Establishing Trade Unionism in the Emerging Iron Ore Mining Industry in Western Australia's Pilbara Region, 1965–72

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By the 1970s, the Pilbara iron ore mining industry was a byword for union militancy. Yet when this industry was established in the 1960s, workers endured harsh conditions, unfettered managerial prerogative, low pay and there was little trade union organisation. To date, studies have concentrated on the period of union militancy, and little effort has been made to document and analyse the rise of trade unionism in this mining region of Western Australia. This article argues that industrial action by unionised and unionising mining workers in the period 1965–72 won serious improvements in pay and conditions, and eroded some of the power of management. Their demands were resisted fiercely by the iron ore companies. Much of the infrastructure of grassroots unionism – central to the exercise of "union power" in the 1970s and 1980s – was established during this period. This included networks of shop stewards, combined union committees and universal unionism. These struggles underpin and therefore contextualise the later union militancy, which has received more academic attention. This article draws on John Kelly's mobilisation theory to examine this period of working-class activity and union growth.

Keywords: Trade Unions, Pilbara, Iron-Ore Industry, Militancy, Strikes, Mobilization Theory, Union Renewal

The development of the iron ore industry in Western Australia's Pilbara region from the 1960s is oft-rehearsed. The accompanying rise in union structures and worker militancy, however, has received little academic attention. Pilbara iron ore unions' 1970s strength is often taken for granted, yet the "rise of the Pilbara unions … was not predestined," as Bradon Ellem argues in his history of the Pilbara.[1] Union success required agency from worker militants and union officials through trade unionism – something not adequately explored by Ellem. This article then, seeks to explain the establishment of grassroots union militancy in the Pilbara iron ore industry. It provides an overview of conditions and managerial practice in the mid- to late 1960s, before analysing how this was turned around. Later sections of the article examine the dynamics of the class struggle, including intra-union relations, before discussing the establishment of combined union committees, and the consolidation of compulsory unionism. Workers' militant action won material gains and enhanced union organisation and confidence. However, grassroots union militancy, and the

1.   Bradon Ellem, *The Pilbara: From the Deserts Profits Come* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2017), 41.

structures which facilitated it, also became a source of conflict with the union officials. We can enrich our understanding of later periods of unionism in the Pilbara (and contemporary industrial relations) by analysing its establishment, although this is beyond the scope of this article.

During the 1970s' and 1980s' peak of "union power,"[2] the Pilbara iron ore industry was a byword for union militancy, characterised by universal unionism, strongly organised networks of shop stewards and their convenors, union encroachment on managerial prerogative, and high strike levels. Neither friend nor foe would deny the strength of the unions; a situation substantially unchanged until the 1986–87 Robe River dispute. The pendulum had not swung completely to the unions' side by 1972, and differences remained between companies with respect to over-award payments, conditions and hours worked.[3] Nonetheless, much of the infrastructure of a grassroots model of union militancy was in place, which later became the vehicle by which unionists imposed their strength. In the 1960s, however, workers faced harsh conditions,[4] arbitrary abuse of power, low safety standards and wages not much higher than in Perth. Trade union organisation was patchy and did not resemble the bastion of union strength and militancy that the region became. We need to investigate how the workers and their unions made this leap. The struggles of the early period of 1965–72, set the tone in terms of union structures, intra-union relations, and the relationship between workers and management for the later period of union strength.

John Kelly's mobilisation theory[5] offers a useful lens through which to view this early period of labour history in the Pilbara iron ore industry, exploring "how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective action against their employers."[6] Structural factors alone are insufficient in explaining union growth and militancy. Many accounts of the later period take worker militancy for granted, attributing the high level of strikes to factors such as geographical and social isolation, high population growth, labour turnover, the hot climate, a tight labour market or the strategic industrial power of small work groups.[7] These objective factors – external to workers but still arising from their role in capitalist production – may assist in unionisation drives, but they do not guarantee success.[8] While important, these factors don't adequately explain the rise of militant unionism. Kelly has argued:

2. Gregor Gall, "Sources of Labour Union Power," Business School Working Papers 2008, University of Hertfordshire, accessed October 2018, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sources-of-labour-union-power; Stephanie Luce, *Labor Movements: Global Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).
3. Errol Lovett, "The Structure of Industrial Negotiations within the Pilbara Iron Ore Mining Industry" (Masters thesis, Monash University, 1980), 82, 84.
4. See Gil Barr and Stuart Reid, "Gil Barr's Story, Part 2," *Papers in Labour History* 5 (1990): 28; Doug Alchin, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 23 January 1991, State Library of Western Australia (SLWA), accessed October 2018, http://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b1753638; Harry Hoskin, interview with author, 17 May 2018; Randall Grant, interview with author, 14 May 2018, among others.
5. John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge, 1998).
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. Stephen Frenkel, "Industrial Conflict, Workplace Characteristics and Accommodation Structure in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 20, no. 4 (1978): 387–88, 398; Norm Dufty, "Remoteness and Industrial Relations in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," *Occasional Paper* (University of Western Australia Industrial Relations Department) no. 1 (1986): 17.
8. If objective factors guaranteed union success, the Pilbara iron ore industry would have been a site of militant unionism during the mining boom of the 2000s, instead of being almost entirely de-unionised. See Ellem, *The Pilbara*, 8.

> collective organization and activity ultimately stem from employer actions that generate amongst employees a sense of injustice or illegitimacy. Employees must also acquire a sense of common identity which distinguishes them from the employer; they must attribute the perceived injustice to the employer; and they must be willing to engage in some form of collective organization and activity. The whole process of collectivization is heavily dependent on the actions of small numbers of leaders or activists.[9]

Using this framework to examine *how* union power was claimed, and the organisational dynamics of that power allows us to move beyond a simple celebration of workers improving their lot through collective action.

This article argues that key to successful working-class organisation was leadership from union organisers, shop stewards and activists, whose arguments found a receptive audience throughout the iron-ore workforce. Workers' collective action, through strikes, threatened stoppages and other protests changed the balance of power in their favour and won improvements in pay and conditions. As industrial relations academic Ralph Darlington notes, few studies have applied Kelly's theory to specific workers' struggles.[10] Yet it is particularly useful in this study. Just as Kelly's theory "redirects our attention away from bargaining structures and institutions and towards the social processes of industrial relations,"[11] our focus shifts from awards handed down in the Perth Industrial Commission, to the pitched battles between workers and management over 1,000km away, amid the dust and heat of Western Australia's (WA) North-West. This theory highlights issues such as interest definition, grievance attribution, group identity and cohesion, power relations and mobilising for collective action, which labour historians need to consider when examining periods of worker militancy and union growth. We also need to be attuned to the dynamic interrelationship between structure and agency,[12] recognising for example that the exercise of agency through collective action could help bring about and then enforce compulsory unionism, which becomes a structural factor aiding workers in future struggles.

Few accounts document the rise of trade unionism in the Pilbara iron ore industry. Articles in labour history journals covering this period are either written from the perspective of union officials and don't examine class struggle;[13] discuss work without explaining unionism and industrial relations;[14] or explore high-level negotiations between companies and union officials in the Industrial Commission

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9.   Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 44.
10. Ralph Darlington, "The Leadership Component of Kelly's Mobilisation Theory: Contribution, Tensions, Limitations and Further Development," *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 39, no. 4 (2018): 617–38; Ralph Darlington, "Leadership and Union Militancy: The Case of the RMT," *Capital and Class* 99 (2009): 3–32. A rare example of mobilisation theory being applied to Australian workers is D. M. Buttigieg, S. J. Deery, and R. D. Iverson, "Union Mobilization: A Consideration of the Factors Affecting the Willingness of Union Members to Take Industrial Action," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 46, no. 2 (2008): 248–67.
11. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 44.
12. Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Ralph Darlington, "The Interplay of Structure and Agency Dynamics in Strike Activity," *Employee Relations* 34, no. 5 (2012): 518–33; Ralph Darlington, "The Leadership Component of Kelly's Mobilisation Theory," 620.
13. J. Tracy, "The Construction Phase of the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry 1965–1972: Workers, Their Unions, and Organising the Industry," *Papers in Labour History* 13 (1994): 15–25.
14. Ray Fells and Stuart Reid, "Tons Were the Go: Some Recollections of Work in the Early Days of the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," *Papers in Labour History* 8 (1991): 1–16.

leading to the 1967 Iron Ore Industry Award.[15] Ellem's work on the Pilbara iron ore industry spans the 1960s to the present day,[16] but does not cover the establishment of trade unionism in the 1960s and early 1970s in any depth. The work of political economist Herb Thompson and sociologist Norm Dufty on the Pilbara iron ore industry does not cover this period.[17] These three authors, the foremost authorities on Pilbara labour history and industrial relations in the iron ore industry, do raise themes which point to the significance of analysing this earlier period. These include: the grassroots nature of Pilbara iron ore unionism; the importance of networks of shop stewards, convenors, and combined union committees; the relationship between the union rank-and-file and officialdom, especially Perth-based officials; the effect of the Pilbara's remoteness on union organising, and worker militancy.

