers from the New Farm SEQEB Depot, "got everybody in a big circle" and told them that in any big dispute, some workers regain their jobs and some workers never regain them. He encouraged the New Farm workers to immediately re-apply for work at New Farm. She said that before Hendricks spoke to these workers, not one worker had scabbed.

Some people might have been wavering, but they didn't need to be pushed. He really did put the shits about some of them... If we hadn't had that barbeque, even the nervous nellies would have held out that week, at least until the next weekly meeting.¹¹⁴

Hendricks' comments at the barbeque encouraged some workers to scab. "Some of those people I have never seen since because they went back," Robyn said. She added

¹¹³ Rob Druery, sacked SEQEB worker, Interview with the author, 27 October 1990.

¹¹⁴ Robin Burrow, member of Womens' Committee, Interview with author, 30 July 1992.

that the solidarity of those workers was central to the fate of the sacked SEQEB workers since the control room was a vitally important factor in ensuring the continuity of Brisbane's electricity supply. Like many other people involved in the strike, she believed that the strike could have been won had those workers not decided to scab because their strike action placed the entire electricity generation system in perilous danger and significantly increased the pressure on the Government for a compromise solution. Robyn told Hendricks that it was wrong for him to encourage the people at SEQEB Headquarters to go back to work without giving all of the other strikers the same chance and said that if he believed that the sacked workers should end their strike, then he had an obligation to tell them that at their weekly meeting. Without the support of these key power workers, however, the SEQEB workers were in a much weaker bargaining position.

The conflicts between the strikers and the union leadership continued throughout the two years of the dispute. Strikers allege that in November 1985, ETU officials refused to accept money donated in Western Australia because they felt the strike fund was already large enough. At the same time these officials told strikers to "forget about Western Australia" because there was no support for the strike there. As a result of the failure of the ETU officials in Brisbane to accurately record the level of support in Perth, the following "Rank and File Resolution" was proposed on the 29th of November 1985:

This meeting of sacked SEQEB workers declares that we will continue our struggle until we achieve a just settlement. We wish to thank the ETU in W.A. for their continuing support and in particular for their concerted call for an ACTU National Stoppage to back the sacked workers in Queensland. However, this

meeting also condemns the Queensland ETU for their attempts to block contact between us and our brothers in W.A. We also condemn the Qld ETU for failing to accept the considerable sums of money collected on our behalf in the Pilbara and Mt. Newman areas of WA. This money is badly needed by us and our families. We take this opportunity to repeat our call on our own union officials to call for a national stoppage of the ETU on Human Rights Day December 10th in support of our struggle for reinstatement. We also call upon the ETU to organise a mass picket on Dec 10th outside the Ann Street Headquarters of SEQEB. We also seek endorsement from this mass meeting to send sacked workers to other states in Australia seeking both moral and financial support.¹¹⁵

It should be apparent that the trade union leadership did not want the dispute to continue beyond March 1985 and that it certainly did not want the dispute to escalate into a large scale confrontation between organised labour and the state. Yet the SEQEB strikers and their families were able to prolong the dispute by organising themselves into a Strike Committee and a Women's Committee and by developing a political discourse which challenged the ideology and authority of the trade union leadership. The political and cultural effects of the organisation and articulation of a radical alternative by strikers were: their immediate success in overturning ETU and TLC decisions to end the dispute; the strategic use of public disunity to press for more militant leadership; the development of a widespread recognition that the strikers had been sold out by the trade union leadership; and the mobilisation of masses of workers in support of the sacked SEQEB workers. The next section of this Chapter analyses these areas of working class agency in more detail, particularly the generation of massive wildcat support by the striking families. For the moment, it is sufficient to

¹¹⁵ "Rank and File Resolution" proposed by sacked SEQEB workers, 29 November 1985

acknowledge that many SEQEB strikers were very bitter towards union officials who they believe prioritised their political and personal ambitions ahead of the fate of the sacked workers.

Strikers frequently suggest that many trade union officials were simply carving themselves a future with the Labor Party. For instance, striker Keith Rohweder said he resented the way the SEQEB strike was often used as a forum for self-promotion:

It was more or less a publicity exercise for a lot of them - getting their bloody mugs in the paper, getting arrested and all the rest of it, making out they were giving us all the support that we needed. We were getting fuck all, actually...

It may be a useful antidote to previous accounts of the SEQEB strike which suggested the strikers were demoralised to quote the following resolution which was passed by a meeting of sacked SEQEB workers in the Logan area towards the end of the dispute. The resolution is a good example of the radical critique of trade union officials which arose during the dispute:

This meeting of sacked workers in the Logan city area calls upon all workers involved in the SEQEB dispute to give realistic consideration to their current situation. This meeting acknowledges that for practical purposes, that is the reinstatement of sacked workers, the SEQEB dispute is lost. We see a number of reasons why this is so, the crucial reason being the failure of the union leadership to mobilise support for the cause. This we see as being a consequence of neglect by union leaders to educate workers in the class struggle nature of our society, consequently the onslaught led by the Queensland Government was not, and is not yet seen as a general attack upon living standards and democratic rights of all workers.

The meeting stated: That those union leaders who do not see the class nature of this struggle should resign, they are no longer serving the best interests of workers. Those who see the nature of the struggle and do nothing because of a

consensus Accord and roll with the punches attitude are disarming the workers ideologically and organisationally through class collaborationist policy.

To unions prepared to carry on and lead the struggle we say get on with it, forget us in so far as getting our jobs back with SEQEB, we will use funds collected to help find alternative employment (if possible) and we stand ready to assist in whatever way possible to defend democratic rights and living standards. We are no longer prepared to be like rabbits to be pulled out of the hat by some union officials as they consider the need arises.¹¹⁶

This degree of radicalism was not an isolated incident. In an interview for this dissertation, striker Jackson Brown suggested there is now a greater need for a return to the old style of struggle than ever before:

The sacking of the SEQEB workers might be seen as the beginning, but there's been a lot of water under the bridge since then. There's been a lot of workers laid off. Like in the Mudginberri dispute, there's been Dollar Sweets, there's been the Plumbers, the Builders Labourers have been de-recognised, Evans Deakin, I mean, the Painters and Dockers in Queensland have actually abandoned themselves as a Branch because they've got no members anymore. The attacks that have been made on the workers and the union officials, including the waterfront unions and the maritime unions... They're getting knocked off because the leadership hasn't taken the initiatives that they should have taken, like the Builders Labourers have taken over the years, though I'm reluctant to include Queensland in that. But we need some good strong militant class action and we need leadership shown by the people who have been elected to lead us.¹¹⁷

Jackson Brown and his wife Shelley both rejected any suggestion that the "old style of struggle" is dead. Shelley was active in the Women's Group, helped organise the food parcels in Southport and attended the weekly meetings and pickets in Southport. She encouraged people to become more militant, saying that "people are just getting walked

¹¹⁶ Copy of resolution given to me by one of the strikers.

¹¹⁷ Jackson Brown, sacked SEQEB worker, 3 January 1991.

over now because the bosses have just about got people where they want them". Shelley particularly emphasised the need for workers in disputes to be more vigorous in their picketing. She remembered one picket which erupted into violence at Southport Depot as a very positive experience, even though the Gold Coast strikers were criticised by the ETU officials and by some other strikers because the picket became violent.

Shelley explained the circumstances of the picket:

We had been up to a meeting at Perry Park and it was terrible and everyone was really depressed. And the bus stopped on the way home at the Hotel and we decided to go to the Depot at knock-off time. And by the time we got there, you can imagine the bus, we were very hyped up by the time we got there. And so we got there and just about five minutes before the guys knocked off we arrived and we started calling out and getting very excited and it all ended up in a big blue. And this guy, Lee Lyons, who was on strike with us for six months, took photos of us because some guys had to go to hospital - it was quite violent. And they arrested about twelve of us through these photos. But that was really - I don't know how to put it in words - that was the only satisfying bit of the dispute that some of us felt.¹¹⁸

Jackson Brown agreed that workers needed to be more militant:

The old style of struggle is dead as far as trade union officials are concerned, but the trade union officials in this country better wake up to the fact that if they don't get off their arses and start serving their members, then the members might just get off their arses and start serving themselves... This is why Hendricks and Kane and all them have got it wrong - because they tread the carpet. They've forgotten where they came from, those blokes. I've said it before and I'll say it again, they ought to get out of those offices and start serving the members. They lost that dispute - the leadership of the trade union movement. It wasn't the rank and file that lost it. We could have beaten the Government.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Shelley Brown, wife of sacked SEQEB worker, 3 January 1991.

¹¹⁹ Jackson Brown, personal interview, *op cit*

For Jackson Brown, the issues raised by the SEQEB dispute go to the very heart of the way this society is organised. He said that if he could pass a message on to other workers, it would be that "For the sake of the working class and for the sake of their class, because that's what we are, working class, we have an obligation to be more militant... We've got to overthrow the present system. It's a matter of surplus value versus labour. We are labour and in fact 40% of our working week makes our wages. The other 60% is surplus value. So I think we have a moral obligation as workers to alleviate the bosses of that extra 60%".¹²⁰ The dispute had a profoundly radicalising effect upon Jackson Brown: his analysis of industrial relations became profoundly anti-capitalist and counter-hegemonic.

Not only has this review of the discourse of the striking families demonstrated that it is almost farcical to suggest the strikers were demoralised, it has also explained why they felt it was necessary to discredit and displace the authority of the trade union leadership as well as the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Previous histories of the dispute have not even recognised that this was the intent of the striking families. The next section of this Chapter seeks to investigate the level of working class activity generated by the striking families without the support of union officials. It examines the adoption of three main elements of the striking families' discourse: the suggestion that the SEQEB dispute was an attack on the entire trade union movement; the acceptance by trade unionists of the

¹²⁰ ibid

need to mobilise in response to this attack; and the acceptance of the idea that the striking families had been sold out by the leadership. In outlining the support mobilised by the striking families, the Chapter will include a discussion of the support mobilised in many industries, as well as regional and interstate trade unionists and the broader community. Previous accounts of the dispute have not recognised that such mobilisation occurred and as a result, have drastically under-estimated the degree of support for the striking families.

The agency of the striking families

This section of the Chapter will analyse the extent to which the striking families were able to marshal support from members of the labour movement and the wider community. It will be suggested that the discourse of the striking families was so successful that it led to an unprecedented mobilisation of working class people. Previous histories of the strike have not recognised the magnitude of this support because of their institutional focus, poorly theorised conception of class and their reliance on traditional sources of information. By using oral history and focussing on working class agency at the local level, I intend to demonstrate the adoption of the striking families' discourse by workers occurred in a wide range of industries, including the power industry, transport, construction, mining, telecommunications, the liquor trade, the waterfront, and education. I will also demonstrate that the strikers received significant regional and interstate support which has been ignored in previous accounts of the dispute.

A focus on working class agency is particularly necessary in this dispute because the vast majority of actions were organised either spontaneously by workers in other industries as acts of wildcat solidarity or were instigated after groups of workers had been addressed by SEQEB workers. Very little of the action taken in the SEQEB dispute had official union endorsement. Nevertheless, workers continued to take actions, pass resolutions and financially support the striking families for over two years. This section of the Chapter will demonstrate that thousands of workers accepted the arguments of the striking families that the attack on the SEQEB workers was an attack on the entire trade union movement; that there was a need to mobilise in order to defeat this attack on the working class; and that the strikers had been sold out by the trade union leadership.

Of course, it is impossible to document all the industrial action taken by rank and file unionists in support of the sacked SEQEB workers. In the first two weeks of the dispute, one million workers were either stood down or on strike.¹²¹ However, this section of the Chapter hopes to give a broad outline of the extent of industrial support at the shop-floor level. Unfortunately, a process which documents the visible actions of a trade union often has a tendency to underestimate the intangible attitudes which underscored those actions. For instance, the demands from workers in nearly every

¹²¹ Trade Union Rights Committee, "Trade Union Rights Committee", self-published, Brisbane, Labour Day, 1985.

industry that the TLC and the ACTU increase their support for the strike would not be recorded in a summary which simply stated that certain workers took industrial action. In order to avoid this pitfall and to provide an accurate reflection of the adoption of the striking families' discourse by other workers, this Chapter includes quotes from resolutions passed at workers meetings and comments from interviews with workers.

There was widespread acknowledgment that the issues raised by the SEQEB dispute went to the very foundations of trade unionism. Meetings of workers throughout Australia condemned the Queensland Government's attack on the striking families as an attack on workers' rights and on trade unionism itself. The following resolutions, which are a sample of those received by the striking families, reflect the success of the striking families' discourse in generating working class and community support. Consistent with the theoretical emphasis of the dissertation on the role of agency and the practical emphasis on the rank and file of the union movement, it is important to note that most of the following resolutions were drafted or requested by rank and file members of trade unions rather than union officials. They were mainly generated by workers who had been addressed by the striking families, but they were sometimes unsolicited and wildcat acts of solidarity. Sometimes, these workers were able to have their position on the SEQEB dispute adopted as official union policy. However, it is important to recognise that the impetus within the trade union movement for displays of solidarity with the sacked workers came from other rank and file workers, rather than the leadership of the trade union movement.

Members of the Australian Telecommunications Employees' Association took up the theme that the SEQEB dispute was a battle for the future of trade unionism and signed a petition addressed "To all Trade Unionists" which stated that:

We, the undersigned, regard the current dispute in the power industry as one of the most serious disputes in the whole history of the union movement in Australia. The issue has now gone beyond the fate of the SEQEB linesmen and now affects the very existence of trade unions in Australia. Bjelke-Petersen has made this quite clear in his press releases. He has claimed victory not only over the ETU but also over the entire trade union movement. He has, moreover, issued a call for his example to be followed in other states. It is vital that this threat to the labour movement be met and defeated. To this end, the winning of the ETU strike is crucial. Accordingly, we welcome and call upon all trade unionists to do what they can to help the SEQEB men get their jobs and full entitlements back.¹²²

Similarly, the State Conference of the United Fire Fighters Union unanimously passed a resolution condemning the attack on the SEQEB strikers as an attack on trade unionism in general. The resolution stated that their Union:

Unanimously condemns the draconian and retrograde amendments to the Queensland Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act introduced by the Bjelke-Petersen Government. We condemn this action as an attempt to put a further nail in the coffin of the trade union movement. We call on the Queensland Trades and Labor Council and the ACTU to organise a united Australia-wide campaign to stop its coldly calculated and premeditated attempt to destroy the trade union movement and everything it stands for...¹²³

The Combined Shire Union (Bowen Branch) also passed strong motions of support for the SEQEB strikers throughout the dispute. They emphasised the "fascist" nature of the

¹²² Sighted in ATEA files by author

¹²³ Copy of Resolution kept in records of Trades and Labour Council of Queensland

Bjelke-Petersen Government, suggesting the Government was intent on destroying trade unionism:

It is perfectly obvious and clear to members of the Disputes Committee that the National State Government has now moved out into the open publicly and revealed to all clear thinking individuals that the intent of the State Government is that of extreme Right Wing Fascist motive with the object of destroying the democratic rights of all Unionists and Queenslanders in general. We deplore this action and revelation and fully support all and every action of the Executive members of the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland and call upon all unionists to rally to the cause of ridding Queensland of this cancer and movement towards fascism and it is our intent to take any action/s in this area. We fully support any State-wide union action towards the return of all democratic rights within the Trade Union Movement...¹²⁴

Retired mine workers were another group of workers who adopted the discourse of the striking families, identifying Bjelke-Petersen as a "dictator" who was attacking the entire trade union movement:

We wish your members well in this struggle, as we see it, a cold and calculated attack on the whole trade union movement in this state, being carried out by Dictator Joh and we call on all other unions, for their own protection, to support the ETU to the hilt.¹²⁵

After they were visited by strikers, workers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia passed a number of resolutions which indicate they too accepted the political arguments of the striking families. They were particularly critical of the union leadership, but this element of their political position will be examined in more detail later in the Chapter. For the meantime, it is sufficient to note that they accepted the

¹²⁴ Copy of resolution sent to Trades and Labour Council of Queensland

¹²⁵ Ipswich and West Moreton Retired Mineworkers Association - copy of resolution given to me by B.Neville

suggestion that there was a need to provide moral, financial industrial and political support to the striking families because they were fighting a battle for the survival of trade unionism. The following resolution was moved by striker Bill Rudolph and was endorsed by every union meeting he attended in the Pilbara region in March 1985.