Histories of the unions involved, such as Australian Workers' Union (AWU),[18] the predecessors of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU)[19] and the Electrical Trades' Union (ETU),[20] shed little light on the topic,[21] and studies of the trade union peak bodies[22] are similarly incomplete. Finally, former tug master and researcher Murray Shaw's account of the industrial action taken against the use of "foreign indentured labour" in the Pilbara in 1967–68, in which he was involved,[23] while a substantial account of these events, does not examine the rise of trade unionism in the region more broadly.

This article, then, represents a first attempt to explain the rise of trade unionism in the Pilbara iron ore industry, largely drawing upon union journals, oral evidence and the state's daily newspaper, the *West Australian.* The journals used are the *AEU Monthly Journal* of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), and the ETU's *Livewire.*[24] These unions covered around one third of the iron ore workforce in this

15.   Ray Fells, "Award Restructuring: But How Did We Get Our Awards in the First Place? The Development of the Award and Union Structures in the Iron Ore Industry," *Papers in Labour History* 11 (1993): 2–19.

16.   See Ellem, *The Pilbara*; Bradon Ellem, *Hard Ground: Unions in the Pilbara* (Port Hedland: Pilbara Mineworkers Union, 2004); Bradon Ellem, "Robe River Revisited: Geohistory and Industrial Relations," *Labour History*, no. 109 (November 2015): 111–30.

17.   See Norman Francis Dufty, *Industrial Relations in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry* (Bentley, WA: Western Australian Institute of Technology, Centre for Social Science Research, 1984); Herb Thompson, "The Capital-Labour Relation in the Mining Sector," *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 15 (1983): 64–86; Herb Thompson, "The Pilbara Iron Ore Industry: Mining Cycles and Capital-Labour Relations," *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 21 (1987): 66–82; Herb Thompson, "Shorter Working Hours or Redundancies: Class Conflict in the Pilbara," *Arena* 56 (1980): 113–27.

18.   Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886–1994* (Cambridge & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

19.   Bobbie Oliver, "One Big Metal Union? The Impact of Union Amalgamation in Western Australia," in *Organise, Educate, Control: The AMWU in Australia, 1852–2012,* ed. Andrew Reeves and Andrew Dettmer (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 58–70.

20.   Linda McLaughlin, "A History of the Electrical Trades Union in Western Australia and Its Place in the Labour Movement from 1905 to 1979" (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2013), 272–73.

21.   The AWU's official history offers barely anything of relevance, while Oliver and McLaughlin mention epic trips taken by Perth-based union officials to the Pilbara in the 1960s and early 1970s to recruit members and set up shop stewards' committees, but do not offer a comprehensive treatment.

22.   Saliba Sassine, "A Study of the Authority of a Trade Union Centre: The Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia, 1963–1981" (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 1984); Bobbie Oliver, *Unity is Strength: A History of the Australian Labor Party and the Trades and Labor Council in WA* (Perth: API Network, Australia Research Centre, Curtin University, 2003).

23.   Murray Shaw, *Bamboo Curtain over Port Hedland: The Anatomy of a Political/Industrial Dispute* (Canning Vale, WA: Murray Shaw, 2013).

24.   Thanks go to the Electrical Trades' Union, especially WA State Secretary Les McLaughlin, for making old copies of *Livewire*, stored at the union's premises, available to the author.
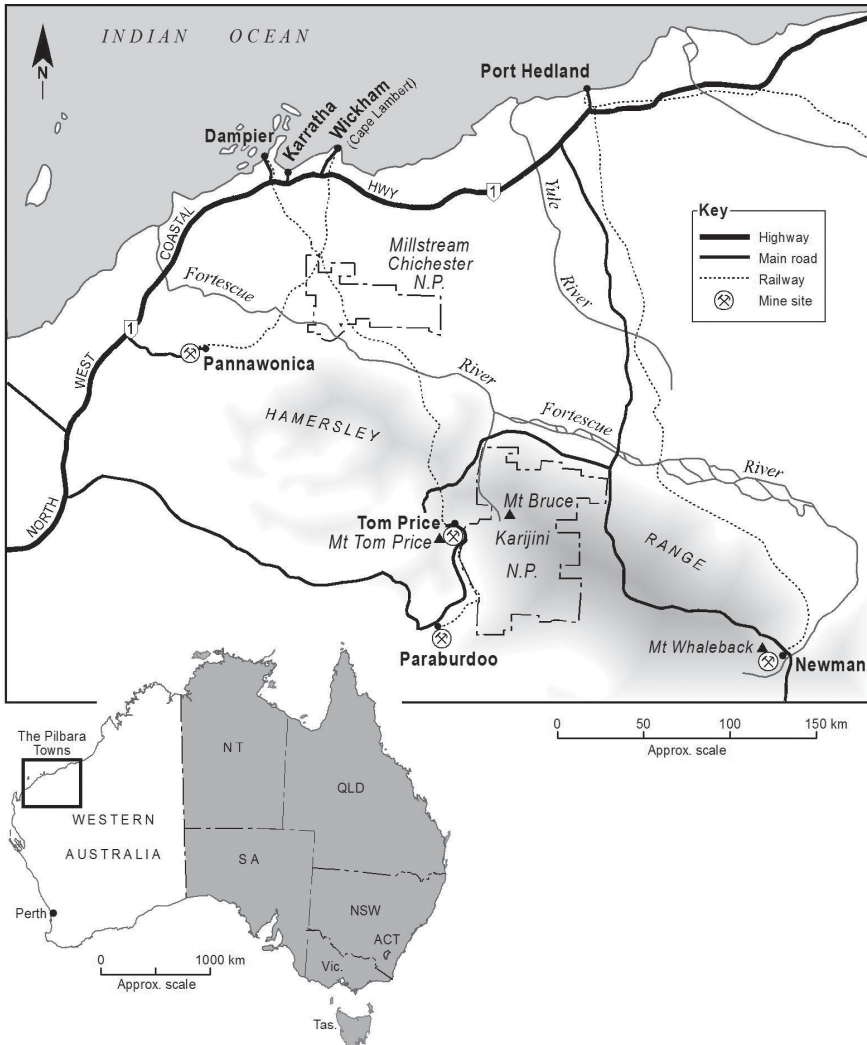
Concrete Pour during Construction of the Primary Crusher, Mt Tom Price, 1965
Courtesy of Rio Tinto Ltd
Sourced from the State Library of Western Australia, BA2817/1671

time period,[25] and their journals often contain reports of strikes and disputes also involving other unions. The records of the Trades and Labor Council of WA (TLC)[26] and Industrial Commission records have been consulted. Seven interviews have been conducted by the author, particularly with shop stewards from the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), the biggest union in the Pilbara iron ore mines but with no relevant journals or records available. I have supplemented these with existing (and thus non-reactive) interviews of union representatives and triangulated the different union sources against each other and the oral material. That the amount of available data is small is unfortunate but unavoidable: the unions and indeed the industry were establishing themselves in a remote region with poor communications half a century ago. While efforts have been made to track down protagonists and valuable information has been gleaned from them, the greater amount of material from written, official sources may result in a somewhat skewed picture. For example, from written sources we have evidence of Perth-based union officials making

25. Norman Francis Dufty, *Management and Union Organization in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry: A Discussion Paper* (Bentley, WA: Western Australian Institute of Technology, 1981), 31. Dufty states that ETU members at Hamersley Iron in 1973 accounted for 11.4 per cent of the workforce, with AWMWSU members at 22 per cent. In 1972, the AEU merged with two smaller unions to form the AMWSU.
26. The author wishes to thank UnionsWA, the successor organisation to the Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia, for permission to make use of their archives, held by the Battye Library in Perth, Western Australia.