Hundreds of meetings in Western Australia endorsed this resolution:

Unionists in the Pilbara region of WA condemn the Queensland Government for its blatant attempt to drastically undermine the working conditions of Australian men and women. This meeting condemns the Government for its actions in putting out work to contract which is rightly the province of trade union members in permanent employment with all normal workers rights in regard to work performed. This meeting condemns the irresponsible, malicious and reprehensible tactics of the Government and the South East Queensland Electricity Board and in particular, Bjelke-Petersen in sacking career workers, some with many years seniority, and in attempting to recruit scab labour at much higher rates of pay to fill the vacant positions. This meeting condemns the fining of individual workers for taking industrial action, a tactic which strikes at the very basis of Australian trade unionism over the last 150 years. This meeting declares full support for Queensland striking unionists in the struggle to defeat the union-bashing campaign of the minority Bjelke-Petersen Government...

Many workers in Queensland contacted their unions and reiterated the theme of the striking families that the future of trade unionism revolved around the fate of the sacked workers. Power station operators, for instance, informed the union leadership of their support for the striking families both on an individual and a collective basis. An MOA meeting in April 1985 passed a resolution condemning the "repressive and repugnant anti-union legislation" and declaring its "strong support" for the campaign for the re-instatement of the striking families. The resolution explained that the MOA supported the SEQEB workers:

Because it is considered that if the sacked workers are not reinstated and if the legislation is allowed to remain and be used, then no M.O.A. member in

Queensland will remain unaffected. Salaries, conditions of employment, employment itself and the principles of arbitration are all seriously threatened. The M.O.A. in Queensland will continue to educate its members about the seriousness of the situation so that, when called upon, M.O.A. is confident that its members will realise the necessity of taking action.¹²⁶

Individual power station operators also endorsed the themes of the striking families that the "fascist" Bjelke-Petersen Government was intent on taking workers rights back one hundred years. On the 8th of March 1985, K.A. Jackson, one of the power operators at the Queensland Electricity Commission, wrote to Ray Dempsey stating:

With reference to the current power dispute in which I am currently involved. It poses the question just what has the Premier and his Cabinet done to the power industry. I feel very strongly I might add that the Premier has turned what was formerly a happy, cooperative and caring workforce into an insecure, distrustful, discontented, threatened and intimidated group of workers. Who are also threatened by the penal provisions of the new legislation, and a return to old working conditions which we fought so hard to improve. Which in effect puts the union movement in this state back a hundred years, and making workers nothing more than serfs or vassals of a totalitarian state. Not to mention the effect the current legislation is having on the health and mental well being of the people and the families involved. My question is this: are we going to allow this government to trample us underfoot or are we going to fight to the death for industrial democracy. I feel that neither I or any other worker in this state can afford the luxury of being complacent, and caving in to fascism. Our livelihood, way of life and all the trade union movement has fought for is at stake. Let us band together in a total union attack to remove this government and replace it with a more responsible one that cares for people, and one that the people of Queensland can trust.¹²⁷

Another power industry worker, Fred Coster, wrote to the Trades and Labour Council, stressing that he believed that it was the right of all workers to withdraw their labour

¹²⁶ Municipal Officers Association, Resolution 26 April 1985.

¹²⁷ K.A. Jackson, correspondence with TLC, 8 March 1985

and that working conditions should "never be eroded or lost or interfered with by any Government". Fred Coster's comments were representative of many rank and file workers at the time:

You let Joh off the block, when you had him completely done, and you had only to bring the axe down and chop him right off completely. You had him reeling ... Get every union worker back to work under all his past conditions and definitely no loss of any item and absolutely no Joh Legislation to be forced on any worker ... PULL THE PLUG if necessary to get every man back working as previously. ... you seemed to give in to Joh and then lost control of the dispute as from then on. Get all the troops to ATTACK AND FIGHT to the end for all Queensland workers...ATTACK AND FIGHT is the name of the game, and hoping you and fellow unionists follow suit.¹²⁸

Other workers also viewed the dispute as an attack on trade unionism and repeated the theme of the striking families that the State Government's push for contract labour would result in less job security and worse working conditions for all public sector employees. The Queensland Rail Employees' Union took industrial action and held a number of meetings about the SEQEB dispute. The concerns of rail workers were summarised as follows:

The right to take industrial action to defend jobs, employment conditions and other rights we consider everyday occurrences are explicitly under attack within the contracts that are currently proposed by the State Government...Whilst the current dispute has flared in the power industry it could have easily occurred within the railway industry as part of any campaign we have mounted to defend our jobs. The assault by the Government on full time employment in Crown authorities such as the electricity and rail industry is a deliberate and ongoing process designed to eliminate jobs in the Government sector in Queensland. Whilst this is an issue of tremendous importance the dispute has also been enlarged to the defence of existing employment conditions covering hours of work, rates of pay, shift work penalties and allowances, sick leave entitlements, long service leave payments, holiday loadings, etc. These areas became negotiable

¹²⁸ Coster, F. Correspondence with T.L.C, undated, (c. February-March 1985)

in the employment contracts with the Government employing authorities holding complete power against the worker. For this reason rail unions have no alternative than to fight in the campaign in the most effective ways possible...¹²⁹

Members of the Queensland Teachers' Union were also concerned that the SEQEB dispute would have flow-on effects for their employment conditions:

If the Government could legislate to override Award conditions for SEQEB workers, as it did, then it could also legislate to override the Teachers Award and reduce our working conditions... The Government has taken away the powers of the Industrial Commission... Without an independent Industrial Commission, we have no avenues for achieving salary increases or improvements in the working conditions of teachers... If members of the QTU take action on any issue because the Government prevents meaningful negotiations between the Union and the Public Service Board, then we face -

- (a) penalties of \$50,000 for individuals and \$250,000 for the QTU;
- (b) dismissal;
- (c) cancellation or suspension of the registration of OUR Union...

Everything that has happened to the ETU and its members could have happened to OUR Union and OUR members...¹³⁰

The Victorian Divisional Committee of Actors Equity showed similar solidarity with the striking families. They linked the attack on the SEQEB strikers to other attacks on the union movement:

The SEQEB linesmen have consistently said that they are fighting for the basic trade union rights of all Australian workers. Equity members whilst aware of the anti-union attacks of Bjelke-Petersen should be warned that they will not be exempted from moves to crush or discipline the trade union movement. Concerted attacks on the trade union movement over the last six months have seen moves to destroy the BLF, the Food Preservers Union, the Furnishing Trades Federation and the Meat Workers Union...

¹²⁹ Queensland Railways Employees Union, "Special Emergency Newsletter on Power Dispute", Station Mini-Leader, 20 February 1985

¹³⁰ Leaflet held in the library of the Queensland Teachers Union.

The striking families were also successful in mobilising construction workers and convincing them that a militant response was necessary. The Plumbers and Gasfitters Union, consistent with the suggestions of the striking families, adopted the policy that there should have been a general strike to support the sacked SEQEB workers. The influence of the discourse of the striking families was obvious: while the Plumbers and Gasfitters' support for a general strike was consistent with the political analysis of the striking families, it directly conflicted with the intentions of the trade union leadership. John Thompson, the State Secretary of the Plumbers and Gasfitters' Union, explained the position of the members of his union: "Our own union debated that and we had a view that we should have a general strike. That was our own union's view... I mean, if it was a proper, organised general strike, I mean it would have had the ability to shut the state down. Then we could have beat them".¹³¹

Workers in the building industry were strongly convinced by the discourse of the striking families. As a result, they took sustained and continuous industrial action throughout the dispute, often in spite of the opposition of their union officials. Building workers throughout Queensland took part in four statewide stoppages and hundreds of job stoppages (as well as enforcing bans and limitations at hundreds of other job sites). Workers in the construction industry channelled \$170,000 through their unions into the

¹³¹ John Thompson, Secretary, Queensland Plumbers and Gasfitters Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, Interview with author, 5 December 1989.

funds set up to support the sacked SEQEB workers. On the 30th of April, 1985 building industry workers and ETU workers throughout Queensland voted by more than a nine to one majority for more industrial action.¹³²

Many other workers were also convinced by the striking families that a militant response was necessary. The Chullora sub-branch meeting of the Australian Railways Union on April 29, 1985 passed a resolution stating :

This meeting condemns the attacks on the ETU members being carried out by the Queensland Government. Petersen's anti-union legislation, abolishing fundamental trade union rights to Queensland workers is an attack on the whole trade union movement. We therefore demand that the ACTU organise a nation-wide General Strike in support of the SEQEB workers. We authorise our branch secretary to send telegrams to the ACTU and to our State Executive to state our position. Further, we call upon the leadership of the combined shop stewards committee to urgently discuss this resolution.¹³³

Members of the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers' Union were also convinced of the need for a militant response to the attack on the SEQEB workers and their families. The July edition of the Painter and Docker stated:

We believe that support for the ETU must not only continue, but in fact, be extended and that the ACTU be prepared to initiate massive industrial action should the latest attempts of solving the dispute fail.¹³⁴

¹³² Daily Sun 30 April 1985

¹³³ Australian Railways Union Chullora Sub-Branch Resolution April 29, 1985

¹³⁴ Federated Ship Painters and Dockers' Union of Australia "From the Federal Office" Painter and Docker, Vol.1, No.2, July 1985, p.1

Many SEQEB strikers suggest that the miners supported them more than any other union. As well as taking statewide strike action for about two weeks in February 1985, miners donated approximately \$24 million through the Collieries Union to SEQEB strike funds.¹³⁵ Similarly, members of the FEDFA were very strong supporters of the SEQEB strikers. To quote from the February 1985 edition of The Engine Driver, the journal of the FEDFA:

The trade unions answered by massive solidarity which closed down the whole coal-mining industry at a cost of about \$8 million a day in export earnings. Some 2000 FEDFA members were directly involved in the strike. FEDFA members were also involved in the power stations themselves, playing an important part by first refusing to supply coal, then returning to work but supplying only enough coal to keep output to 1300 megawatts...¹³⁶

In August 1985, Ralph Coates, the FEDFA delegate at the Callide Mine in Central Queensland, was reported in The Engine Driver, as saying that "We have maintained our support for the SEQEB workers from the very beginning". The magazine reported that "The 1,400 odd FEDFA members in the Queensland coal industry came out for two weeks in support of the power workers and then levied themselves \$10 every week since returning to work".¹³⁷

¹³⁵ "Miners Stop Donating to Sacked SEQEB Workers" Courier-Mail 22 October 1985.

¹³⁶ Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association "Bjelke's War on Queensland Workers" The Engine Driver, Vol.10, No.2, February 1985, p.1

¹³⁷ Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association "Cambourn's Column", The Engine Driver, Vol.10, No.8, August 1985, p.3.

Transport workers also formed a very close association with the striking families. The food distribution outlet for the striking families was organised by transport workers. As a result, when transport workers instituted a blockade of Queensland:

The big depots in transport in Brisbane were totally empty. So it had a tremendous effect... the TNT Express Depot, one of the biggest in Queensland, if not the biggest, that Depot was empty and there were something like 200 TWU members walking around that place, getting paid, with nothing to do. Totally empty. COMET, KWIKASAIR, all those depots were empty. And they were the key ones.¹³⁸

Workers in the transport industry were moving to extend the blockade when it was called off by the ACTU with the promise that the proposed Federal legislation would ensure that the sacked SEQEB workers were re-instated. Brisbane's Daily Sun reported that when the ACTU first announced that the blockade would be lifted, some unions refused to lift their bans. On Tuesday May 14, 1985 it stated that "The blockade and all other industrial action officially was lifted from 4pm yesterday but some unions are maintaining bans until they have more specific information from the ACTU".¹³⁹ Such wildcat actions are another indication of the abundance of support for the sacked SEQEB workers. The level of support for the SEQEB strikers throughout the whole transport industry should never be underestimated. The State Secretary of the Tram and Bus Union, Tom McHenry reflected the widespread support in the industry when

¹³⁸ Hughie Williams, Secretary, Brisbane Sub-Branch, Transport Workers Union, Personal Interview, 8 February 1990

¹³⁹ Daily Sun, May 14 1985

he commented on August 3, 1985 that "If the TLC decides busses should stop, they will for whatever period is necessary".¹⁴⁰

Other transport industry unions also demonstrated their support for the SEQEB strikers. Queensland Rail Employees' Union (QREU) delegates attended transport industry meetings and supported a motion calling for strike action in the rail industry; they donated \$20 per member to the Strike Fund; and endorsed other motions calling for industrial and financial support for the sacked SEQEB workers.¹⁴¹ The State Secretary of the Federated Storemen and Packers' Union, Ray Smith, also acknowledged the massive level of support from transport workers when he said that "Various unions around Australia were boycotting the handling and transportation of goods to or from Queensland without any resolution from the Australian Council of Trade Unions".¹⁴² The Storemen and Packers' Union offered strong industrial support to the SEQEB workers, particularly in their support for the industrial blockade of Queensland. On the 7th of February 1985, a general meeting of the Storemen and Packers' Union unanimously passed the following motion:

This meeting of the Storemen and Packers Union strongly condemns the Queensland State Government for declaring a State of Emergency against the Electrical Trades Union and should refrain from interfering in this Industrial Commission matter. Further, we condemn the Queensland State Government also for continuing to attack the worker of Queensland and their working conditions. It is the opinion of this Union that the State Government would like to see the

¹⁴⁰ Connors, D. "Buses could stop in SEQEB Dispute", Courier-Mail, August 3, 1985

¹⁴¹ Resolutions sighted by author in records of Queensland Trades and Labour Council

¹⁴² Smith, R. quoted in Courier-Mail, 2 May 1985.

workers of this State, working under conditions that exist in many South East Asian countries. We therefore call on the Queensland Trades and Labor Council to unite the workers of Queensland to take a stand against the continued attacks by the State Government.¹⁴³

Lulla Davis, from the Brisbane Branch of the Painters and Dockers Union, was very active in supporting the sacked SEQEB workers. He reported on the support shown by workers on May Day 1985 in his union's journal, Painter and Docker:

It was the biggest march since the days of the Vietnam War protest, over 50,000 people marched. These are not my figures, that's the Local Sausage Wrappers figures, "The Sun". The leaders of the march were out at the Exhibition Grounds, about a 30 minute march and the last of the marchers were still at the starting point in the centre of the City. A most impressive body of trade unionists and other people allied to the trade union cause, and all were determined to defeat the Bjelke-Petersen Government. While spectators were not about in large numbers they were up on previous years. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) were by far of course the biggest and best body of marchers. I thought that they should have led the march.¹⁴⁴

In May 1986, the Painter and Docker discussed the SEQEB dispute in the context of the growing attacks on unionism throughout Australia. The Federal Secretary of the Painters and Dockers Union, Bob Gallegan, commented:

As a union we have been like a voice crying in the wilderness about the lack of united trade union action to combat the savage attacks on workers as demonstrated by the SEQEB dispute, Mudginberri, the BLF dispute, the use of Sections 45D and E of the Trades Practices Act, etc. The time to say - Halt! No more! was long ago. To the extent that our position is not satisfied by July, or whenever the crunch comes, we will be recommending a national campaign of industrial action. At that stage, bosses, Governments and others who take their side will get to know the meaning of 'Touch One, Touch All', as we prepare for a fight as important as any in our history. We remain confident that the fighting qualities and solidarity of our members will see us through to victory.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Storemen and Packers' Union Resolution, February 7 1985.

¹⁴⁴ Davis, L. "May Day 1985, Brisbane", Painter and Docker, Vol1, No.2, July 1985, p.9

¹⁴⁵ Gallegan, B. "From the Federal Office", Painter and Docker, Vol1, No.5, May 1986, p.1

The members of the Seamen's Union were also convinced by the striking families of the need for a militant response and continually demanded an escalation of industrial action throughout the SEQEB dispute. For example, a stopwork meeting of the Seamen's Union held in Brisbane on the 25th of June, 1985 unanimously demanded that:

In conjunction with any future industrial action re the power dispute or further attacks on any section of the trade union movement, that immediate working class mobilisation should be initiated and simultaneously well published and organised mass rallies be convened throughout the State, so as to attract the largest possible unity. Further, we call on the Trades and Labor Council to organise a major public rally in Brisbane on August 20th to coincide with the opening of the State Parliament, to protest against Bjelke-Petersen's anti-trade union attacks.¹⁴⁶

Rank and file seamen and waterside workers showed tremendous solidarity with the SEQEB strikers. Their support was demonstrated financially and industrially on many occasions. Rank and file seamen such as Bob Carnegie, Frank Malone and Tony Bernardin took their place alongside SEQEB workers at picket lines. Bob Carnegie was later jailed for refusing to sign bail conditions which would have prevented him from returning to the SEQEB picket lines. In response to the jailing of Bob Carnegie on April 17, 1985 seamen declared a snap strike on the 1st of May. The strike meant that tug services were completely halted, the departure of three ships was cancelled, three other ships were left at anchor awaiting berth and two ships decided to anchor at

¹⁴⁶ Resolution passed by stop-work meeting, Brisbane, 25 June 1985. A copy of this resolution can be found in the Minutes of the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, No.493, 22nd July 1985, p.4

Mooloolaba.¹⁴⁷ The extent to which seamen were supportive of the sacked SEQEB workers can be seen by the fact that on two ships, the Mackay Tugs and the Ampol Sarel, Bob Carnegie personally collected \$1,970.00.¹⁴⁸

It was not just seamen based in Brisbane that supported the sacked SEQEB workers. On the 26th of April, 1985, Seamen's Union members in Gladstone held up two bulk carriers, the River Boyne and the Howard Smith, so that they could attend a solidarity rally in Gladstone. When one of the seamen attending the rally moved a motion calling on the ACTU to organise "immediate industrial action", all but one of the approximately 500 workers in attendance supported the motion.¹⁴⁹ Interstate support was also given by seamen. For instance, on the 18th of February 1985, Seamen's Union delegates at Ormiston sent a telegram to Trades Hall stating that "Seamen's Union members Ormiston strongly support any action Council takes to beat the anti-union actions of the Queensland Government".¹⁵⁰

Workers in the telecommunications industry were also active in supporting the SEQEB strikers and their families. Members of the Australian Telecommunications Employees'

¹⁴⁷ See Connors, D. "Seamen out in New Twist to Campaign", Courier-Mail, May 1, 1985; also Watson, W. "Seamen Walkout Starts State Stoppage", Daily Sun, April 18, 1985.

¹⁴⁸ I have personally seen these receipts

¹⁴⁹ "Rally calls on ACTU for 'Action'", Courier-Mail, April 27, 1985

¹⁵⁰ Seamen's Union delegates at Ormiston, telegram to Trades And Labour Council of Queensland, 18th of February 1985

Association (ATEA) throughout Queensland passed strong motions of support for the SEQEB strikers, donated to the strike fund and took industrial action over the SEQEB dispute. In response to the sackings of the SEQEB workers, ATEA members placed bans on the maintenance of the State Government's PABX systems. This action was very effective and was supported by a nine-to-one ratio of ATEA members in a secret ballot. The resolution which was the subject of the secret ballot was proposed by ATEA officials at the Mass Meeting held at Lang Park at 12.30pm on the 20th February 1985.

The motion stated:

That the ATEA apply State Wide Bans on the installation and maintenance of services to all Queensland State Government Administration, its Statutory Authorities, SEQEB, other Regional Electricity Authorities and QEC. Further, that other action recommended by properly constituted meetings of ATEA members in support of the Dispute, may be applied subject to the approval of the State Executive. These bans are to be applied in an endeavour to have the Queensland Government accept the Industrial Commission's recommendation which has already been accepted by the power unions as the only sensible way of restoring sanity to the Industrial Management of this State. ¹⁵¹

Of the 1668 votes cast in this secret ballot, 1320 people voted "yes", 342 voted "no" and there were 5 informal votes. ¹⁵²

ATEA members throughout Queensland demonstrated their support in a variety of ways. ATEA members at Emerald, an area in western Queensland which is not even covered by SEQEB, sent the following message to the State Secretary of their union:

¹⁵¹ Queensland Branch of the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association files

¹⁵² Letter from the Returning officer to Secretary of ATEA

At the February meeting of the Emerald Section Council held on Thursday 19-2-85 at 1650 the following motions were carried:

1. That the Emerald Section Council of the ATEA believes that the present SEQEB dispute cannot be resolved until sacked SEQEB linesmen are re-instated;
2. That the Emerald Section Council of the ATEA ban maintenance on the office telephones of the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations due to his inaction in the current power dispute;
3. That the Emerald Section Council calls upon the Government to accept the State Industrial Commissions recommendations so that the dispute may be solved.¹⁵³

In Brisbane, ATEA members had already been in a dispute with SEQEB over the removal of asbestos and the City Telephone Information Centre passed a motion on the 28th of February, 1985 stating "That SEQEB Ann Street be returned to a total maintenance ban due to the lack of progress in relation to their asbestos removal campaign".¹⁵⁴ The fact that such action occurred on a wildcat basis can be further demonstrated by recognising that ATEA officials directed their members to remove these bans and agreed to pay SEQEB \$17,000 for damages caused by this industrial action.¹⁵⁵

Many other unionists also supported the striking families. For instance, workers in sugar mills took industrial action in support of the sacked SEQEB workers on numerous

¹⁵³ Emerald Section Council ATEA. Telegraph to Ian McLean, State Secretary ATEA, 18 February 1985.

¹⁵⁴ Sighted by author in ATEA files

¹⁵⁵ ATEA files viewed by author

occasions, without support from the trade union leadership. The mill workers were one of the groups of workers who continued to support the sacked workers with industrial action months after the TLC had officially declared that the strike was finished. For instance, mill workers and waterside workers took 24 hour strike action on September 9, 1985. The following day, coal miners and seamen held 24 hour stoppages. Eight days later, there was a statewide stoppage of building workers, involving members of the Builders Labourers' Federation, the Building Workers' Industrial Union, the Plumbers and Gasfitters' Union and the Painters and Decorators' Union. Prior to this action, TLC representative Hugh Hamilton had publicly declared that the strike was over and that it was pointless to continue supporting the striking families with industrial action. The fact that these workers were still prepared to continue to take industrial action at this late stage of the dispute, in spite of the opposition of the union leadership, once again reflected the success of the striking families' discourse.

Similar support came from postal workers. For instance, an Australia Post spokesperson said in the Courier-Mail on Thursday 9th May, 1985 that postal workers in New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia had decided not to process Queensland mail on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays until further notice. These bans on postal services were only lifted because the ACTU announced a moratorium on industrial action on Monday 13 May 1985. Other indications of the widespread trade union support for the striking families include the fact that a general meeting of the Queensland Branch of the Australian Foremen Stevedores' Association on the 12th of

July 1985 voted to send a donation of \$1600 to the ETU sacked workers fund¹⁵⁶ and Executive members of 42 unions demanded at a Trades Hall meeting on 21 March 1985 that the ACTU and the TLC wage "an all-out industrial campaign".¹⁵⁷

Power industry workers also demonstrated their solidarity with the sacked SEQEB workers on many occasions. During February, 1985 they instigated load shedding in response to the dismissal of the SEQEB workers. As the Callide Power Station Combined Operating Unions said in a letter to the Daily Sun on May 10, 1985, rank and file members rather than union officials caused the February load shedding:

We must state that load reductions did not occur at the instigation of State union officials, as has been suggested by some people. The move to support fellow industry employees originated within the rank and file in the power stations.¹⁵⁸

The load shedding campaign of the operators only ended when they were issued a directive from the Queensland Trades and Labour Council. Although operators followed this directive, they made it quite clear that they were not intimidated by the Government and were prepared to engage in further load shedding in support of the sacked workers. For instance, the Callide operators stressed that they were quite prepared to engage in load shedding again, despite the threats of \$50,000 fines:

It must be pointed out that these pieces of legislation do not ensure continuity of supply, they merely ensure that power station operators can be taken to court and possibly fined for winding down load.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ ATEA files viewed by author

¹⁵⁷ Trades and Labour Council records

¹⁵⁸ "Power Unions Renew Threat" Daily Sun May 10, 1985 p.2

Nearly a month after they had been instructed by the Trades and Labor Council Executive to restore full power, workers in the power stations still wanted to take strike action in support of the sacked SEQEB workers. The Telegraph reported that the TLC was under pressure from workers in the power stations who wished to take more industrial action in support of the sacked SEQEB workers, including restricting power output.¹⁶⁰ A TLC meeting on 20 March, 1985 was told that "The MOA has 30-40% of power operators. Power operators will again take action if necessary".¹⁶¹ On the same day, a federal unions conference was held in Brisbane and workers from Tennyson, Swanbank and Bulimba power stations attended a rally designed to lobby the officials into more industrial action. At the rally, some of the power station operators publicly voiced their concerns, with one asking the officials "If you're fair dinkum, why don't you call a national or state stoppage?" An ETU member from Swanbank was reported in the left wing paper the Workers News as saying:

Everyone's impatient. In any dispute you've got to go to the heart of the matter. We take our directives from the union - we have to stand by the union. We want directives - that's the only way to do it. Every union bloke in Queensland should be supporting these men. These blokes have to be supported and the power houses are the only people who can do it.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ ibid

¹⁶⁰ Dempster, Q. "D-Day For TLC" The Telegraph March 7, 1985

¹⁶¹ Dwyer, J. Notes of TLC Meeting, 20 March 1985.

¹⁶² Workers News 21 March 1985

On the 20th of March, 1985, the late Des Enright, the Treasurer of the Tarong Power Station Social Club, forwarded to Trades and Labor Council Secretary Ray Dempsey a donation from the construction workers who were members of the Federated Ironworkers Association at the Tarong Power Station.¹⁶³ They had collected \$2572.00 in support of the sacked SEQEB workers. Again, this illustrates the support which existed for the sacked SEQEB workers and their families amongst workers at the power stations.

The pressures from the workers in the power stations to take more industrial action continued for months. Even though the ETU National Executive had called off a strike by workers involved in the electrical industry which was to have taken place on that day, construction workers from the Tarong power station travelled for two hours to attend a stop-work meeting in Brisbane on the 30th of April 1985 in order to support the sacked SEQEB workers. Joined by other unionists including members of the Federated Ironworkers Union, these construction workers took wildcat action despite the refusal of their union officials to support them. They held a 24 hour strike on that day, despite threats that they would be sacked for taking such action. They were very militant in the SEQEB dispute, holding a rally and picket outside the Kingaroy electoral office of Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

¹⁶³ Enright, D. Correspondence with TLC, 20 March 1985.

Whenever trade union officials promised that a massive campaign would occur alongside any renewed action from the operators, workers at the power houses declared that they were prepared to become involved in such a campaign. For instance, meetings at Collinsville, Gladstone and Callide 'A' Power Stations in May 1985 all voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution proposing industrial action in support of the striking families. This resolution was first carried at a meeting held in Collinsville on the 28th of May 1985. On that occasion, the maintenance and coal gang showed their unanimous support for the SEQEB strikers when all 82 of them supported the resolution. Amongst the operators, 22 voted in favour of the resolution and one against. The following day, at Gladstone, approximately 250 members of the maintenance and coal gang unanimously supported the resolution and 32 operators unanimously voted in favour of it. Again on the 29th of May 1985, the maintenance and coal gang at Callide 'A' power station endorsed the resolution, this time by a majority of 39 to 2. The operators voted in favour of the resolution by a majority of 31 to 1.¹⁶⁴

In May 1985, unionists throughout Queensland had committed themselves to instituting a blockade of Queensland in order to force the Government to reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers. Queensland's electricity supplies were once again threatened as a part of this campaign of industrial action - until the ACTU cancelled the entire campaign. The Daily Sun reported on May 11, 1985 that workers in the power industry

¹⁶⁴ MOA files

had decided to implement more power blackouts in support of the sacked SEQEB workers.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, the Courier Mail's lead story on May 13 was entitled "Unions plans to hit power, buses, trains". It stated that "City transport, electricity supplies and building work are the unions' next targets in Queensland's escalating industrial crisis".¹⁶⁶

A month later, trade union leaders still could not guarantee that workers in the power stations would not take industrial action which would cut the State's power supply. Even though lawyers representing the Unions had lodged Supreme Court affidavits stating that they had no intention of reimposing power blackouts, the officials could not be certain that the rank and file operators would not take such action themselves. Under the headline "Blackouts Looming", the Telegraph newspaper stated on Wednesday April 17, 1985 that "power supplies are again under threat".¹⁶⁷

The National President of the MOA, Kevin Flynn, said on the 6th of June at a National Executive meeting of the MOA that the union's members were worried that the anti-union legislation would flow into other areas and they were quite prepared to resort to load-shedding.¹⁶⁸ An article in the Daily Sun on June 19, 1985 said that power station

¹⁶⁵ Watson, W. "New Threat Of Blackouts" Daily Sun, May 11, 1985 p.7

¹⁶⁶ "Unions plans to hit power, buses, trains" Courier-Mail May 13 1985, p.1

¹⁶⁷ "Blackouts Looming", Telegraph Wednesday April 17, 1985, p.3

¹⁶⁸ Connors, D. "Blackouts a 'last resort' in Union Industrial Plans" Courier-Mail, 7 June 1985.

operators had made it quite clear to visiting union officials including Ray Dempsey, ACTU Industrial Officer Ian Court, MOA State Secretary Ray Selby and ETU Assistant State Secretary John Lawson that they were "ready to pull the plug on Queensland again".¹⁶⁹ Workers at every power station had been visited and the report said that "Union sources said the workers had responded to the meetings and were ready to act whenever the ACTU believed it was necessary".¹⁷⁰

TLC Secretary Ray Dempsey responded to the willingness of power house operators to take industrial action in support of the SEQEB strikers when he commented in the Sunday Mail on August 18, 1985 that:

We (the TLC) can't give a commitment on power beyond the next few weeks. Pressures are building again in the power industry as they were at the beginning of the dispute. This is because the legislation entrenches a permanent state of emergency. It is a powerderkeg, but we aren't lighting any matches.¹⁷¹

Despite the opposition of the trade union leadership to a campaign of mass mobilisation, a considerable amount of support was mobilised in the trade union movement for the striking families. Even areas which traditionally have not been strongly unionised supported the campaign of the striking families. For instance, teachers provided political and financial support to the striking families. According to

¹⁶⁹ Watson, W. "Power Men Ready To Pull Plug" Telegraph 19 June 1985

¹⁷⁰ ibid

¹⁷¹ Sunday Mail August 18, 1985

Peter O'Brien, the State Secretary of the Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools, there was "considerable public support" for the SEQEB strikers:

The TLC should have called a general strike... In terms of our own organisation, there was considerable support for the SEQEB workers... Our union, which seldom goes on strike, would have seriously considered going out with other unions on a general strike because it did go to the heart of the question of the organisational rights of labour.¹⁷²

Union President Lynne Rolley said the SEQEB dispute was only the second time in the Union's sixty-five year history that it had taken a "political stand".¹⁷³ This showed the depth of feeling amongst QATIS members over the SEQEB dispute. In one month, from February to March 1985, the members of QATIS donated \$1000 to assist the sacked SEQEB workers.¹⁷⁴ The 1985 Annual Conference of the Teachers' Union also decided to establish a campaign fund to support the sacked workers and their families. The Annual Conference of the union also decided that the school week from August 5 till August 9 would be declared "A Dollar For the ETU Families Week".¹⁷⁵ Hundreds of teachers attended meetings organised in solidarity with the striking families. Meetings of teachers were held after the introduction of the anti-union legislation and also after the mass stopwork meeting on August 20, 1985.