The Pilbara's Mines and Towns in the 1980s

Map by Peter Johnson; originally published in Bradon Ellem, "Robe River Revisited: Geohistory and Industrial Relations," *Labour History*, no. 109 (November 2015): 116

organising trips to the Pilbara where they recruited members, set up shop stewards' committees and ensured 100 per cent union membership. From oral interviews, we know that in other cases grassroots unionists did this work.[27] Presumably, this was more widespread but we cannot know this due to limited sources.

Conditions in the Developing Iron Ore Industry

The Menzies federal Liberal government relaxed the iron-ore export ban in 1960, opening up a phase of rapid development of the industry.[28] Contracts were signed

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27.   Graeme Haynes, interview with author, 5 May 2017.
28.   David Lee, *The Second Rush: Mining and the Transformation of Australia* (Redland Bay, Qld: Connor Court Publishing, 2016).

with Japanese companies to supply that country's fast growing steel industry. Demand for iron ore was relentless – almost limitless,[29] with the development period described by mining historian David Lee as an integral part of Australia's "second rush."[30] Despite a high labour turnover,[31] the number of workers at each company increased significantly during the period under discussion (see Table 1). The companies, with substantial State government assistance,[32] built seven towns near their mine sites and ports. Each company controlled the housing, shopping and amenities in "their" towns: Tom Price (built in 1964); Dampier (1965); Goldsworthy (1965); Newman (1966) Wickham (1970); Paraburdoo, and Pannawonica (1972).[33] Of currently-existing Pilbara towns, only Port Hedland pre-dates the resources boom of the 1960s and 1970s, but its town and port were significantly extended. The companies also built the new ports of Dampier and Cape Lambert, and laid down thousands of kilometres of road and railway. By 1968, three iron ore companies had established operations: Hamersley Iron, Mt Newman and Goldsworthy. They were joined by a fourth, Cliffs Robe River Iron Ore Associates, in 1972. This article will focus on Hamersley Iron, Mt Newman and Goldsworthy.

Table 1. Number of Iron-Ore Workers at Pilbara Companies, 1966–72

Year	Hamersley	Mt. Newman	Goldsworthy	Cliffs Robe River	Total
1966	420	-	168	-	588
1967	766	-	368	-	1,134
1968	1,161	-	475	-	1,636
1969	1,462	1,000*	547	-	3,009
1970	1,985	1,118	655	-	3,758
1971	2,436	1,983	726	-	5,145
1972	2,630	2,115	666	517	5,928

* Approximate only

Source: Errol Lovett, "The Structure of Industrial Negotiations within the Pilbara Iron Ore Mining Industry" (Masters diss., Monash University, 1980), 35.

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29. Thompson, "The Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," 68. Thompson writes: "The early development stage, or "take-off" is directly attributable to the rapid growth of the Japanese steel industry from 4.8 million tonnes in 1950 to 119.3 million tonnes in 1973. All of the original contracts for the export of iron ore were negotiated with the Japanese steel makers. Throughout this period Japanese steel output continued to increase rapidly and the iron ore companies were desperate to increase capacity to keep up with the demand … the Pilbara was producing 6.8 million tonnes in 1967 and five years later this had been increased more than 700 per cent to 50.5 million tonnes per annum."
30. Lee, *The Second Rush*, 74.
31. For example, Hamersley Iron's turnover was 180 per cent in 1967 and 140 per cent in 1968: Alan Trengrove, *Adventures in Iron: Hamersley's First Decade* (Clayton, Vic.: Stockwell Press, 1976), 123.
32. Ellem, *The Pilbara*, 23.
33. Tracy, "The Construction Phase of the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," 15–25.

Conditions in the late 1960s and early 1970s were tough. Lance Elliott, a staff member at Mount Newman Mining, has described conditions at this time as "unairconditioned, dusty, unsafe to say the least."[34] A worker at Hamersley Iron's Dampier site described the conditions in 1968 as "outrageous," noting that in the pelletising area:

> The heat of the ore combined with the added water increased the humidity in what was virtually an enclosed building. It was just amazing … putrid. So we would just strip down to our pants and … be sweating all the time, and at the same time the storage area where the hot ore came from the ball mills would be overflowing. So you would have all this iron ore dust pouring down into the building all the time.[35]

Workers would be "black" and "stinking" from the dust,[36] which became a key *grievance* identified by unionists.

Table 2. Iron Ore Companies in the Pilbara, 1965–72

Company	First Exports	Mine Sites	Port
Hamersley Iron Pty Ltd	1966	Tom Price Paraburdoo	Dampier
Mt Newman Mining Co. Pty. Ltd	1969	Newman (Mt Whaleback)	Port Hedland
Goldsworthy Mining Ltd	1966	Goldsworthy Shay Gap	Finucane Island
Cliffs Robe River Associates	1972	Pannawonica	Cape Lambert

Source: Helen Court, "Industrial Relations Disputes in the Pilbara Iron Ore Mining Industry:
A Study of Labour-Management Relations in a Developing Region"
(Masters diss., University of Western Australia, 1976), 19.

The state of the lunches was another grievance. Elliott remembers that company contractors would bring workers a big plastic bag containing within it:

> plastic bags of lettuce, plastic bags of ham, plastic bags of bread rolls … They'd rock up at the workshop at about 10:30, chuck the bag on the floor and away they'd go. The bag would sit there in sometimes 100 degree (F) heat until lunchtime when the guys would have to construct their own lunch, and of course the lettuce was like wilted spinach. It wasn't good. They weren't being looked after in the food side of things.[37]

These were known as "pooman's power packs," after catering contractor Poon's.[38] Production worker (and later AWU shop steward) Randall Grant remembers the

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34. Lance Elliott, interview with author, 1 August 2017.
35. Grant, interview.
36. *Ibid*.
37. Elliott, interview.
38. *Ibid*.

Smoko at Mt Tom Price, 1966
Courtesy of Rio Tinto Ltd
Sourced from the State Library of Western Australia, BA2817/2555

sense of *injustice* surrounding "soaked and soggy" salad sandwiches at Dampier in 1968, stating "the guys were really pissed off with that. They wanted a hot meal."[39]

AWU member Harry Hoskin at Tom Price recalls 1968 conditions as unsafe and like the "Wild West."[40] The mine superintendent gave him a "powder monkey role" using explosives he had no experience with: "it was as dangerous as hell … I can't even spell gelignite let alone [know] what it's about, he's like 'You'll be right, you'll be right.'"[41] Grant remembers an incident at Goldsworthy where a worker was "blown up" by explosives (he survived) and one at Hamersley Iron where a worker's skull was "crushed" by machinery. He attributed these incidents to the lack of safety protocols.[42] These conditions provided the basis for the battles between workers and employers.