¹⁷² Peter O'Brien, State Secretary, Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools, Personal interview, 20 October 1989

¹⁷³ Rolley, L. "Editorial: Taking an Industrial Stand", Independent Teacher, Vol.6, No.3, March 1985, p.3

¹⁷⁴ O'Brien, P. "National Meeting of Teachers - Special Report", Independent Teacher, Vol.6, No.5, May 1985, p.13.

¹⁷⁵ Bevis, A. "Open Letter to Queensland Teachers Union Members - Subject: Financial Assistance for the Sacked SEQEB Workers and their Families", no date (c. July-August 1985)

Teachers throughout Australia offered support to the sacked SEQEB workers. A national meeting of the executive of the Independent Teachers Federation of Australia (ITFA), the national union representing private school teachers, donated \$500 to the SEQEB strike fund and passed a motion stating in part:

That this executive meeting of ITFA deploras recent actions of the Queensland Government in relation to the current dispute between SEQEB and members of the Electrical Trades Union; in particular, the Government's

- (a) Refusal to accept formal recommendations made by the State Industrial Commission issued on February 13 and February 16, 1985, which would have resulted in the reinstatement of the sacked electrical linesmen;
- (b) Hurried passing through the Queensland Parliament of a series of legislative enactments which, among other things,
 - erode the power of the State Industrial Commission;
 - abolish the right to strike in the electricity industry;
 - introduce the notion of civil conscription in certain instances contrary to International Labor Organisation conventions;
 - severely limit the civil liberties of citizens and in particular trade unionists to engage in traditional forms of protest, such as picketing, peaceful assembly, and the reportage of industrial incidents.

Further, this executive of ITFA believes that such actions represent a concerted attack on fundamental democratic and union rights which has implication for all Australian unionists...

Members of the Queensland Teachers' Union also offered support to the sacked SEQEB workers. For instance, at a meeting of the Queensland Teachers' Union Wide Bay Area Council (WBAC) on March 9th, 1985, delegates from Bundaberg, Maryborough, North Burnett, South Burnett, Gympie and Noosa District Branches passed resolutions supporting the sacked workers. The resolutions confirmed the importance of the right

to strike, endorsed the strike and condemned the actions of the State Government in declaring the State of Emergency and in introducing its anti-union legislation. The resolutions also urged all teachers in the Wide Bay Area "to donate to the funds set up to relieve the financial burden of sacked workers families". The WBAC also passed one resolution aimed specifically at the Queensland Trades and Labor Council. It was intended to pressure the TLC not to negotiate a "deal" with the Queensland Government where some workers remained sacked but others were re-employed. This motion stated that:

WBAC urges the TLC to maximise its efforts in having all sacked workers reinstated and that a strong public relations campaign be pursued to inform the public of all aspects of the dispute, the stand taken by the ETU and the needs of the sacked workers.¹⁷⁶

As well as mobilising support in the trade union movement, the striking families were able to mobilise support from many sections of the community, including concerned Christians, pensioners, women's groups, Aboriginal groups and academics. The discourse of the strikers struck a chord with many academics and Christians who had a social conscience. Concerned Christians spoke out in opposition to the Government's anti-union legislation and joined the picket lines and many academics also demonstrated their support for the sacked workers and their families. University staff and students held a picket outside the Taringa SEQEB Depot on May 2, 1985. About 60 University staff joined the SEQEB strikers at this picket.¹⁷⁷ Twenty-six protesters, some

¹⁷⁶ Queensland Teachers Union Wide Bay Area Council Resolutions March 9th, 1985

¹⁷⁷ This picket is discussed in the Daily Sun reports on May 2, 1985

of whom were wearing academic gowns, were arrested at this demonstration. The group "Queensland Academics for Human Rights" was formed during the SEQEB struggle to demand the repeal of the anti-strike legislation. Thousands of University staff and students protested at the University of Queensland on May 10, 1985 when the University Senate voted to give an honorary doctorate of laws to Bjelke-Petersen. One of the main grievances of those protesting was the Government's sacking of the SEQEB workers. Conservative estimates put the crowd at around 3000.¹⁷⁸

Pensioners also provided the SEQEB strikers with a great deal of support. As well as attending rallies and marches, many pensioners contributed to the strike fund, even though they had little money to spare. The following messages of support, written by pensioners, were attached to their donations to the strike fund. They are a fairly representative sample of the opinions of pensioners who supported the strike. One pensioner said "Please accept my small donation. I wish it could be more. I have been a battler all my life, and only on a pension, so you will understand".¹⁷⁹ Another message, sent before the TLC had decided to restore full power, said "We are pensioners and are sending you what little we can spare. If you stop now, then you will be forever under Joh's thumb and you have massive support in your actions against the Government".¹⁸⁰ Other pensioners offered their financial and moral support because they accepted the

¹⁷⁸ For instance, "Governor Assaulted", Daily Sun, May 11, 1985, p.1

¹⁷⁹ Letter from T. Pascoe to TLC, undated.

¹⁸⁰ Letter from "Elizabeth Steel and Friends" to Trades and Labour Council fo Queensland, no date.

arguments of the striking families that the dispute was fundamental to the future of trade union rights. As one retired couple said, "We wish you every success in your fight to maintain decent unionism and living standards in Queensland. Please accept this small donation out of our pension".¹⁸⁰ Many of the pensioners who sent in their financial support said they, like the striking families, were greatly concerned about the rise of fascism in Queensland.

The following three comments, sent in from pensioners, indicate their acceptance of the striking families' suggestion that Queensland might become a fascist state. One of the letters said that:

In response to your appeal, we enclose \$2 to assist unionists victimised by the Premier. Sorry it is not much, but we are pensioners ... If the union movement doesn't stop him before it's too late, we will find ourselves in a fascist state. You have got to win this showdown or unions will be finished in this state.¹⁸¹

Another letter, written by a veteran of the labour movement, said

I was a very active union organiser in the late thirties and early forties. I am deeply concerned at the attack on the organised workers in Queensland by the reactionary forces led by Sir Joh. If allowed to win, working people generally in this country are in for a long struggle to stop the rise of fascism, which didn't end with Hitler in the bunker in Germany.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in evidence given by M.Sherry to Senate Select Committee on Political Broadcasts and Political Disclosures, November 14, 1991

¹⁸¹ Crayford, G. Letter to TLC 18 May 1985

¹⁸² Letter to the TLC from Agnes Small, 13 May 1985.

Another message simply said "The best of luck in your struggle. Don't let the fascist bastards beat you. Sorry I cannot send more but we are aged pensioners and it is pretty tough going".¹⁸³

The strike also received significant support from women's groups. For instance, wives and mothers of sacked SEQEB workers gave speeches to the Union of Australian Women and to the International Women's Day Rally in Brisbane. Sixty women attended the Union of Australian Women meeting to hear the wife of a sacked SEQEB worker speak. On another occasion, a women's group organised a solidarity luncheon with the women involved in the SEQEB dispute at the Kurilpa Hall in West End. Members of the Women's Committee actively mobilised support for the SEQEB struggle amongst builders labourers, whose union was also under attack at the same time. In Canberra, the "Women's BLF Defence Committee" was visited by a group of women involved in the SEQEB dispute. Such interstate networking was an important feature of the SEQEB strike. Members of the Women's Committee summarised the lessons of the SEQEB strike for the BLF women. In response, their meeting passed a resolution which said that the women involved in the SEQEB dispute "inspired us with their dedication and resourcefulness, and gave us many ideas for action".¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ William and Gwen McInness, letter to T.L.C, 6 May 1985

¹⁸⁴ Women's BLF Defence Committee, Canberra, 1986

Another indication of the broad support mobilised by the striking families was the involvement of members of Actors Equity in their campaign against the anti-union legislation. Thirty members of Actors Equity picketed the SEQEB Depot at Taringa on the 16th of May, 1985. Eleven of those Actors Equity members were arrested at this picket. At this picket, they read messages of support from many prominent Australian actors and writers including Patrick White, Judy Davis, Noni Hazelhurst and David Williamson. Members of Actors Equity also presented a fund-raising night at the Rialto Theatre in Brisbane and at Collingwood Town Hall in Melbourne.¹⁸⁵ The play "The Rough Edge of the Pineapple" was written and performed by Actors Equity members in Melbourne in solidarity with the sacked SEQEB workers.

It is also important to acknowledge that the striking families were also able to mobilise considerable regional and interstate support within the trade union movement. Provincial Trades and Labor Councils throughout Queensland offered their support to the sacked workers by taking industrial action, passing resolutions of support for the strikers and by making donations to the strike funds. In the early stages of the dispute, the Mount Isa Trades and Labor Council called an indefinite general strike of all unionists because it expected the Queensland Trades and Labor Council to do likewise.

¹⁸⁵ Copies of Actors Equity advertisements about the concerts and about their involvement in the SEQEB dispute held by author.

In regional Queensland, thousands of workers attended rallies in support of the sacked workers. Rural unionists and their unions took industrial action, passed supportive resolutions and donated heavily to the SEQEB strike funds. Within two months of the start of the dispute, the following actions had been held.

Townsville Rally This Rally was held on Friday 29th March, 1985 at lunch-time in the Music Bowl. In excess of 2,000 unionists and members of the public attended, who unanimously supported a strong resolution of support.

Mackay Rally This Rally was held on Wednesday 3rd April, 1985 at lunchtime in the Showgrounds. Approximately 1,100 unionists attended who expressed unanimous support.

Bundaberg A meeting of 84 Delegates of the Bundaberg Provincial Trades and Labor Council was held on 29th March, 1985. The meeting gave strong support and determined to hold a Rally in the near future.

Rockhampton A Rally was held in Rockhampton of available Railway Workshop Employees and others on 5th April, 1985. The 250 who attended gave strong support.

Toowoomba 60 Delegates of the Toowoomba Provincial Trades and Labor Council endorsed the campaign and decided to put their efforts into making Labor Day a success.

Southport 53 Delegates of the Southport Trades and Labor Council endorsed the campaign and decided to put their efforts into making Labor Day a success.

Ipswich A Rally was held on Friday 26th April attended by 2,000. After the Rally 500 marched to the Ipswich Magistrates Court to express anger at the Government's arrest of picketers.

Gladstone 500 unionists attended a Rally held on Friday 26th April.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Trade Union Rights Committee op cit p.1.

Many individual workplaces in rural Queensland took wildcat strike action in support of the sacked SEQEB workers. For instance, the members of the Capricornia Electricity Board stayed out on strike for more than three weeks, without ever seeing a union official. One of the workers there, Jeff Miller, told me there was a great deal of support for the strikers "because we all felt that we could be next" but "I can't remember any full time paid organisers visiting us at our work". Jeff Miller agreed with strikers who said that they were sold out by the trade union leadership.¹⁸⁷

The September 1985 issue of The Meatworker summarised some of the Queensland country meetings held on August 20, 1985.

Townsville: 2000 members of unions affiliated with the Queensland Trades and Labor Council voted unanimously to support the council in its action to protest Queensland's anti-union laws. ...

Bundaberg: Nearly 700 unionists attended the stopwork meeting... 19 affiliated unions were represented at the stopwork meeting...

Mackay: One thousand workers attended the rally and unanimously endorsed the resolution. Speakers, including the Federal Secretary of the Seamen's Union of Australia, Mr Pat Geraghty, addressed the rally. He pledged the solidarity of seamen with SEQEB and meatworkers and promised his union's support through the use of stoppages...

Cairns: Over 1000 unionists attended meetings and unanimously supported the resolution submitted by the Queensland TLC for further action in support of the sacked SEQEB workers and for the repeal of the anti-union legislation...

Rockhampton: The Rockhampton meeting at Brown Park attracted an audience of nearly 2000 workers from 28 unions. The resolution calling for action against the Bjelke-Petersen Government was overwhelmingly carried. Trades and Labor Council Secretary Mr Jeff Jones said unions all over the State would now take

¹⁸⁷ Jeff Miller, Shop Steward, Capricornia Electricity Board, 18 May 1990.

action at any time. "Their action will be aimed at hurting the State's enterprise while also causing the least possible inconvenience to the public," he said. Australian Telecommunications president Mr Ian McLean said selective applications of bans could be placed on services, building up to a State blockade.¹⁸⁸

It is a reflection of the depth of feeling which Queensland workers held about the SEQEB dispute that they voted in support of more industrial action even when the struggle had already been going for more than six months and many trade union leaders had declared that it had no possibility of succeeding. However, it was not only Queensland workers who supported the striking families. Workers interstate passed resolutions of support, gave huge financial donations and took industrial action to help achieve the twin goals of the reinstatement of the sacked SEQEB workers and the removal of the anti-union legislation.

One of the members of the SEQEB Women's Committee provided a list of phone contacts which indicated the enormous level of support across Australia for their dispute. It was a list of telephone numbers of workers who had offered their support in the SEQEB struggle. It was by no means exhaustive - it was simply a list of people who she had found very supportive. Other people involved in the strike had different contacts. For instance, some of the strikers who had visited Perth had a more extensive list of contacts over there and some of the women who toured Victoria made other

¹⁸⁸ Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union, Queensland Branch, The Meatworker, Vol.14, No.5, September 1985, p.6.

contacts there. The list of contacts of this one member of the Women's Committee spanned six states.

In Adelaide The delegates at the Islington Railway Yards, at Wylies, at the State Transport Authority workshops, at the Port branch of the Wharfies and other contacts at the BWU, at the Seamen's Union and at Trades Hall.

In Canberra Contacts at the Trades and Labor Council, the Builders Labourers Federation, the Transport Workers' Union, the Teachers' Federation, the Administrative Clerical Officers' Association and the Australian Public Sector Association.

In Melbourne Contacts in the Food Preservers' Union, the Waterside Workers' Federation, the State Ammunitions Factory, the Naval Dockyards, the Painters and Decorators', the ATMOEA, the Furnishing Trades Federation, the Confectioners' Union, the BLF, the ETU, the APSA, and the Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees' Association.