Power Dynamics between Companies and Workers

Power dynamics between the companies and their workers changed substantially during the period 1965–72; the unfettered managerial prerogative present when companies started Pilbara operations had been pared back a few years later. "Power" is a crucial concept in industrial relations and labour history, yet is under-explored, as Kelly suggests.[43] By "drilling down" to examine the role of leadership, organisation and collective action we can better understand the reasons for the shift in "power" towards workers. In the 1960s, before workers exercised their collective

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39.   Grant, interview.
40.   Hoskin, interview.
41.   *Ibid.*
42.   Grant, interview.
43.   Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 23. Kelly himself does not offer a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

muscle, the companies used their responsibility for food, housing and amenities in the "company towns" to their advantage. For example, the AEU reported that in June 1968, a Hamersley Iron boilermaker had his accommodation, and therefore job, withdrawn after making "sharp criticisms" of the food to the Messing Officer from Poon's.[44] The same month a worker's complaint about food resulted in his alleged assault by a manager. Three workers were framed and remanded in custody for eight days by a Justice of Peace[45] who worked for the company, before being sacked.[46] Grant has confirmed this picture, citing workers at Dampier in 1968 being "thrown off site" for a drunken brawl off the job, and at Goldsworthy for having an affair.[47] Another disciplinary tool was the deferred payment system where some of a worker's earnings were paid at the completion of the contract. According to union officials, "one small misdemeanour and it's down the road with no fares and no deferred pay."[48] Workers were also sacked for refusing to carry out unsafe work practices, according to Hamersley Iron foreman Robert "Bob" Dickson, who commenced work at Dampier in 1967:

> you could hop in a shute … in a dangerous situation, with just a tripwire pulled rather than have the equipment isolated … and the bloke that's on your shift would do it with you … The next night you could ask a different bloke to do it, and that bloke would say, "It's bloody unsafe," and get sacked.[49]

Power rested squarely with management in these early days.

Leadership, organisation, group solidarity and collective action helped to transform this situation, building unionists' power over time. The collective action of AEU members at Dampier, prevented a sacking in July 1967.[50] Yet the following year the same company could dismiss workers for complaining about food in the incident described above. Thus while management still had more power than the unionists in the late 1960s, unionists had successfully challenged that power in particular instances. The "hard-line" management style of the iron ore companies contrasts with the later period, when grassroots unionism was so strong that managers found it hard to sack anybody. According to Hamersley Iron boilermaker and long-time AMWU convenor John Mossenton: "in the '70s … no-one got the sack … I don't know what you'd have to do to get the sack in the '70s … you just didn't get the sack."[51] The "company town" structure had facilitated management's arbitrary abuse of power. Later company towns transformed into union towns where municipal issues could cause lost production.[52]

44. Jack Marks, "State Reports, WA, Division 14," *AEU Monthly Journal* (August 1968): 31–32.
45. A civilian with some judicial powers who can decide whether bail is granted in minor cases.
46. Marks, "State Reports, WA, Division 14," 31–32.
47. Grant, interview.
48. Jack Marks, "Report on North West Organising Trip," *AEU Monthly Journal* (October 1967): 11.
49. Robert Dickson, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 29 January 1991, transcript, 14, SLWA, accessed October 2018, http://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/download/slwa_b1754221_7.pdf.
50. Marks, "Report on North West Organising Trip," 11.
51. John Mossenton, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 29 January 1991, transcript, Tape 1, 22, accessed October 2018, http://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b1754217_7. Thanks to Professor Ray Fells who provided the author with interview transcripts not available via SLWA.
52. Ellem, *The Pilbara*, 52.

Class Struggle: Strikes, Stop Works and Riots

Class struggle by workers in the Pilbara iron ore industry contributed to significant improvements in conditions and pay, and an erosion of managerial authoritarianism. Despite some earlier examples, such as a food riot by Hamersley Iron's construction crew on Christmas Day 1965,[53] it was the strikes in the late 1960s that had the greatest impact, culminating in significant over award payments and improvements in conditions for workers at all three iron ore companies in 1970. Militant class struggle continued in 1971 and 1972. This section offers a chronological treatment of Pilbara class struggle in these years, contextualising the upsurge in struggle from 1969 with the national Clarrie O'Shea strikes, in which Pilbara iron ore miners participated.

In 1967 and 1968, workers dredging Port Hedland harbour to accommodate ore carriers, took wildcat strike action over the issue of "foreign indentured labour."[54] Twenty Japanese indentured workers were employed on Goldsworthy's dredging operation in 1965.[55] Workers were concerned that this would establish a precedent, and keep wages in the region low. In July 1967, workers on the dredge the *Alameda* discovered that "an undisclosed number of Japanese will be coming to Port Hedland to man dredges working on the Mt Newman contract." Utilising Kelly's framework, we can better understand the mechanics by which workers were mobilised to take industrial action, and the role of leaders such as Murray Shaw. Shaw helped define workers' interests in banning foreign indentured labour and to frame the issue as one where companies, backed by the government, were dishonestly using "foreign labour" to push down wages and conditions of Australian workers. In a pseudonymous letter to the *West Australian*, Shaw pointed out that despite a government requirement that indentured labour be used only as a last resort, numerous Japanese "specialists" were being employed as deckhands when thousands of people had unsuccessfully applied to work on the Mount Newman project.[56] It is likely that Shaw made similar arguments to workers. As Kelly argues, dissatisfaction is "necessary but not sufficient" for mobilisation;[57] blame *attribution* must also take place, based on a notion of *injustice* and *illegitimacy*, in this case because the government and company weren't following their own rules.

Shaw describes workers discussing how to make their cause public:

> [S]omeone suggested we hold a 24-hour protest stoppage of work … any thought of going on strike had never crossed my mind … However, the more I thought about it, the more merit I could see … as I believed the situation warranted it and indeed it was the only option left open to us. I then suggested the stoppage be of 48 hours duration, as a lesser time might not have the desired effect. The others agreed to this and I was then elected as spokesman … So began my brief career as a political/industrial activist.[58]

The workers' respective unions the AWU, and the Merchant Shipping Guild directed members to go back to work, and the employer threatened to sack strikers. Despite

53.   Humphrey McQueen, *Gone Tomorrow: Australia in the 1980s* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982), 92.
54.   Shaw, *Bamboo Curtain over Port Hedland*.
55.   *Ibid.*, 41.
56.   Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 27–29; Shaw, *Bamboo Curtain over Port Hedland*.
57.   Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 45.
58.   Shaw, *Bamboo Curtain over Port Hedland*, 46.

these obstacles, they carried out their industrial action. Shaw warned workers, including newly arrived migrants, that the company would likely threaten to sack the workers, and "forewarned is forearmed."[59] That is, he "legitimate[d]" the form of action, at both meetings and informal conversations, "in the face of counter-mobilization by the employer."[60] As Kelly and Rick Fantasia argue, the role leaders play in convincing workers that the potential costs of industrial action are worth it, is "critical."[61]

Jack Marks (AEU), Frank Bastow (Boilermakers and Blacksmiths' Society, BBS),[62] and Joe Quinn (Carpenters' Union) came to show their solidarity, adding some institutional support. Shaw argues that TLC President Jim Coleman manoeuvred to get an unsatisfactory compromise passed, and the workers returned to work.[63] The following year, further strike action brought victory. Shaw also describes his own evolution into a leader, caused by circumstances outside his control such as the issue of indentured labour, outrage at what he saw as the lies of the government and the companies over the issue, and the lack of efficacy of his lobbying efforts. A tug master who often voted Liberal became a militant unionist organising wildcat strike action![64] Shaw had an offer of employment withdrawn after the strikes, probably due to his heavy involvement, and left the region, playing no role in the union movement thereafter. Yet the outcome of the episode was that indentured labour did not become part of industrial relations in the region.