In Newcastle Contacts at the Railway workshops, the Trades Hall and the Steelworks.

In Perth People in the Rubber Workers' Union, the ETU and the TLC.

In Sydney Workers at CSR Chemicals, at Everley Railway Workshops and at Chullora Railway Workshops, as well as members of the Public Service Association.

In Wollongong Contacts in the South Coast Trades and Labor Council, in the Federated Ironworkers' Association (FIA) at Port Kembla, in the FIA at the steelworks, in the Public Service Association, in the Miners Federation and in the Waterside Workers' Federation.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Copies of names and phone numbers given to M.Sherry

She also had contact numbers for people in Albury/Wodonga and Tasmania. Once again, this reinforces the idea that there was massive, Australia-wide support for the sacked SEQEB workers. The emphasis in this thesis on the importance of women in sustaining the SEQEB dispute is obviously necessary when one considers that women mobilised so much of the support for the strike.

Members of the Women's Committee toured nationally mobilising in support of the SEQEB strike and gaining financial support for the striking families. Robyn Burrow recognises the important role played by women in the SEQEB dispute and the effect it had on their lives. She said that personally, "It's changed my life, its changed my outlook, its changed everything". Overall, she said that the women involved in the SEQEB dispute "got behind their men and in the end we got in front".¹⁹⁰ Robyn said that the women were very well received in other states. "I travelled to Victoria, Mackay and Adelaide and I think men of other unions were more prepared to listen to the stories of hardship from the women than the sacked workers themselves".¹⁹¹ When Robyn and Jenny Bourne toured Melbourne as representatives of the women involved in the SEQEB dispute, they received enormous support. The Technical Teachers' Union of Victoria (TTUV) sent numerous telegrams after their visit. One of those telegrams said:

Congratulations to sacked SEQEB workers and their families for their continuing fight to maintain working conditions despite attacks from Qld Government.

¹⁹⁰ Robyn Burrow, member of Womens' Committee, interview with author, 30 July 1992

¹⁹¹ ibid

TTUV is grateful for information provided during recent visit and assures you of ongoing financial support.¹⁹²

Similarly, the Victorian Branch of the Seamen's Union sent a thank you note to the ETU Queensland Branch after a visit by these women.¹⁹³ The Combined Union Shop Committee at Jolimont Metropolitan Train maintenance Depot also sent a message of solidarity after a visit by the women stating:

The workers at Jolimont have already contributed \$2500 to the struggle so far, and convey our most heartfelt support for the sacked workers and their families against the Joh Bjelke Petersen Government and his right-wing cronies. The Jolimont workers understand that the struggle is for trade union and worker's rights and therefore should be supported by all workers across Australia.¹⁹⁴

Another excellent example of the level of interstate support for the sacked SEQEB workers can be found in the response of workers in Western Australia to the political developments in Queensland. The Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia carried the following motion on the 19th of March 1985:

That in view of information received from Queensland and confirmed by the NSW Manager, that the firm of Electrical Contractors, Kilpatrick Green Pty Ltd, have been involved in work for SEQEB during the Queensland power dispute, that consideration be given to placing a complete ban on their operations in W.A.; That a meeting of construction and other relevant unions be called to consider the implementation of such action.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Technical Teachers Union of Victoria, letter to "Sacked SEQEB Workers Fund c/- ETU", 26 July 1985

¹⁹³ Copy given to author by striker Jackson Brown.

¹⁹⁴ Rzesniowiecki, G. Secretary of Jolimont Combined Unions Shop Committee, letter "To Sisters Jenny Bourne and Robin Burrows and all Sacked SEQEB Workers", 22 July 1985.

¹⁹⁵ Copy of resolution given to author by striker Bill Rudolph

Trade unions interstate accepted the arguments of the striking families that industrial action was necessary to defeat the attack on the union movement. A telex from the ETU Western Australian State Secretary Mick Beattie to the ETU National Executive Committee meeting on 11 March 1985 said:

ETU W.A. Branch urges the National Executive Committee to call a national 24 hour stoppage of all ETU members to coincide with the proposed stoppage of the same duration in Queensland. Rank and file support for the proposal continues to gain strength in W.A.¹⁹⁶

After hearing from strikers Keith Rohweder and Bill Rudolph, the Western Australian Branch of the ETU called for a national strike, and in the first two weeks of visits from strikers, "they had released something like thirty seven thousand dollars".¹⁹⁷ Bill Rudolph produced a folder which contained resolutions from the hundreds of job sites which he had addressed while he stayed in Western Australia. He has approximately 20 pages of records of financial assistance provided by Western Australian workers. One of the records he had kept was a letter from Leo McKee, an acting organiser of the ETU, to the State Secretary of the ETU in Queensland, Neil Kane, stating

I have the responsibility to advise you that the overwhelming desire of the workers throughout the Pilbara is that you should advise the striking members that they have their total support...It is my estimation that an initial payment of \$71410.00 followed by \$16000.00 weekly has and will continue to be paid into an account to assist those members on strike.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Telex from ETU Western Australian State Secretary Mick Beattie to the ETU National Executive Committee meeting 11 March 1985

¹⁹⁷ Bill Rudolph, ETU Strike Committee member, personal interview, 6 February 1991

¹⁹⁸ Copy of letter given to M.Sherry by Bill Rudolph

A table which summarises the incredible support mobilised by Bill Rudolph in one week in the Pilbara is included in this thesis as Appendix Two. It is significant principally because it demonstrates the incredible level of financial, political and industrial support mobilised by the striking families. As well as donating large amounts of money to the strike funds, Bill Rudolph was able to convince them that the strikers had not been supported by the trade union leadership. Nearly every meeting he addressed passed a resolution which stated that:

This meeting is critical of both the Queensland TLC and the ACTU for not strongly supporting the striking unionists in Queensland and to date have in fact isolated the striking members rather than to widen the dispute so as to win the campaign rather than resolve it.¹⁹⁹

The only cases where workers in the Pilbara did not pass this motion were at Port Headland and at Tom Price. There, the Mount Newman employees donated \$20 per unionist and established a levy of \$5 per week, but adopted a more critical approach to the ACTU and the Queensland Trades and Labor Council. Instead of stating that the meeting "is critical" of the both the ACTU and the TLC, they passed an amendment which stated that "this meeting condemns both the Queensland TLC and the ACTU" because they had isolated the strikers. The resolution from Tom Price was angrier still - it added that "We support the rank and file strikers in Queensland and recommend the disbanding of the Queensland TLC for their mishandling of the dispute".²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ ibid

²⁰⁰ ibid

It should not be suggested that it was only workers in Western Australia, or that only people in the mining communities, supported the sacked SEQEB workers. Approximately 140,000 building and construction workers throughout Australia stopped work on May 1, 1985 in response to the Queensland Government's attack on their fellow workers.²⁰¹ A Sydney leaflet advertising the building workers national solidarity stoppage on May 1, 1985 was endorsed not only by Queensland unions but also by the New South Wales Branches of the Building Workers' Industrial Union; the Amalgamated Metals, Foundry and Shipwrights' Union; the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association; the Plumbers and Gasfitters' Union; the Operative Plasterers and Plaster Workers' Federation; the Operative Stonemasons' Society of Australia; the Electrical Trades Union; the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners; the Plate, Sheet and Ornamental Glass Workers' Union; the Australian Workers' Union; the Transport Workers' Union; the Federated Ironworkers' Association; the Painters and Decorators' Union; and the Australian Society of Engineers. Other interstate unions in Victoria and other states also took part in this national day of stoppage.

The Builders Labourers' Federation offered a great deal of assistance to the sacked workers. BLF members throughout Australia were one of the mainstays of support for the sacked workers. Summarising the industrial action taken before May 1985 by workers in the building industry, the Queensland Trade Union Rights Committee

²⁰¹ See Daily Sun, May 1, 1985

commented that "The Building Group as part of the A.C.T.U. nationally coordinated campaign conducted a National 24-hour stoppage on Tuesday 20th April and Wednesday 1st May. Rallies were held in all capital cities of Australia and in Queensland, as well as Brisbane, meetings were held at Rockhampton, Biloela, Gold Coast, Tarong and Callide Power Stations construction workers also stopped for 24 hours".²⁰²

There were street marches in support of the sacked SEQEB workers in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. A packed rally at Trades Hall in Sydney organised by the BLF decided to impose bans on Pioneer Concrete, Aquila Steel and Jennings Industries because of their support for the Bjelke-Petersen Government. In Perth, approximately 2000 Unionists stormed the Queensland Tourist Bureau on May 1, 1985, chanting "Joh must go". The tactic of picketing the interstate branches of the Queensland Tourist Bureau was also used in other capital cities at different stages in the dispute.²⁰³

On the first anniversary of the dismissal of the SEQEB workers, the NSW South Coast Trades and Labor Council in Wollongong was visited by women involved in the dispute and passed a resolution calling on the ACTU to fulfil its promises to the SEQEB strikers that they would not be abandoned. It called on the ACTU to implement the

²⁰² Queensland Trade Union Rights Committee *op.cit* p.1

²⁰³ Resolutions of "Queensland Solidarity Campaign"

ACTU Congress decision which involved a campaign of industrial action in support of the striking families.²⁰⁴

As an ETU Circular dated 18th March 1985 acknowledged:

Sacked workers have travelled to New South Wales, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia to press for support, particularly financial support for their campaign. Substantial donations have been received from the other States as well as from our members and members of other unions and the Public of Queensland.²⁰⁵

It should be apparent from this brief summary that there was a considerable level of interstate and regional trade union support mobilised by the striking families which has been ignored in previous accounts of the dispute. Another area which has been ignored in previous accounts of the dispute is the effects of such working class agency. In particular, the literature has ignored the crisis of confidence in the trade union leadership which occurred as a result of their failure to support the striking families and the divisions between the Government and the business community over the anti-union strategies employed in the SEQEB dispute. This is the focus of the next section of the Chapter.

²⁰⁴ Copy of resolution provided to author by a member of the Women's Committee who addressed the meeting

²⁰⁵ Electrical Trades Union "Circular" 18th March 1985

The effects of working class agency

(a) A crisis of confidence in the union leadership

It is the purpose of this section of this Chapter to further the extent to which the striking families were successful in creating a crisis of confidence in the trade union leadership. I seek to demonstrate that the striking families were able to convince large sections of the trade union movement that they had been sold out by the leadership of the trade union movement. Such a suggestion has not been evident in any of the previous histories of the dispute and yet is important confirmation of the role of the agency of the striking families. This section of the Chapter includes a reasonable sample of the criticisms of the union leadership from workers in a variety of industries in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the striking families' discourse.

The failure of the TLC to support the strikers was recognised by the Executive of the Queensland Branch of the Tramways Union which passed the following resolution in November 1985:

That in relation to the ETU dispute, a vote of 'No Confidence' in Dempsey and Hauenschild and the rest of the Committee, and for the sake of the Trade Union Movement, they should resign immediately, for mishandling this dispute.²⁰⁶

Other trade unionists were equally critical. Harold Evans, the General Secretary of the South Coast Provincial Trades and Labor Council, wrote to Ray Dempsey on the 6th of March, 1985 informing him that:

²⁰⁶ Queensland Tramways Union, Resolution, November 1985

At last night's meeting of Council, there was heavy discussion on the power dispute and a resolution was finally carried, almost unanimously, of no confidence in the Q.T.&L.C. and the Secretary, Ray Dempsey. The discussion revolved around the fact that there was little, if any, communication between the leadership of the State Body and other areas, like the South Coast Provincial Council.²⁰⁷

Rank and file building workers throughout Australia were often addressed by members of the striking families and they also regularly passed resolutions which were critical of the trade union leadership. The following resolution, passed on October 1 1985 by building workers at the Melbourne Remand Centre and sent to the President of the ACTU, is a good example of the anger felt by many building workers:

This meeting of all building trades rank and file employed on the Melbourne Remand Centre site has today expressed their outrage at the inactivity of our Peak Council in supporting the sacked SEQEB workers. We demand that you immediately undertake a National Industrial Campaign to reinstate all sacked workers with full compensation. Workers on the job see your betrayal of our Queensland comrades as encouraging and furthering these anti-union attacks. It appears that workers can no longer depend on the leadership of the ACTU to defend us. Unless this sellout of workers ceases, we have no choice than to take up the fight ourselves. So, get off your bum and stop selling us out! ²⁰⁸

Similarly, the Bacon Factory Employees Union discussed the strike and suggested the TLC "should be publicly stuffed" for losing the dispute.²⁰⁹ Workers at the power stations also recorded their anger towards trade union officials. On Thursday 19th March, 1985, power station operators sent a message to the TLC which criticised the union leadership for failing to consult with them and for making the decision to restore

²⁰⁷ Trades and Labour Council records

²⁰⁸ Copy of resolution given to author by member of the Strike Committee

²⁰⁹ Copy of correspondence in Trades and Labour Council files.

full power even though the SEQEB workers remained sacked. They said that the union leadership was "weak and unwilling to support us in the hour of our greatest need. Rest assured we will repay this let-down in kind".²¹⁰

After the SEQEB strike had been going for 11 months, a rank and file group within the New South Wales Teachers' Federation published a document which suggested that the SEQEB dispute showed that "the gap between the rank and file and the leadership has widened" and "union leaderships have proven themselves incapable of defending rank and file interests". It further suggested that trade union officials endorsed by the ETU and the TLC to address their Annual Conference should be replaced by strikers themselves.²¹¹

Actors Equity members in Melbourne reiterated the theme of the striking families that suggestions they should "give up and face defeat" amounted to "treachery and betrayal". They accepted the arguments of the striking families that:

The ten month struggle of the SEQEB linesmen is clearly at a crucial point. The linesmen who have vowed to continue "UNTIL VICTORY" need support from all unions generally. THEIR FIGHT IS OUR FIGHT! A betrayal or defeat of the SEQEB linesmen will lead to more blatant attacks on the entire trade union movement. No one will be exempted from these attacks.²¹²

²¹⁰ Daryl Finney, correspondence with the MOA, Thursday 19th March, 1985.

²¹¹ New South Wales Teachers Federation "Cavalier is learning from Bjelke-Petersen - Support the Locked-Out SEQEB Strikers", no date, (c. January 1986).

²¹² Victorian Divisional Committee of Actors Equity "Equity Fact Sheet - SEQEB Dispute" self-published, mimeo, 1985, p.2.

QATIS members were similarly critical of the trade union leadership. One meeting of QATIS members endorsed the following resolution:

That the (QATIS) Executive, on our behalf, express disappointment and condemnation of the TLC in its abandonment of its industrial and moral obligations to those who relied on its auspices and remain as casualties in the current electrical trades disputations.²¹³

The following motions, passed by workers in the coal industry, are further indications of the success of the discourse of the striking families in convincing other workers that they had been sold out. Amongst the telegrams of support which SEQEB strikers received from miners were:

- a telegram from J.W. O'Connor, the President of the Collinsville Mining Union received by the Trades and Labor Council on February 13, 1985, saying that "This branch of the C.M.U (Combined Mining Unions) condemn the TLC for not calling an immediate state wide stoppage when the State Government declared a State of Emergency on industrial action taken by SEQEB employees;²¹⁴
- a resolution from Moura Combined Mining Unions saying that they were "Totally disappointed with the performance of the TLC" and demanding "that

²¹³ Coburn, N. op cit p.4

²¹⁴ J.W. O'Connor, President of the Collinsville Mining Union, telegram to the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland, February 13, 1985.

they escalate the dispute, involving all affiliated unions especially ETU members still working";²¹⁵

- a telegram from Miles Vickers, the Chairman of the Goonyella Combined Mining Unions, which stated:

The Combined Mining Unions of Goonyella, Riverside and Peakdowns call on the TLC to take stronger action to secure a guarantee from the Bjelke-Petersen Government that all sacked SEQEB workers be reinstated without loss of entitlements. Further we believe if this dispute is to be settled in a satisfactory manner, the TLC must take a stronger stand than what they are presently taking;²¹⁶

- a resolution from the Blackwater Combined Mining Unions which summarised the feelings of many miners who were striking in solidarity with the SEQEB workers:

Blackwater area CMU very concerned over rumours of weakening of action to support sacked linesmen. We suggest that campaign be stepped up. Delegates in Coal industry welcome state officials to address mass meetings. Blackwater CMU fully supports sacked SEQEB till hell freezes over;²¹⁷

- a call from the Combined Mining Unions at Callide requesting the TLC "To implement power restrictions immediately and escalate industrial action with

²¹⁵ Moura CMU, telegram to Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, February 26, 1985.

²¹⁶ Miles Vickers, Chairman of the Goonyella Combined Mining Unions, telegram to Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, February 25, 1985

²¹⁷ Blackwater Combined Mining Unions, telegram to Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, February 26 1985.

the appropriate unions".²¹⁸ This call was written on the 26th of February, five days after the restoration of full power;

- a telegram from the Combined Mining Unions in the town of Dysart which said that while the mining unions had supported the linesmen through industrial action, the TLC had shown a "complete lack of mettle" and "to put it bluntly, this situation stinks". As a result, they passed a motion "That in view of the fact that this is the second time the TLC has called for CMU support and then shown a complete lack of resolve themselves, we would find it very hard to view kindly any future requests for assistance".²¹⁹

There are many other resolutions from the coal industry which indicate the strong level of industrial support for the striking families as well as the increasing disillusionment with the TLC from within the mining unions. However, these resolutions are a broadly representative sample of the feelings of workers in that industry.

The striking families were also very successful in convincing regional trade unionists that they were not being supported sufficiently by the trade union leadership. The

²¹⁸ Combined Mining Unions Callide, telegram to Queensland Trades and Labour Council, 26 February 1985.

²¹⁹ Combined Mining Unions Dysart, telegram to Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, February 1985

March monthly meeting of the Rockhampton Trades and Labor Council responded to the comments of striking workers by passing a motion which stated:

Delegates believe that the lack of expertise of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council is disastrously affecting the advancement of Unionism in Queensland (re: 38 hour week for crown blue collar workers and now imminent losses for Unions involved in the SEQEB dispute).²²⁰

Another of the motions passed by that meeting stated:

That the Rockhampton Trades and Labor Council write to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council and strongly impress on them that they are divorcing themselves from the rank and file by not informing them of the developments of the SEQEB dispute, and that union organisers and union officials are embarrassed by the lack of information.²²¹

Jeff Jones, the President of the Rockhampton Trades and Labor Council, argued that the striking families were successful in convincing workers that they were being sold out because there was an obvious incongruity between the demands of workers throughout Queensland and the actions of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council in demobilising the dispute:

There was massive support for industrial action... We had workers going on strike before they were even asked to go on strike in support of the SEQEB workers. Now this is usually unheard of in the industrial sphere. The Queensland Trades and Labor Council were slightly embarrassed by all their disputes, all these workers walking out of the gate, and I believe they tried to stem the tide... They left the SEQEB workers who were sacked - they were just left out on a limb.²²²

²²⁰ Copy of resolution provided to author by Jeff Jones, the President of the Rockhampton Trades and Labour Council

²²¹ *ibid*

²²² Jeff Jones, President, Rockhampton Trades and Labour Council, personal interview, 28 November 1989.

Another reflection of the crisis of confidence in the trade union leadership can be found in the following letter, written by Graham Fincham, the Secretary of the Bowen and Districts TLC, to the Secretaries of all the provincial Trades and Labor Councils:

Although I have made every genuine endeavour NOT to be too critical of the Q.T.L.C. my personal frustration and that of rank and file members of all unions in this area is far greater than is as briefly described in the attached correspondence. I am convinced that this is brought about by the failure to date of the Q.T.L.C. to make a greater effort to communicate and inform all Provincial Councils in greater detail of their intent... The failure of the Q.T.L.C. to FULLY INFORM and INVOLVE - ALL members of the Trade Union movement. Lack of COMMUNICATION is destructive to the Labor movement ... Without INVOLVEMENT and INFORMATION we will be powerless to defeat the destructive interests of Big business interests and Petersen FASCIST laws.²²³

Graham Fincham also wrote a letter to Ray Dempsey stating that:

At the last monthly meeting of the Bowen and Districts Provincial Council much discussion was forthcoming relative to the 'lack of information' coming from the Q.T.L.C. on the current Industrial disputation between the Power Unions and the State Government ... It would be a neglect of duty if the frustration experienced by all rank and file union members was not brought to your notice in the strongest terms... It must be understood by you that the gulf of frustration, non-involvement and lack of information is widening day by day within the area of rank and file members - particularly in the North Queensland areas. Without doubt in my mind and without any intent at dramatics, I wish to strongly bring to your attention the fact that the Lack of Communication and Information within the area of the present attacks on the trade union movement is alienating rank and file members, creating disinterest and feeding apathy. From original strong intent to defeat the Fascist forces at any cost by all workers there is now a situation of resolve destroying frustration. WHY? -because the ONLY information rank and file members receive is via the electronic media and Newspapers - usually bias. Without criticism - Is your workload so great that it has become impossible to communicate 'some' information to provincial councils? It is NOT POSSIBLE to contain enthusiasm, build morale or continue firm resolve by being placed in a position of only repeating hashed-up information received in radio and television news.²²⁴

²²³ Copy of correspondence kept in files of Queensland Trades and Labour Council

²²⁴ Copy of correspondence kept in files of Queensland Trades and Labour Council

Another reflection of the success of the striking families was that a number of unions attempted to pressure the Trades and Labor Council to alter its stance on the SEQEB dispute and to be more supportive of the striking families. For instance, after TLC Secretary Ray Dempsey and ACTU Industrial Officer Ian Court publicly criticised the workers who had protested outside Parliament House on August 20 1985, the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union wrote to the TLC expressing concern at the stance taken by the TLC leadership towards the demonstrations. The Plumbers and Gasfitters Union was angry about the failure of the TLC to support the workers who were viciously attacked by the police on that day.²²⁵

Other unions also tried to pressure the TLC leadership into being more supportive of the sacked SEQEB workers. The Committee of Management of the Australian Social Welfare Union passed the following motion on 24 June 1985:

The ASWU calls on the Trades and Labor Council to financially support the ETU Strike Committee and the Trade Union Support Group and its planned bus trip of striking SEQEB workers to Canberra to picket Bjelke-Petersen at the Tax Summit, to address meetings in Sydney and Newcastle, and to give press conferences in towns through which the bus passes. The ASWU believes that this bus trip is crucial in preventing the decline in interstate donations to the strike relief funds and fighting fund, and to furthering the Queensland struggle to defend trade union rights.²²⁶

²²⁵ Trades and Labour Council of Queensland "Decisions of Meeting of the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland held on Wednesday 28th August 1985 in TLC Building, 16 Peel Street, South Brisbane, at 7.30pm", p.4

²²⁶ Trades and Labour Council of Queensland "Decisions of Meeting of the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland held on Wednesday 17th July 1985 in TLC Building, 16 Peel Street, South Brisbane, at 7.30pm", p.4

Despite such pressure, the TLC refused to finance the bus trip. They felt that the anti-union forces were too strong and too unified to be defeated by the trade union movement, so they saw rank and file mobilisation as a pointless exercise. The next section of this Chapter will analyse this assumption in some detail. Specifically, it will investigate whether the TLC over-estimated the strength of the anti-union forces by failing to recognise the divisions within the state and between capitalists over the industrial relations strategy of the Bjelke-Petersen Government.

(b) Divisions within the Government and the Business Community

One of the key flaws of both the political analysis of the trade union leadership and the previous literature on the SEQEB dispute has been the failure to recognise that there were serious divisions among capitalists and within the State Government over the appropriateness of the strategy of all-out confrontation with the union movement. It was suggested in Chapter Three that this failure to examine the effects of political and industrial pressure from the labour movement on the State Government and on leading capitalists has often stemmed from a poorly theorised conception of class and an instrumentalist theory of the state. The paucity of information about the effects of the labour movement's actions on the state and capitalists in the SEQEB dispute stands in direct contrast to the abundance of literature on the effects of the Bjelke-Petersen Government's actions on the labour movement.

Despite the assumption in much of the literature that the Bjelke-Petersen Government and capitalists were united in their support for the anti-union strategies employed in the SEQEB dispute, there is some evidence to suggest that neither capitalists nor the Government were united over the appropriateness of full-scale confrontation with the union movement. During February 1985, there was growing political pressure from within the National Party and from within the business community which suggested that the Government should compromise and reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers. A great deal of pressure was placed on the Queensland Government from business organisations whose short-term profits were threatened by the continuation of the SEQEB dispute. Reflecting these concerns, newspapers such as the Courier-Mail,²²⁷ The Bundaberg News-Mail²²⁸ and The Age²²⁹ urged the Premier to allow the Arbitration Commission to resolve the matter. The Queensland Times²³⁰ and the Toowoomba Chronicle²³¹ went further, demanding that the Government reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers. Former Senator George Georges also said that he held discussions during February 1985 with a number of Queensland's business leaders and he indicated that the Government was being pressured by business leaders to back down and reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers so that a return to normal industrial relations could be

²²⁷ "Decisions for the Umpire" Courier-Mail 18 February 1985.

²²⁸ "Lights On" The Bundaberg News-Mail 22 February 1985

²²⁹ "Power games in Queensland" The Age 21 February 1985

²³⁰ "Editorial: Reinstate Unionists" Queensland Times 20 February 1985.

²³¹ "Reinstate them" Toowoomba Chronicle 15 February 1985

achieved.²³² While the results of some public opinion polls seemed to support the stance taken by the Government, others were far more critical. A joint telephone poll conducted by radio station 4BK and The Sunday Mail indicated that 54.7% did not support the stance taken by the Premier in the SEQEB dispute.²³³

Spokesperson for the Queensland Confederation of Industry (QCI), Bruce Seibenhause, provided extensive public support for the Government,²³⁴ but he was criticised within his own organisation because other members of the association did not want to become embroiled in the dispute.²³⁵ Neither the TLC nor the previous literature on the SEQEB strike has recognised that the QCI was internally divided over the appropriateness of its leaders' support for the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Nevertheless, many capitalists voiced public and private concerns about the effects of the industrial relations strategies adopted by the Government. These concerns over the effectiveness of direct confrontation with unions were mirrored by other capitalists throughout Australia in the 1980s. For instance, some mining executives expressed their concern to the Government that the course of action upon which it had embarked in the SEQEB dispute threatened their entire operations.²³⁶ The Executive Director of

²³² George Georges, former ALP Senator for Queensland, personal interview, 13 December 1990

²³³ "54.7 Say 'No' to Laws", Sunday Mail, April 14, 1985

²³⁴ See for instance Stewart, A. "Two Cheers from Business as Bjelke Hobbles Unions", Business Review Weekly, Vol7, No.12, March 29, 1985, pp.10-14.

²³⁵ Vaughan, K. Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 26 February 1985, p.3312

²³⁶ Bjelke-Petersen, J. Don't You Worry About That - The Joh Bjelke-Petersen Memoirs, London, Angus and Robertson, 1990, p.170

the Queensland Coal Owners Association publicly complained about the cost of the dispute to the coal industry and pressed for an immediate resolution.²³⁷

The divisions which occurred amongst capitalists over the Bjelke-Petersen Government's attack on the union movement paralleled those which emerged throughout Australia in 1985 and 1986 over the appropriateness of an industrial relations policy of confrontation. The inability of business leaders to unite around such an industrial strategy or to have a single central body which would lead a campaign against trade union power was discussed at length. According to Bryan Nokes, the Director-General of the Australian Confederation of Industry, the inability of employers to unite was an inherent feature of capitalism:

Many people forget that employers themselves exist in a highly competitive and even cut-throat environment and they compete with each other on many issues in the business world and it's a fundamental misunderstanding to think that they are going to be able to easily subscribe to one organisation representing them all...²³⁸

As a result, some leading capitalists did not endorse the strategy of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and sought instead to work in collaboration with unions through the Accord. Carney comments:

What was holding them back from full-blooded support (of a policy of industrial confrontation) was the result of the Accord which had shown up in their profit and loss statements... Under the Hawke Government, it was an unassailable fact that unions had shown restraint. The corporate heads had to ask themselves

²³⁷ Gibbs, I. Queensland Parliamentary Debates 26 February 1985, p.3274

²³⁸ Noble, B. quoted in Carney, S. Australia in Accord: Politics and Industrial Relations Under the Hawke Government, Melbourne, Sun Books, 1988, p.79.

whether the alternative that had been outlined to them, with its threats of dislocation, would be cheaper.²³⁹

Another important pressure for an immediate resolution existed which has not been recognised in previous accounts of the dispute: in February 1985, the entire electricity generation system in Queensland was on the verge of collapse. Although the previous literature has not acknowledged this key point, the solicitors for the Queensland Government have conceded that "The electricity generation system was perilously close to total failure" as a result of the strike action in February 1985.²⁴⁰ Queensland has an interconnected electricity supply system combined with a regionalised distribution system,²⁴¹ and the high level of strike action at various electricity generation and distribution plants throughout the state combined with the fact that no maintenance work was being carried out by the sacked SEQEB workers, meant that the electricity system was on the verge of a total breakdown. The members of the Queensland Government were informed of this situation, which increased the pressure on the Government to resolve the dispute. Despite the tendency of previous histories of the strike to under-estimate the pressure on the Government, their own solicitors have

²³⁹ Carney, S. *ibid* pp.130-131

²⁴⁰ Electrical Trades Union of Australia and Queensland Electricity Commission and Others "Note of Submissions on Behalf of State of Queensland (Intervening)", Exhibit No:C72, C.No.2748 of 1985, Tendered by Cooke (Queensland Government), Date Tendered: 30 July 1986, p.2.

²⁴¹ For further information about the differences between the electricity supply and distribution system in Queensland and those in other states of Australia, see Hamilton, J. "A History of the Electricity Industry in Queensland", Exhibit No C26, C No 2748 of 1985, Date Tendered: 12 June 1986, Tendered by Watson (QEC).

admitted that the electricity generation and supply system throughout the entire state was in a perilous state because of the high level of solidarity throughout the power industry.