In 1968, industrial action (a 48-hour strike) secured the payment of "dust money," an additional allowance to compensate for the large quantities of dust workers had to work in. Hamersley Iron contractor Utah reneged on an agreement to pay the money, apparently under pressure from Hamersley Iron, but eventually relented after union officials and the Industrial Commission became involved.[65] BBS grassroots union representative John Beales remembered that in 1968 workers at Goldsworthy Mining's port on Finucane Island tried unsuccessfully for weeks on end to convince management to let them eat at the mess, rather than consume the "power packs" in the smoko room. The entire workforce of 80 then struck for four days to force the issue, but were sacked. They were re-employed days later when a ship needed loading.[66]

Union militancy increased in 1969. Significant levels of industrial action across all companies in the Pilbara iron ore industry involved all unions, some of it unsanctioned by union officials. On 8 January 1969, the Industrial Commission's Chief Commissioner Eric Kelly issued the new Iron Ore Industry Award, which had expired almost a year before.[67] This sparked strikes by AWU and ETU members at Goldsworthy Co's Goldsworthy mine site and Finucane Island, and Hamersley

59.   *Ibid.*, 47.
60.   Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 127.
61.   *Ibid.*, 35.
62.   This union merged with the AEU in 1971.
63.   Shaw, *Bamboo Curtain over Port Hedland*, 47.
64.   *Ibid.*
65.   *AEU Monthly Journal,* April 1968: 31.
66.   John Beales, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 20 December 1990, transcript, 11–12. This transcript was made available to the author by Ray Fells. It is based on sound recordings available at SLWA, accessed October 2018, https://encore.slwa.wa.gov.au/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1753636.
67.   "Minutes of 5 Feb 1969 State Council meeting," *Livewire* (March 1969): 7. The minutes do not give the exact state of the strike. Given that the State Council meetings were monthly, the strikes would have probably occurred in January, but may have taken place in the first few days in February before the meeting. For the award, see *Western Australian Industrial Gazette* 48 (1969): 898.

Iron's Mt Tom Price mine site and Dampier. Gil Barr, organiser for the AWU and at
this stage the only full-time union official based in the entire Pilbara region for any
union, has recounted:

> That award Kelly brought down was awful. They went on strike all over
> the Pilbara over it … the Union Secretary at the time, made things a bit
> hard for me. He believed in arbitration … [and accepting] the umpire's
> decision … the blokes said they wouldn't accept it under any circumstance.
> It was the first real big strike throughout the whole area … They were
> out for about 3 weeks.[68]

Like its predecessor, the 1967 Iron Ore Award, it was a "minimum rates"
award,[69] so did not offer wages and conditions very different from elsewhere in the
state, despite the remoteness and harsh working conditions in the Pilbara. More
fundamentally, the award was arbitrated by the Commission after submissions by
Perth-based union officials and the iron ore companies. Workers had no ownership
over it. However, the award for the first time gave limited recognition to shop
stewards, despite the opposition of some union officials.[70] Researcher Errol Lovett
wrote in 1980: "The long delay in processing the workers' claims for the 1969 award
had a significant influence on the establishment of … site structures, and laid the
foundation for a level of mistrust and suspicion of the State union which remains
in evidence to this day."[71]

On 22 May 1969, workers at Tom Price, Mount Newman and Goldsworthy
stopped iron ore production for a day, as part of a state-wide strike involving up to
100,000 unionists.[72] Two militant metal trades unions, the AEU and BBS, both with
a substantial Pilbara membership, and the waterside unions led by communist
union official Paddy Troy, pushed for the strike at the WA TLC, and the motion
passed 78 to 40.[73] The TLC was also under pressure from rank-and-file unionists. The
right-wing AWU, with thousands of members in the Pilbara iron ore industry, did
not direct workers to strike, but 5,000 of their 12,000 WA members struck anyway,
presumably including Pilbara members.[74] The strike was in support of Victorian
Tramways Union secretary Clarrie O'Shea.[75] O'Shea was jailed for refusing to pay
his union's fine, administered under the anti-strike "penal powers,"[76] but freed after

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68.   Barr and Reid, "Gil Barr's Story, Part 2," 28.
69.   Frenkel, "Industrial Conflict, Workplace Characteristics and Accommodation Structure," 400;
       Lovett, "The Structure of Industrial Negotiations within the Pilbara Iron Ore Mining Industry," 74.
70.   Frenkel, "Industrial Conflict, Workplace Characteristics and Accommodation Structure," 400;
       Ellem, *The Pilbara*, 39–40.
71.   Lovett, "The Structure of Iron Ore Negotiations," 76.
72.   "Strike Hits WA but 40,000 Go to Work," *West Australian*, 23 May 1969, 1. The strike affected
       buses, trains, flights, industrial production, construction and retail trade. The *Sydney Morning
       Herald* states that 100,000 workers participated in the WA strike: "ACTU to Have New Talks with
       Ministers," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May 1969, 1. Sassine states 25,000, citing the Department of
       Labour and National Service as the source: Sassine, "A Study in the Authority of a Trade Union
       Centre," 207, 592. However, this seems like an understatement given that even 5,000 AWU workers
       struck and the conservative *West Australian* newspaper, with an editorial line against the strike,
       stated that 60,000 struck: "Strike Hits WA but 40,000 Go to Work," *West Australian*, 23 May 1969, 1.
73.   Sassine, "A Study in the Authority of a Trade Union Centre," 201–202.
74.   *Ibid.*, 206.
75.   "Strike Hits WA but 40,000 Go to Work," *West Australian*, 23 May 1969, 1.
76.   Legislation which imposed large fines on unions, and sometimes unionists, striking illegally: Ian
       Turner, *In Union is Strength: A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1788–1974* (West Melbourne:
       Thomas Nelson, 1976), 121–22.

a partial general strike called by left-wing Victorian unions, and involving unionists interstate.[77] The strikes, in which Pilbara miners participated, defeated the penal powers, and marked a turning-point in industrial relations across the country. The number of recorded strikes days shot up following the O'Shea victory, as did the confidence of unionists to take industrial action.[78]

A number of unions at Tom Price stopped work in June and July 1969 over the issues of dust, hot water, blankets and food, with the unionists winning on all issues apart from dust.[79] At Goldsworthy, unionists from all unions successfully struck in July 1969 over shop committee recognition.[80] Two months later, a five-day strike at the same company saw a sacked shop steward re-instated.[81] This strike took place against the advice of the union officials and in defiance of the Industrial Commission who had ruled to uphold the sacking.[82] Strikes also occurred at Mount Newman mining in the same year.[83]

In October 1969 there were strikes lasting 17 days, and involving all unionists at two Hamersley Iron sites.[84] Starting with one union, at one site, the dispute quickly spread to other unions and a second company site. The grievances included dust, refrigeration, food and heat money. The strike "was controlled/administered by newly established combined union committees at each of the two sites. Compulsory conferences held between union officials and the company in the Industrial Commission failed to resolve the strike. Further, union officials were given hostile treatment by mass meetings of the workers."[85] This was the last industrial dispute at Hamersley Iron where ships were loaded by staff members. After the dispute, air-conditioning started to be introduced into cabins of shovels and trucks.[86] A rank-and-file leadership was emerging, supported by workers, willing to take militant action to improve conditions, who were prepared to defy union officials, the company and the state.[87] Workers had calculated that the benefits of taking industrial action justified the risk, and strong *group cohesion* was maintained.

In late 1970, workers broke through and made significant gains in their wages and conditions. At Goldsworthy, mining workers won a flat $25 a week increase early in the year.[88] Grant remembers that work to rules caused a significant drop in production, which "forced the company to come to the negotiating table and we got a $25 a week production rise which was huge."[89] Grant had a very communicative leadership style, which is likely to have aided the processes of *interest definition* and *mobilisation*:

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77.   Tom Bramble, *Trade Unionism in Australia: A History from Flood to Ebb Tide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.
78.   *Ibid*. Darlington, drawing on Kelly, also discusses the importance of confidence and the subjective feeling of subjective power in a much more recent context in England. See Darlington, "Leadership and Union Militancy," 20.
79.   "Half Yearly Report, October 16, 1969," *Livewire* (November 1969): 9.
80.   *Ibid*.
81.   "Iron Ore Men End Two Strikes," *West Australian*, 27 September 1969, 2; *Livewire* (November 1969): 10.
82.   "Dust Row Halts Ore Output," *West Australian*, 26 September 1969, 2; "Iron Ore Men End Two Strikes."
83.   "Dust Row Halts Ore Output."
84.   "Hamersley Strike Halts Production," *West Australian*, 23 October 1969, 12.
85.   Lovett, "The Structure of Iron Ore Negotiations," 81.
86.   Trengrove, *Adventures in Iron*, 125.
87.   "Minutes of 6 November 1969 State Council Meeting," *Livewire* (November 1969): 25.
88.   Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (June 1970): 30.
89.   Grant, interview.