As a result of the pressure from the public, from capitalists and from the power industry workers, internal political developments occurred within the State Government aimed at ending the strike. Ian Miller reported in the Sunday Mail on the 24th of March, 1985:

Cabinet sources tell this column that towards the end of the dispute, Sir Joh enjoyed far from the unanimous support perceived as publicly apparent and party-backed. In effect, there was a revolt from within his own party. Metropolitan members particularly argued that the tough stance of the Government meant their seats were in danger... National Party metropolitan backbenchers told the Mines and Energy Minister, Mr Gibbs, they were concerned that the Government was being seen as unable to end the dispute. The backbenchers met Mr Gibbs at National Party headquarters on Tuesday. At least one city member told Mr Gibbs public opinion in his electorate was running 80 to 20 against the Government. Other MLAs expressed fears that public feeling could turn against the Government if the crisis continued. "We wanted to let him know that things were getting a bit tough in the trenches," one backbencher said. "The majority of party members were not badly affected by the strike because they come from the country. It's Brisbane that's been hit hard." Party members realised it was a dispute which affected people and that a government failing to act on such a matter would face the electoral consequences...²⁴³

There is some evidence that the Government was on the verge of a major backdown in February 1985. Writing in the Courier-Mail, Peter Morley stated that many National Party politicians did not support the actions of the Premier:

²⁴³ Miller, I. "Unions won the battle - despite polls" Sunday Mail, 24 March, 1985

Cabinet colleagues...had threatened to leave him out on a limb if he did not back down and return the SEQEB men... Although Ministers were always declaring rock-hard solidarity, some were getting extremely nervous. The people were rightly demanding to know when the Government would say or do something concrete that would get electricity back on.²⁴³

A report in the Daily Sun on February 22, 1985 also commented on the divisions within the National Party:

Ministers confirmed last night that Cabinet always planned to reinstate the sacked SEQEB workers and restore their superannuation benefits as the Government's fall-back position.²⁴⁴

This is a far cry from the picture of a united Government, unquestionably dominated by the Premier, which is implicit in the arguments of the TLC and a great deal of the previous literature on the dispute. It seems that the TLC and the previous literature over-estimated the strength of the anti-union forces by exaggerating the unity of the state and capitalists in the SEQEB strike. Nevertheless, the strike was lost. The next section of this Chapter seeks to investigate why the strike was lost, focussing on some of the forces which constrained the agency of the striking families and which limited the effectiveness of labour movement's opposition to the anti-union forces.

Agency Constrained

This section of the Chapter will seek to identify some of the forces which constrained the agency of the striking families and which prevented them from defeating the anti-

²⁴³ Morley, P. "How Joh Beat the Doubters", Courier-Mail Saturday February 23, 1985.

²⁴⁴ Robbins, M. "Super Payouts Key to Joh's Offer", Daily Sun February 22, 1985, p.3.

union forces. In an important speech on Queensland's political culture during the SEQEB strike, Dan O'Neil identified many of the factors which constrained the growth of counter-hegemonic struggles like those waged by the sacked SEQEB workers and their families.²⁴⁵ He suggests that the following factors limited the agency of oppositional groups in Queensland during that time:

- * the Queensland gerrymander and malaportionment, combined with the lack of responsiveness of Cabinet to the Parliament;
- * the demise of the Liberals and the ALP opposition;
- * the re-organisation and increased centralisation of the public service;
- * the increased politicisation of the police force;
- * the decline in the power of trade unions;
- * the rise of influential extreme right-wing forces;
- * the lack of liberal attitudes within organisations representing the professions and the weakness of intelligentsia in Queensland; and
- * the impotence of public opinion and the apathy of educational institutions.

While Dan O'Neil's generalisations may need some qualification, he was successful in identifying many of the political forces within Queensland at that time which produced a reactionary political climate. Nevertheless, another important factor is necessary to explain the extent to which the agency of the striking families was limited by forces

²⁴⁵ Reprinted as O'Neil, D. and Fitzgerald, R. "The 'Queensland System: Analysis and Response'", Social Alternatives, Vol5, No.3, 1986, pp.10-16

beyond their control: the striking families also faced opposition from trade union officials, the Labor Party and left-wing parties. This opposition meant that the full weight of the labour movement was not marshalled against the anti-union forces and that the ability of the striking families to mobilise other workers was limited. Although previous literature on the SEQEB strike has tended to dismiss the criticisms of the trade union leadership by the striking families, it is important to recognise that there were important financial, organisational and political reasons for the lack of support from the trade union hierarchy for a continuation and an escalation of the dispute.

When the striking families sought to mobilise working class people in order to defeat the attack on the union movement, they directly challenged and confronted the leadership of the union movement, the Labor Party and many left wing parties. The previous section of this Chapter demonstrated that their challenge to the political hegemony of the trade union leadership was so effective that a crisis of confidence in the leadership occurred within the trade union movement. In response, the trade union leadership adopted a number of tactics to limit the effectiveness of the striking families. They promised that the strike pay would be shared amongst all the strikers, but then reneged and refused to provide strike pay to prominent members of the Strike Committee. They also diverted funds away from the strike funds and into other areas so that the strikers had less resources to campaign with. For instance, they diverted \$40,000 into the coffers of the ALP and another \$180,000 to a Trades and Labor Council

fund which was not provided to the strikers.²⁴⁶ One ETU official boasted of the corruption of the strike fund by referring to the infamous crook Robert Trimbole. He offered a prominent member of the Strike Committee a \$50,000 bribe to get out of the dispute, so that it would be easier for the officials to close the dispute down. "We have better lawyers than Trimbole," he boasted.²⁴⁷ The diversion of funds away from their proper destiny significantly depleted the strike funds available to the striking families.

The opposition of the ALP and the trade union leadership was significant not only in terms of the finances available to the striking families, but also in terms of the political direction of the campaign developed by the striking families. Bradley Bowden, who was heavily involved in support groups for the sacked SEQEB workers, resigned from the ALP because he had seen prominent members of the ALP and trade union officials attend meetings organised by the striking families "in order to keep the campaign within bounds loyal to the TLC Exec and ALP leadership". He explained in his resignation letter how they undermined the campaign of the striking families from within: "They have engaged in foot dragging, boycotts and at times, sabotage of decisions made democratically at meetings".²⁴⁸ Gary McLennan, another member of the Socialist Left faction who was heavily involved in the SEQEB dispute, also resigned from the ALP. He complained that:

²⁴⁶ I presented further evidence about these matters to the Senate Select Committee on Political Disclosures and Political Broadcasts in November 1991.

²⁴⁷ Personal interview

²⁴⁸ Bowden, B. "Open letter of resignation from Socialist Left", self-published, 1985

From the outset, the SL members involved seemed more concerned with sectarian manoeuvring rather than the task of building a militant onslaught on Petersen. This led them into shameful acts such as participating in a boycott of a women's picket of a SEQEB depot because it was supposed to have been organised by Bernie Neville, and the equally outrageous act of denouncing comrades who were confronting Bjelke-Petersen's police.²⁴⁹

Members of the striking families complain that almost every time they sought to mobilise other workers, the trade union leadership, Labor Party politicians and many members of left wing parties would oppose their motions. Some of the people involved in the strike have suggested that the TLC led a "campaign of demobilisation and demoralisation".²⁵⁰ They suggest that one of the key features of this campaign was a refusal to heed the motions of workers for mass industrial action. For instance, when more than 1000 builders labourers voted in favour of a motion proposed by a rank and file member which called upon their union to lead a general strike in support of the sacked SEQEB workers, the State Secretary of the Union, Vince Dobinson, ruled the motion out of order. In a similar vein, the motions of affiliated unions calling on the TLC to support the strikers were ignored.

Even a union official who toured the power stations is now prepared to admit that those workers demanded a more militant response than the trade union leadership was prepared to organise. Former Federated Clerks' Union organiser Lynne Taylor said that she visited some power stations and there was a good deal of support there. She added

²⁴⁹ McLennan, G. "Resignation from the Socialist Left: An Open Letter", self-published, 1985

²⁵⁰ Personal interviews, Bernie Neville and Phil Perrier

that the power station workers had said they would support the SEQEB workers but the recommendations not to escalate the involvement of the power station operators in the SEQEB dispute "came from above", that is, from the trade union leadership.²⁵¹ Andrew Vickers, the State Secretary of the Queensland Colliery Employees Union, stresses the political pressures which lay behind the trade union leadership's conservative response to the SEQEB strike. He said that the leadership of the trade union movement believed it was more important to limit the damage done to the electoral chances of the Labor Party than to secure the reinstatement of the sacked workers or the repeal of the anti-union legislation. He pointed out that "a state election was imminent" and said:

They decided that the best interests of the Australian Labor Party would be served by a resolution of the dispute rather than a continuation of the dispute, an escalation of the dispute, and taking the chances as to whether they could roll the Government.

Women's' Committee Member Pat Spence said that as well as battling against the trade union officials, members of the striking families also had to confront their ALP cohorts, who would try to "steer any form of demonstration into elected committees that could be controlled by the ALP".²⁵² She suggested that the historical ties between the ETU and the ALP made cooperation between the two organisations easy.

²⁵¹ Taylor, L. organiser, Federated Clerks Union, Personal Interview, 16 October 1989

²⁵² Pat Spence, member of Women's Committee, Personal interview, 16 December 1990

There was another important dynamic within the ETU that had important effects in the SEQEB dispute: the lack of a tradition of democracy within the Union. Many of the strikers have commented that they never saw a union official before the dispute and they had never voted in a Union election. From its inception until 1985, the ETU had only ever had three State Secretaries. As a result, the ETU officials were very arrogant towards the rank and file and this arrogance had major effects throughout the strike. Neil Kane, the State Secretary of the ETU, placed such a low priority on communication with the members that he never attended a strike meeting at Perry Park. The strikers bitterly resented his absence and felt so frustrated that they passed a motion requesting that Neil Kane attend just one of their meetings. He simply ignored the motion and there was nothing they could do in response. The lack of internal democracy within the Union constrained their agency.

Given that the union leadership was essentially unaccountable to the striking families, and that it consistently undermined and opposed the mobilisation of fellow workers by the striking families, it is not remarkable that the strike was lost. What is remarkable is the level of mobilisation that the strikers were able to achieve in the face of a hostile press, a conservative Government and opposition from the leadership of the labour movement. The importance of the agency of the striking families and their success in developing a discourse which galvanised the labour movement in spite of the opposition of the trade union leadership cannot be over-estimated. This is one of the themes of the conclusion of this case study.

Conclusion

The emphasis of this Chapter has been on the discourse of the striking families and on their agency within the context of the SEQEB dispute. The reliance on a discourse analysis is intended as an antidote to those structuralist Marxist histories which have often failed to properly represent working class perspectives on industrial matters and have failed to sufficiently analyse the effects of class as a lived experience. Instead of relying on institutional, economic or structural factors to discuss the dispute, the aim of this Chapter has been to personalise the workings of historical forces by drawing on the experiences, perspectives and vocabularies of those involved in the struggle. Attention has been focussed on the organisational mechanisms and the modes of ideological and political struggle through which people involved in the SEQEB dispute could be seen to have "made history". This case study has been able to demonstrate that women played an active role in the SEQEB strike. It has also demonstrated that, far from being demoralised and passive victims, the striking families developed a radical discourse which enabled them to challenge the authority of both the trade union leadership and the Bjelke-Petersen Government. The case study has also shown that the striking families were remarkably successful in mobilising support for their cause and that such support was far more significant than previous accounts of the dispute have recognised. Their discourse was taken up by workers in a wide range of industries, including those engaged in construction, telecommunications, mining, the transport industry, teaching, the waterfront, the power industry and by other workers. The case study has also demonstrated that there was significant support for the striking families

in the broader community, as well as amongst regional and interstate trade unionists. Such support had not been recognised in previous histories of the SEQEB strike.

The Chapter has also shown that the political arguments of the striking families were so convincing that they led to a crisis of confidence in the leadership of the trade union movement in Queensland. This is another vitally important element of the dispute which previous accounts have not recognised. The case study demonstrated that the striking families adopted an independent course of action which conflicted with the intentions and political strategy of the trade union leadership and the ALP. Yet instead of being quickly bludgeoned into submission by the combined weight of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and the opposition of the hierarchy of the labour movement, they persisted against all odds and were so successful that both the Bjelke-Petersen Government and the trade union leadership were in real danger of being defeated. The fact that they were ultimately unsuccessful does not mean that they were passive or demoralised, as previous accounts have suggested. Instead, by relying on information gained from my close connections with the striking families, I have been able to document the strength and resilience of the striking families in the face of almost insurmountable odds.

By moving away from structuralist approaches to class and by including discourse analysis and oral history techniques, the Chapter is able to re-examine the experiences and outlooks of the SEQEB strikers and their families. I have been able to demonstrate

that the labour movement was in a considerably more powerful position in the SEQEB dispute than previous accounts have suggested. The SEQEB strike has now attained almost legendary status amongst Australian workers. This fact is a testimony to the striking families who dared to struggle against the oppression of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and who convinced thousands of other workers that their dispute was vital to the future of the trade union movement. The lingering bitterness and lack of faith in the trade union leadership from many workers involved in the dispute is a similar legacy of the dispute.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This Chapter will begin with a brief summary of the main argument of the thesis. Then it will outline the value of the research for the discipline of political science.

A Brief Summary of the Thesis

The initial argument raised in Chapter One was that a great deal of Australian industrial relations literature, including material on the SEQEB dispute, has suffered from an institutional focus, a failure to accurately analyse the perspectives of rank and file workers and a gender-blind approach to politics. My hypothesis was that only through the adoption of a more rigorous conception of class, the abandonment of a gender-blind approach to industrial relations and the utilisation of oral history techniques and discourse analysis can labour history overcome many of these problems. The SEQEB dispute was chosen as a case study both because of its importance in Queensland's industrial and political history and because my personal involvement in the dispute led me to believe that the existing literature on the strike contained significant theoretical and methodological limitations.

Reviews of many previous Australian labour histories in Chapter Two confirmed that such conceptual and methodological limitations were prevalent in many Australian

labour histories. This Chapter described the historical development of the Australian labour history tradition and identified its lingering effects in many recent Australian labour histories. It indicated that many recent Australian labour histories have ignored the challenges from New Left, feminist and social histories and continued unabated with an institutional focus, a failure to analyse gender issues and a poorly theorised conception of class.

Furthermore, analysis of the existing literature on the SEQEB dispute in Chapter Three illuminated many similar limitations. The literature review indicated that previous accounts of the dispute have adopted an institutional focus and generally failed to examine working class agency. This has led to a drastic under-estimation of the level of support mobilised by the striking families. The failure to focus on the experiences and perspectives of the strikers has also led to the incorrect attribution of demoralisation and passivity to the striking families and a failure to recognise the political and ideological differences between the striking families and the trade union leadership. Women were also notable by their absence in the literature on the strike. Moreover, the poorly theorised conception of class and the instrumentalist conception of the state which provided the basis for many accounts of the SEQEB strike meant that the literature has not examined the effects of labour movement mobilisation on the Bjelke-Petersen Government. These areas were identified as requiring further consideration in the case study in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four, my case study of the SEQEB dispute, sought to correct the inaccuracies developed in previous accounts of the dispute. Through a discourse analysis of the position of the striking families, the Chapter demonstrated major inadequacies in the existing literature, particularly in the suggestion that the strikers were passive and demoralised victims of history. My discourse analysis of their position also allowed me to re-assess the differences in the perspectives of the rank and file and the trade union leadership which arose during the dispute. It suggested that the striking families were able to develop an independent position which was very militant and which was taken up by workers in many industries, as well as in the community and in other parts of Australia. I therefore provide a very different account of the agency of the striking families from the standard accounts of the dispute. Indeed, I suggest that the agency of the striking families was so important that it led to a crisis of confidence in both the trade union leadership and the State Government. None of the existing literature has recognised that these events occurred.

The Value of the Thesis for the Discipline of Political Science

The thesis is relevant to recent European debates about the importance of discourse in the historical process. "Discourse analysis" is an emerging field within labour history which is still being developed. Referring to the lack of detailed empirical investigations of discourse within labour histories, Steinberg has suggested that "we need detailed

analyses of the ways in which working-class groups conducted discursive struggles on the local level... (and) we need further research on how groups bridged locally produced structures of meaning, to create larger frameworks for understanding and articulating their senses of oppression and redress in regional and national contexts".²⁷⁸ One of the most significant contributions of this thesis has been to provide such an analysis of the SEQEB strike.