> I was driving a fuel tanker so I was driving all around the mine all the time refuelling all the drills; all the shovels; bulldozers … So I got to keep in touch with all the guys around there. So I would be kind of spreading the word amongst the guys all the time.[90]

Grant thus took advantage of opportunities stemming from his work role to mobilise workers for *collective action*, using one-on-one conversations to promote work *group cohesion*, in Kelly's terminology.

Workers at Hamersley Iron won an over-award payment in May.[91] The deal was a substantial increase, worth around $1,000–$1,100 for lower bracket workers and $550 for those in a higher bracket, and endorsed "by almost unanimous decision" by the workers at both sites.[92] Workers at Mount Newman Mining were in dispute with the company for about four months, during which time there were sporadic strikes lasting between one day and weeks.[93] Elliott remembers that "all of a sudden there were union meetings, there were union delegates talking with the management and it all came to a severe head … and the whole place went out on strike." According to Elliot, the atmosphere was "acrimonious," with staff crossing union picket lines to do workers' work. Key to the victory was the industrial pressure put on the company in the context of high demand for iron ore. Idle iron ore carriers were visible from the site of union-management negotiations.[94]

The 1970 Mount Newman strikes ended with a stunning victory. The workers obtained "more money for a 40-hour week than they were offered for a 60-hour week."[95] Over-award payments were won, which lifted semiskilled workers' wages closer to those of skilled workers. Under the agreement, by the middle of 1972 one would get $50 per week over award, the other $54. Workers also became eligible for a free airfare to Perth and back once a year for man, wife and kids after two years' service. *Power relations* were changing: on-again, off-again strikes over many months suggest a tug of war between the company and their workers, with Mount Newman Mining testing the workers' strength, determination and organisation, and trying to avoid meeting the unionists' demands.

Workers rioted in the mess over inadequate facilities at Paraburdoo in December 1971. The AEU alleged that their shop steward was victimised by the company and police.[96] Further strikes at Hamersley Iron in April 1972,[97] dashed company hopes that the February 1972 industrial agreement struck with union might eliminate strikes.[98]

This (incomplete) discussion of strikes and even riots in the period 1965–72 demonstrates that improved conditions were hard-fought; the mining companies didn't grant any concessions willingly. That companies reneged on agreements indicates that they were engaged in a show of strength with the unionists. Furthermore, gains won at one company did not automatically flow through to

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90.   *Ibid*.
91.   "Substantial Rises for Men at Hamersley," *West Australian*, 7 May 1970, 41.
92.   *Ibid*.; Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (June 1970): 30.
93.   Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (September 1970): 29.
94.   Elliot, interview.
95.   *Ibid*.
96.   Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (December 1971): 30.
97.   Alan Thornhill, "Overtime Dispute at Dampier," *West Australian*, 24 April 1972, 11.
98.   "Award Agreements Signed," *Hamersley News*, 1 March 1972, 2.

another mining company. For example, Hamersley Iron workers won an over award payment in May 1970 months before Mount Newman workers, who needed to continue to take strike action to win their own claim. While improved wages and conditions didn't automatically flow on, gains won in one company could set a benchmark, and show other workers what was possible with industrial action. This could assist leaders to frame grievances and contribute to a sense of injustice: why should we get less than workers at another company? Several breakthroughs were made in this period including the winning of over award payments, a reduction in hours, the provision of dust money, flights, substantial improvements in food and housing, and the limitation in the use of indentured labour from outside Australia.[99] Militant action was necessary to achieve these ends. Increasingly, strikes started without official sanction, and officials tried to get members back to work. This became typical for the Pilbara iron ore industry. Charlie Butcher, Port Hedland AWU organiser in 1976 said:

> [Y]ou'd sometimes wonder who we [union officials] work for, the workers or the companies. We spend our time going from one town to another putting people back to work … when we get a call that people are on strike, the companies put on a plane and we go out.[100]

Long-time AEU/AMWU organiser and later Assistant State Secretary Jack Marks (who played a role in unionising the industry as discussed above) was nicknamed "Back to Work Jack" by militant workers.[101] This dynamic had certainly been foreshadowed by the early 1970s, if not fully established.

The company town structure aided "the willingness to engage in some form of collective organization and activity,"[102] as workers living and working in close proximity had ample opportunity to discuss grievances, the likelihood of success through collective action, and to counter arguments emanating from management. Site mass meetings to decide on action leant themselves to consideration of *group interests*, and could give workers a sense of collective strength.[103] Leaders,

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99.   Gil Barr's evidence to the WA Industrial Commission provides a good overview of the gains that had been made by 1971. Iron ore production workers at Hamersley Iron would receive a minimum over award payment of $18 a week for the first six months, while their counterparts at Mt Newman enjoyed a $20/week guaranteed minimum, all based on a 40-hour week. Mt Newman workers who were married had accommodation in three or four bedroom houses, for a rent of $6 per week or $8 week per week respectively, a small portion of their wage, and received free water and transportation to work. See WA Industrial Commission Consignment no. 1735, Item no 78 of 1971 Australian Workers' Union and Others vs Goldsworthy Mining Ltd and Others: Application to amend Awards No 35 and 51 of 1968, p. 100, State Records Office, WA.

100. Bruce Juddery, "Problems in the Pilbara: Mt Newman Plagued by Indifferent Industrial Relations," *Canberra Times*, 30 April 1976, 2.

101. Graeme Haynes, "The Resistible Rise of the New Right: The 1986 Robe River Dispute" (paper presented at the For the Union Makes Us Strong Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 21 October 2014); Jolly Read, *Marksy: The Life of Jack Marks* (South Fremantle, WA: Read Media, 1998).

102. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 44.

103. From the point of view of mobilisation, this all compared favourably to the isolation enforced by the postal ballot required by contemporary Australian industrial relations legislation before strikes can take place, and the additional atomisation experienced by the fly-in-fly-out workers servicing the Pilbara's iron ore mines today. One does not have to accept wholesale Kerr and Siegel's "isolated mass hypothesis" to see that the process of involving workers in collective action is aided by the proximity of workers to one another, and their distance from a metropolitan location like Perth. See Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike: An International Comparison," in *Industrial Conflict*, ed. A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin, and A. M. Ross (New York McGraw-Hill, 1954). This has been criticised on both empirical and methodological

whether newly-minted shop stewards, union organisers or other activists, played an important mobilising role by framing grievances as unjust or illegitimate, and cohering workers.

Establishing Union Structures in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry

For unions to be players in the rapidly increasing iron ore industry, they needed to establish union structures in the Pilbara. In other parts of the state, industrial development preceded unionisation and the establishment of union structures; it also informed union strategy. The Kwinana industrial strip 50km south of Perth, which expanded significantly in the early 1960s, was an example.[104] Yet the Pilbara's remoteness – mining town Newman is 1,186km north of WA's capital, Perth – posed a significant challenge. It meant that on the one hand, unions needed to devote significant resources to the task; on the other it made it vital to have union representatives on the ground. A 1967 TLC document argued that some unions "could go broke if they were to visit North West projects as frequently as they would like to."[105] Servicing the Pilbara iron ore industry *per se* was costly. It also required sacrifices from organisers, some of whom camped in tents with their family while on organising drives.[106] But once members had been recruited and shop stewards' networks set up, it was also a new dues base for the unions. ETU organiser Errol Smith – recruited from the shop floor in Perth to a union organising position in 1966 – remembers bringing back more in dues than the cost of the trip: "you'd have money sticking out of your pockets everywhere."[107]

Trips north by Perth-based union officials played an important role in unionising the region, as did rank-and-file union activists. ETU officials made organising trips in the mid to late 1960s aiming to elect a shop steward on each worksite and establishing a union sub-branch, as well as discuss conditions. The first was a 1965 journey by organiser Owen Salmon to King Bay, Hamersley Iron's construction site for the port of Dampier.[108] McLaughlin contends that these growing shop stewards' networks played an important role in communicating with the distant union centre, and were key to the union's development in WA.[109] The ETU went from a fledgling organisation to a strong union in large part because of the Pilbara unionists. Similarly the AWU almost doubled its WA membership from 10,000 in 1963 to 19,000 in 1976, thanks largely to iron ore workers.[110]

Other unions organised the North in a similar fashion. In July 1967, Jack Marks (AEU), F. W. (Frank) Bastow (BBS) and J. Quinn (Carpenters and Joiners Society),

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grounds, for example in P. K. Edwards, "A Critique of the Kerr-Siegel Hypothesis of Strikes and the Isolated Mass: A Study in the Falsification of Sociological Knowledge," *The Sociological Review* 25, no. 3 (1977): 551–77.

104. McLaughlin, "A History of the Electrical Trades Union in Western Australia," 249.

105. Notes in Support of a Temporary Organiser for the North West, 24 July 1967, Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia, File 81 "North West," 1967, Box 11, Acc 3492A, SLWA.

106. Errol Smith, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 25 July 1988, transcript, 20, call no. OH2052, Battye Library, SLWA.

107. *Ibid*.

108. McLaughlin, "A History of the Electrical Trades Union in Western Australia," 271. Salmon, later an Industrial Commissioner, was the ETU's first full-time organiser for the whole state.

109. *Ibid*., 275.

110. Nick Dyrenfurth, *A Powerful Influence on Australian Affairs: A New History of the AWU* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2017), 177.

undertook a "North West Organising Trip" lasting several weeks.[111] Marks reported that they "set up new shop stewards wherever we found a group of workers, and when this group consists of more than one union representation shop committees were formed."[112] By June 1969, another AEU organiser, Colin Hollett, could report: "Our organisation in the iron ore industry is good. Numerous Shop Stewards and combined Union organisation on every site plus a high level of [militancy]."[113] In 1971, during another weeks-long organising trip, Marks set up AEU branches.[114] The Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Union sent organiser Dick Keegan to Mount Newman Mining Co's Mt Whaleback mine in 1968 to help resolve "industrial problems"; while there he set up a branch committee of the union.[115] Grant was present at the first AWU meeting at King Bay (later renamed Dampier), Hamersley Iron's port operation in 1968. Workers with union traditions from the Eastern States, got Grant to the meeting and later became shop stewards: "I didn't come from a union background at all, but as soon as you got on site and saw what was going on it's like … hang on things have got to be improved here." These activists made use of their experience to frame the conditions as being unjust and illegitimate: "the guys from Newcastle … all came from a union background … they were saying this wouldn't happen at Port Kembla [an industrial hub 8km south of Wollongong, NSW] and places like that."[116]

AWU officials Barr and (probably) State secretary Frank Mitchell addressed around 40 workers in the single men's quarters, and signed them up to the union.[117] Barr relates that Mt Newman was unionised in the late 1960s by jumping on an organising opportunity,[118] the sacking of three workers. After previously getting only 10 to 15 workers from a 400-strong workforce to a union meeting, he "fronted the company" and got the workers re-instated. "From then on, we started to get membership as the guys could see the benefit of it."[119]

The backgrounds of shop stewards varied. Grant later became a shop steward due to his social conscience and the state of the working conditions.[120] Like Grant, AWU shop steward at Hamersley Iron, Harry Hoskin, did not come from a union background. Hoskin and Grant came from New Zealand and Melbourne respectively; like most of the Pilbara workers they were not from Perth.[121] Oral accounts attest to other shop stewards heralding from union backgrounds at militant workplaces in the Eastern states, or from Britain.[122] Collectively workers recognised the need for a shop stewards' networks, but on an individual level "normally nobody else wants to be the shop steward."[123] Backgrounds and traditions were important, as was the union movement's forward surge nationally, and local conditions. Politically, shop

111.   Jack Marks, "Report on North West Organising Trip," *AEU Monthly Journal* (October 1967): 10.
112.   *Ibid.*, 13.
113.   Colin Hollett, "State Reports, WA, Division 13,"*AEU Monthly Journal* (June 1969): 32.
114.   Jim Mutton, "State Report, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (January 1971): 28.
115.   Dick Keegan, interviewed by Stuart Reid, 1 February 1991, transcript, tape 1, 2–3, call no. OH2699/24, Battye Library, SLWA.
116.   Grant, interview.
117.   *Ibid.*
118.   Barr and Reid, "Gil Barr's Story, Part 2," 25.
119.   *Ibid.*, 25–26.
120.   Grant, interview.
121.   Trengrove, *Adventures in Iron*, 124.
122.   Grant, interview; Peter Hollow, interview with author, 13 July 2017.
123.   Grant, interview.

stewards were typically not members of political parties, but would vote Labor, and identify as left-wing.[124]

With respect to union organisers, at least one, Marks, was from a communist background, and from the shop floor.[125] More often they were ALP members such as Smith (ETU),[126] and the AWU's Barr.[127] Political alignments in the union movement made a difference to support for strikes like the Clarrie O'Shea strike, which, as noted above, was spearheaded both nationally and in WA by left-wing unions. However, in terms of organising the Pilbara these political alignments held less significance. All union organisers wanted to unionise the region, all put in the "hard yards," and were prepared to sanction some level of industrial militancy. Barr considered himself a militant in the early days, despite working for a right-wing, anti-communist union.[128] He worked with communist union officials, and was viewed suspiciously by union higher-ups. His position in the union hierarchy – closer physically and organisationally to workers than State officials – meant he was more attuned to the needs of, and susceptible to pressure from, the rank-and-file.[129] Rank-and-file BBS activists John Beales and Gordon Grenfell established the union branch at Goldsworthy's Finucane Island port in the late 1960s. Beales recalls being elected spokesperson after being very outspoken at a workers' meeting about an unfair dismissal, while Grenfell was a former BBS branch President elsewhere.[130] It is possible that other union branches were established by rank-and-filers. Certainly, it was shop stewards themselves who ensured ongoing union organisation and strength, given the lack of Pilbara-based union officials and their infrequent trips north. Jack Thorpe, an ETU shop steward at Hamersley Iron in the early 1970s doesn't remember a single visit from union officials in 18 months.[131] So the duties of collecting dues, inducting new workers into the union and convening meetings was done by shop stewards.

Committees consisting of shop stewards representing each of the different unions on a site, were first established in 1967,[132] with similar structures being set up at various companies and worksites in the next few years.[133] These structures have been called, variously, shop committees, combined union committees, joint unions committees or combine committees.[134] In 1969, a strike at Goldsworthy mining forced management

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124. Grant, interview; Hoskin, interview; Hollow, interview.
125. Note that a long-time Communist Party of Australia leader in WA has stated that Marks ceased effective membership of the Party in 1967, the same year he became a union organiser, despite formally resigning from membership many years later: Geoff Davis, *Causes* (Mount Lawley, WA: self-published, 2013), 226–27.
126. McLaughlin, "A History of the Electrical Trades Union in Western Australia"; Oliver, *Unity is Strength*, 378.
127. Barr and Reid, "Gil Barr's Story, Part 2," 30.
128. *Ibid*., 22.
129. For an English example of the phenomenon of union organisers being more likely to sanction militancy, see Ralph Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: Shop Stewards' Organization in Three Merseyside Plants* (New York and London: Mansell, 1994), 288.
130. John Beales, interview transcript, 8–9.
131. Jack Thorpe, interview with author, 21 May 2018.
132. Jack Marks, "Report on North West Organising Trip," *AEU Monthly Journal* (October 1967): 13. This is slightly earlier than previous accounts suggest. Dufty dates the inaugural CUCs as 1969: Dufty, "Remoteness and Industrial Relations in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry," 9–10.
133. Jack Marks, "State Reports, WA, Division 14," *AEU Monthly Journal* (September 1968): 31.
134. For a history of "shop committees" in Australia from World War I to the 1950s, see Malcolm Rimmer and Paul Sutcliffe, "The Origins of Australian Workshop Organisation, 1918 to 1950," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 23 (1981): 216–39.