Another of the merits of this dissertation is its practical application of the notion of agency to a historical situation. In this respect, the thesis is similar in intent to those social histories which aimed to "show how workers could be given voices and wills and could be constituted as a collective agent in an historical narrative".²⁷⁹ The case study of the SEQEB dispute has analysed and assessed the discourse through which the striking families constituted themselves as a powerful political force and made history, albeit under conditions that they had not chosen. As the late E.P. Thompson once said, in order to understand the roles of working class people in creating history, it is necessary to examine men and women "placed in actual contexts which they have not chosen, and confronted by indivertible forces, with an overwhelming immediacy of relations and duties and with only a scanty opportunity for inserting their own

²⁷⁸ Steinberg, M. W. "The re-making of the English Working Class?", Theory and Society, Vol.20, 1991, p.191

²⁷⁹ Sewell, W.H. "How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson's Theory of Working- Class Formation" in Kaye, H.J. and McClelland, K. (eds.) E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives, Polity Press, London, 1990, p.53

agency".²⁸⁰ This is certainly an accurate description of the position of the striking families in 1985. The SEQEB workers were sacked, blacklisted and impoverished, and unsupported by their own union, they and their families proceeded to instigate one of the largest mobilisations of the labour movement in Australian history.

The focus on the agency of the striking families and the factors which constrained their agency, flows from the arguments of European historians who stress that the outcomes of struggles:

... are not naturally given. They are historically established. They are resisted, but also adapted to. Their imposition is experienced as oppressive and unjust. When they are established they may come to be taken for granted, in which case criteria are defined as to what is just and tolerable within a set of class relations. They are not simply defined by ideological justifications and legal codes, but are the products of continuing struggles of classes...²⁸¹

The thesis has demonstrated that the striking families resisted the imposition of contract labour with remarkable success against almost insurmountable odds. As European historians have emphasised, language and discourse play a fundamental role in such struggles. To quote Gray, "we need to see language as actively constitutive of social identities and bases of political mobilisation".²⁸² Further, as McClelland suggests, historians and political scientists must then examine the extent to which historical actors

²⁸⁰ Thompson, E.P. "The Peculiarities of the English" in The Poverty of Theory, London, Merlin Press, 1978, p.69

²⁸¹ Williams, G. "In Defence of History", History Workshop Journal, Vol 7, 1979, p.118

²⁸² Gray, R. "The Deconstructing of the English Working Class", Social History, Vol.11, No.3, October 1986, p.365

have been able "to create forms of politics and political language that will unify and construct the class(es) and social groups they claim to represent".²⁸³ The dissertation's examination of the discourse of the striking families has been designed to achieve this aim.

This thesis therefore fits squarely within an emerging tradition which seeks to avoid economic reductionism and to emphasise the importance of politics, culture, discourse and agency within the historical process. The analysis of the discourse of the striking families further emphasises that structural exploitation does not have any necessary consequences for political organisation or political consciousness and that it is necessary to investigate the experiences, perspectives and vocabularies of those involved in struggles in order to understand their organisational, ideological and political responses to any historical situation.

The thesis has also demonstrated significant limitations in the existing literature on the SEQEB strike. The case study suggests that previous accounts of the dispute have simultaneously under-estimated the strength of the labour movement and over-estimated the strength and unity of the anti-union forces within capital and the state. It has demonstrated that there was significant support for the SEQEB strikers across many industries, regions and states for almost two years. Previous accounts of the strike have

²⁸³ McClelland, K. "Introduction", in Kaye, H.J. and McClelland, K. (eds.) *op.cit.*, p.5

not recognised that such working class support existed. It has also indicated that women played a key role in generating this support and that there were gender components of the discourse of the striking families which have previously gone unnoticed. The dissertation has also indicated that there were serious divisions within the state and amongst capitalists over the anti-union strategies of the Queensland Government which the previous literature on the strike has not recognised.

Previous histories of the SEQEB dispute have failed to effectively and appropriately consult with the workers who were involved in the strike and have instead attributed feelings and experiences to them which were inaccurate. This thesis has demonstrated that the widespread attribution of demoralisation and passivity to SEQEB strikers has been unjustified. Instead, by working in close collaboration with the striking families over a long period of time, I have been able to provide an alternative analysis of their discourse. Major elements of their discourse included a refusal to return to work under unreasonable conditions which they regarded as an attack on trade unionism; appeals to traditional (and often masculine) notions of working class consciousness, unity and strength; opposition to contract labour because it destroyed job security and working conditions; identification of the Queensland Government as "fascist"; and a belief that they were being "sold out" by the trade union leadership. The use of these themes allowed the striking families to tap into elements in the community with a strong working class consciousness and a sense of solidarity, and stimulated support across the

broad labour movement in spite of the hostility of the leadership of the labour movement to a continuation and extension of the dispute. A measure of the success of the discourse adopted by the strikers and their families was the massive support they received, which this thesis has documented.

The case study of the SEQEB dispute has identified many of the divisions within the Queensland labour movement in the period being studied, suggesting that Queensland's trade union leaders responded to numerous organisational, political, ideological and economic pressures as well as (and in some cases, instead of) the demands of union members during the dispute. This conclusion is important in terms of recent debates about the usefulness of analyses which distinguish between trade union officials and rank and file workers. Whereas some British social historians have suggested that such divisions are essentially useless and ought to be scrapped,²⁸⁴ the case study of the SEQEB dispute suggests that in some instances, such divisions are significant in practice and therefore they must be incorporated into studies of the labour movement.

The dissertation also has value as a detailed empirical record of working class experiences, attitudes and activity in one of the most significant strikes of this century. The thesis has recorded the history of an ultimately unsuccessful struggle without

²⁸⁴ See Zeitlin, J. "'Rank and Filism' in British Labour History: A Critique" International Review of Social History, VolXXXIV, 1989, pp.42-61.

patronising working class people or adopting a condescending historical perspective. It has presented a lively and meaningful account of one of Australia's most important class struggles, in which the courage, dignity and commitment of working class people is apparent at all stages.

APPENDIX ONE

INTERVIEWS

In the course of conducting this research project, there were many strikers and their families who asked to remain anonymous due to fears and threats which they had suffered. Throughout this project, I have respected their right to privacy and their fear of intimidation. The following people consented to have their names recorded as interviewees for this research project.

It may appear that the interviews were heavily gender-biased and that the input of women was missed throughout the research project. There are a number of points which I would like to make in response to this suggestion. Firstly, it is true that the union officials who dominate Queensland's industrial scene are mostly men. However, I went out of my way to organise interviews with women involved in the strike. Many of these women had themselves been threatened and had been told not to speak to me and therefore I have not referred to their names in the work or in this list of interviewees. As one woman angrily said to me, "How dare you ring me from your home. You must know by now your phone is bugged. We have been threatened. Don't ring me from your home again. You put my family at risk". The number of women who asked for anonymous interviews is significantly higher than the number of men. Indeed, I have spoken to nearly all the members of the Womens' Committee and many other women involved in the strike, even though their names do not appear here.

Many of the Unions to which I refer have since amalgamated with other unions and many of the people who I interviewed have subsequently moved on to other positions. For the sake of consistency, I have referred to their position at the time I interviewed them, which was almost always the same position as they held during the SEQEB dispute.

Wilf Ardill, Secretary, Miscellaneous Workers Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 14 February 1990.

Scott Barclay, former member Socialist Workers Party, 22 August 1989.

Peter Beattie, MLA for Brisbane Central and former ALP State Secretary, 12 March 1990.

Warren Bowden, Trade Union Support Group, various occasions 1989-1992, especially 28 September 1989

Jean Bowden, Trade Union Support Group, 28 September 1989.

Jackson Brown, sacked SEQEB worker, 3 January 1991.

Shelley Brown, wife of sacked SEQEB worker, 3 January 1991.

Tom Burns MLA, Deputy Leader of the Labor Party in Queensland, 24 August 1989.

Robin Burrow, member of Womens' Committee, 30 July 1992.

Bernadette Callaghan, State Secretary of the Queensland Branch of the Federated Clerks Union, 13 February 1990.

Vince Dobinson, State Secretary, Builders Labourers Federation and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 8 January 1990.

Rob Druery, sacked SEQEB worker, 27 October 1990.

Pat Dunne, Secretary, Queensland Branch, Australian Railways Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 30 March 1990

John Dwyer, State Secretary, Australian Insurance Employees Union, various occasions in 1992.

David Ettershank, organiser, Liquor Trades Union, 6 December 1989.

Carole Ferrier, member Trade Union Support Group, Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights and International Socialists, various occasions 1988-1990.

Ray Ferguson, State Secretary, Socialist Party of Australia and member of Trade Union Support Group, 29 September 1989.

Norm Gallagher, Federal and Victorian Secretary, Builders Labourers Federation, December 1989.

George Georges, former ALP Senator for Queensland, 12 December 1990

Hugh Hamilton, Secretary, Queensland Branch, Building Workers Industrial Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 2 November 1989.

Harry Hauenschild, President, Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, 20 December 1989.

Bob Hendricks, Secretary, Queensland Branch, Electrical Trades Union, 9 August 1990.

Errol Hodder, Secretary, Queensland Branch, Australian Workers Union, 8 September 1990.

Drew Hutton, member of Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, 29 September 1989.

Jeff Jones, President, Rockhampton Trades and Labour Council, 28 November 1989.

Lindsay Jones, State Organiser, Australian Labor Party, 1 February 1990.

Eddie Kahn, member, Transport Workers Union, 31 January 1991.

Vince Lester MLA, Member for Emerald, 1 September 1989.

Marie McFarlane, member of Trade Union Support Group and International Socialists Organisation, 15 November 1989

Barry MacIntosh, shop steward, Australian Workers Union and former organiser, New South Wales Branch, Builders Labourers Federation, various occasions 1992-1994.

Ian McLean, State Secretary of the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association and Secretary of the Queensland Branch of the ALP, 27 February 1990.

Garry MacLennan, Member of Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, 19 October 1989

Dinny Madden, Organiser, Electrical Trades Union, Brisbane, 15 November 1989.

Jeff Miller, Shop Steward, Capricornia Electricity Board, 18 May 1990.

Barbara Nelson-Atkins, member, Trade Union Support Group, November 1989

Bernie Neville, ETU Strike Committee Member, various occasions, especially 18 August 1991.

(The late) Mavis Neville, member of Women's Committee, various occasions

Peter O'Brien, State Secretary, Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools, 20 October 1989.

Rodger Omdahl, State Secretary, Public Sector Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 19 July 1990.

Dan O'Neil, member of Trade Union Support Group and Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, 23 August 1989.

Jack Pemberthy, Executive member of Miscellaneous Workers Union and member of Communist Party of Australia, 21 September 1989.

Peg Pemberthy, Communist Party of Australia member, 21 September 1989.

Kathy Rohweder, who supported her family while her husband, Keith, was on strike, 19 December 1992

Keith Rohweder, ETU Strike Committee member, 19 December 1992

Bill Rudolph, ETU Strike Committee member, 6 February 1991

Ray Selby, State Secretary, Municipal Officers Association and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 26 July 1990.

Pat Spence, member of Women's Committee (numerous interviews, including extensive interview on 16 December 1990)

Bill Steedman, sacked SEQEB worker, 16 July 1992.

Harley Stumm, 4ZZZ Reporter arrested at SEQEB Depot, 20 November 1989.

Lynne Taylor, organiser, Federated Clerks Union, 16 October 1989.

John Thompson, Secretary, Queensland Plumbers and Gasfitters Union and member of Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 5th December 1989.

Austin Vaughan, State Secretary of the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union and member of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council Executive, 16 July 1990.

Andrew Vickers, State Secretary, Queensland Colliery Employees' Union, 8 January 1990.

Eric Vogt, sacked SEQEB worker, 22 December 1990

Billy Watts, member of Socialist Left faction of the ALP and member of the Trade Union Support Group, 26 October 1989.

Anne Warner MLA, Member for Kurilpa, 28 September 1989.

Joanna Watson, member, Queensland Coalition for Democratic Rights, 6 October 1989.

Hughie Williams, Secretary, Brisbane Sub-Branch, Transport Workers Union, 8 February 1990

APPENDIX TWO

SUPPORT FROM PILBARA WORKERS FOR SEQEB STRIKE

| DATE AND PLACE | NO. OF MEMBERS | UNION | RESOLUTION |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|-------|--|
| 11-3-85 SHAY GAP | 37 | ETU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 72 | AMWSU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 81 | TWU | \$500 initially followed by \$5 per member per week. Will review in 2 months. |
| | 7 | BTA | \$50 per member. |
| | 22 | FEDFU | Sub Branch will decide financial assistance and advise. |
| | 124 | AWU | Approaches being made by the members to the Convenor on financial assistance. |
| 11-3-85 GOLDSWORTHY MINING | 57 | AWU | A mass meeting of the members of the Unions mentioned endorsed in principle a recommendation to donate \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week. To comply with industrial relations procedures on site the individual Unions will meet on Tuesday 19-3-85 to formally endorse their actions. |
| 12-3-85 | 125 | ETU | \$1000 per week for the length of the dispute. |
| | 245 | AMSWU | \$500 immediately, \$20 per member \$500 of which will be returned to their fund. Following this \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 431 | AWU | \$2000 immediately. Will meet again in two weeks for further action. |
| | 6 | BWIU | Voluntary donation. |
| 12-3-85 MOUNT NEWMAN MINING | 133 | FEDFU | Sub-Branch will decide financial assistance and advise. |
| GOLDSWORTHY MINING | 100 | AWU | \$2000 immediately. Will review in one month's time. |
| FENCANE ISLAND | 2 | BWIU | Waiting advice of their action. |
| | 20 | ETU | This Union was on strike but the Convenor attended the Mass Meeting. He then called a meeting of his members on the 13-3-85. They decided to donate \$1000 immediately and will review in one months time. |
| | | FEDFU | Awaiting advice of their action. |

| DATE AND PLACE | NO. OF MEMBERS | UNION | RESOLUTION |
|-----------------------|----------------|--------------|---|
| | 73 | ETU | This meeting showed support. Because apprentices are party to their slush fund a further meeting was called at 3.30pm on 13-3-85. |
| | 302 | AWU | The convenor and shop steward attended the above meeting and intend to call a mass meeting to consider financial assistance. |
| | 156 | AMSWU | Unfortunately notification of intentions to hold a mass meeting was not advised soon enough. Information and details of the QLD Dispute were left and I hope to advise. |
| | 70 | FEDFU | To consider request at meetings. |
| | 4 | BTA | To consider request at meetings. |
| 14-3-85 PARABURDOO | 70 | ETU | The meetings of the noted unions endorsed the recommendations of financial support of \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| 14-3-85 | 500 | AWU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 200 | AMWSU ASE | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 100 | ETU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 70 | FEDFU | \$1000 immediately and will review. |
| | 20 | BTA | \$50 per member initially and will review in 6 weeks time. |
| 15-3-85 | 250 | AMWSU | \$2000 immediately. \$2000 in two weeks time then followed by \$1000 per fortnight until the dispute is resolved. This membership requires particular information about what is going to be done about scabs involved in the dispute. |
| | 145 | ETU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |
| | 160 | FEDFU | \$5000 immediately. Members of this Union have expressed that they will consider any further requests. |
| | 100 | BTA | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. The FLTU are to conduct a meeting on Sat. 16-3-85 to further endorse this action. |
| | 300 | TWU | \$20 per member initially followed by \$5 per member per week until the dispute is resolved. |

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