to recognise a "Joint Unions Committee,"[135] while in 1971, the AEU reported that, "We also have Combine Committees in some of the sites; we are also at present working on those other sites."[136] The presence of numerous unions on site made it possible for management to play them off against one another. The formation of combined union committees undercut this, instead engendering solidarity between the different unions. Barr attests to the importance of the combined union committees both for the union, and the workers: "In the early days you'd only have union officials come up there when there were disputes on. Now and then they'd do a run through of the place. They couldn't pay attention to it, that's why we needed combined union committees." He further states, "It was great to see, the blokes never ever succeeded in getting on top of the companies until we set up those committees."[137] These grassroots bodies would later go on to organise strikes in the region involving all or many of the unions, lasting weeks and costing the mining companies millions of dollars in lost production. Unions would thus have branches (occasionally called sub-branches) consisting of members of only one union, as well as multi-union committees going by different names, with shop stewards or activists from many unions joining forces. Both of these types of structures were important. The multi-union committees assisted with social identification between the entire workforce, rather than group identity being restricted to individual unions. While the purpose of setting up these structures was to ensure adequate union organisation in the Pilbara iron ore industry, in time they posed a challenge to the negotiating role of the union bureaucracy when grassroots unionists negotiated directly with management themselves.[138]

Consolidating Union Preference Arrangements

Universal union membership of the iron ore workforce was one of the factors giving unionists their strength. Union officials and members fought hard to achieve this. It was part of ensuring viable, powerful organisations that union officials could lead. The issue of union preference among Pilbara mineworkers has not been adequately examined previously. For instance, Ellem writes simply that:

> As was standard in Western Australia's unionised sectors, there was a clause providing for "preference for unionists." On taking a job, non-unionists had to apply for membership of the union with the right to cover their work and had to remain a union member while employed. This was, in effect, compulsory unionism.[139]

The union preference clause in the 1967 and 1969 Iron Ore Awards[140] may have assisted the unionists' cause, but alone was not sufficient to guarantee universal unionism.[141] In the Pilbara iron ore mines, too, 100 per cent union membership

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135. Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (September 1969): 31.
136. Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (January 1971): 28.
137. Barr and Reid, "Gil Barr's Story, Part 2," 23.
138. For example, the Hamersley Iron strike in 1979 was initially run by a 25-person coordinating committee consisting entirely of workers. It was many weeks into the strike before union officials played a role. See, for example, Sassine, "A Study of the Authority of a Trade Union Centre," 408.
139. Ellem, *The Pilbara*, 38.
140. Ellem, "Robe River Revisited," 112.
141. This should not be surprising. Patmore and Cooper have shown that throughout Australian labour history, preference clauses were not always respected by management and where they were, "did not ensure organising success": Greg Patmore and Rae Cooper, "Trade Union Organising and Labour History," *Labour History*, no. 83 (November 2002): 14.

was something that had to be won, enforced and even re-won from the ground up, including by withdrawing, or threatening to withdraw, labour. Some companies and contractors actively resisted unionisation.

There were disputes in 1967, 1968, and 1971 at various sites of Goldsworthy and Hamersley Iron over union membership, often linked to other grievances such as dust money. In late 1971, the union launched a recruitment drive within Transfields in Port Hedland, a contractor of Mt Newman mining. All non-unionists joined and shop stewards were elected. According to AEU WA secretary Jim Mutton: "The shop steward did a good job in convincing the non-English speaking workers of the advantages in being organised and united."[142] The "leadership role" involved "persuasion" around the "costs and benefits" of mobilisation.[143] At Goldsworthy's port on Finucane Island in 1971 there was "a collective decision taken that no individual would be available for overtime on Sunday 29 August." The grassroots unionists forced the sacking of two non-unionists who "wilfully disregarded the meeting's decision" and went to work. Mutton said, "This dispute created tremendous unity on the job."[144] That is, it strengthened group identity and social identification with the union.[145]

The level of trade union membership is an *opportunity structure*. "[D]ensity *per se* tells you very little about the willingness of workers to act collectively."[146] However, universal unionism, combined with strong union organisation, such as networks of shop stewards and combined union committees, and a propensity to take industrial action, was a factor weighing on the side of the unionists. Darlington points to the "complex dialectical interplay between structure and agency": opportunity structures can assist in the persuasiveness of activists' arguments.[147] Having been won through struggle, universal union membership became an "objective conditioning factor" for activists – the subjective factor – to utilise.

Conclusion

By 1972, conditions markedly, and in some ways quite quickly, had improved as a result of union industrial action. The role of workers' agency, organised through trade unions, needs to be stressed in explaining this. Power dynamics had also changed by 1972. This is not to say the Pilbara iron ore industry in the 1970s was a workers' paradise. Miners worked hard in tough jobs in a remote location. Even in 1971, there was no air-conditioning in Goldsworthy Mining Co's trucks.[148] In addition, there were still examples in the 1970s of workers being mistreated, and bullied by bosses. For example, Thompson recalled his first day in the Pilbara in 1978, when a foreman threw biscuits on the floor during smoko and the workers picked

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142. Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (December 1971): 29.
143. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 33, 35.
144. Jim Mutton, "State Reports, Western Australia," *AEU Monthly Journal* (November 1971): 31.
145. While beyond the scope of this article, in the early years at Robe River, unionisation was driven by union members on site. ETU shop steward Graeme Haynes remembers that when he started work with the company in 1975, three years after it started exporting iron ore, "the site still wasn't heavily unionised," but universal unionism was achieved by walking off the job whenever a non-unionist came on site: Haynes, interview.
146. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 37, 100.
147. Darlington, "The Leadership Component of Kelly's Mobilisation Theory," 620.
148. WA Industrial Commission Consignment no. 1735, Item no 78 of 1971 Australian Workers' Union and Others vs Goldsworthy Mining Ltd and Others: Application to amend Awards No 35 and 51 of 1968, p. 87, State Records Office, WA.

them up.[149] Situations varied from company to company, and site to site. At Robe River, which started exporting iron ore in 1972, workers had to start from scratch.[150] Nonetheless, big changes took place from 1965–72 as a militant, grassroots-led form of trade unionism was established in the region.

Contrary to accounts of the Pilbara iron ore industry that tend to imply that it was easy for workers and their unions to improve conditions because of objective factors such as a tight labour market, and insatiable market demand for iron ore, these examples from the late 1960s and the early 1970s illustrate that the companies gave nothing away willingly. The militancy of the 1970s can be better understood in light of this. Of course, objective factors did work in the unionists' favour, but without strong organisation and industrial action would likely have counted for nothing. As the above account of the path to union strength has shown, the iron ore companies improved pay and conditions for workers only with extreme reluctance, and engaged unions in (sometimes protracted) showdowns if they thought they had a chance of maintaining the *status quo*. Further, gains in one company didn't automatically flow over to another; in each worksite, they had to be fought for.

Throughout these years, the organisation, confidence and power of the working class in the iron ore industry developed. Leaders emerged, willing and able to frame issues, make mobilising arguments, and organise successful strikes. The collective strength of the workers was tested as managements would hold out, sometimes for weeks or even months. A pattern emerged where gains would be won through struggle, encouraging workers to push for more, and solidifying existing levels of solidarity, confidence and organisation. This story may also offer insights for union renewal generally, as militant action, and a propensity to expend significant union resources, brought gains not only in membership, but importantly in union vitality, strength and vast improvements in workers' wages and conditions.

By 1972, a large part of the infrastructure of a grassroots model of unionism in the Pilbara iron ore industry was in place. This consisted of shop stewards and combined union committees, which, perhaps ironically, had been set up in many instances by union officials themselves. To this infrastructure would be added throughout the 1970s the notorious "union convenor" positions, rank and file unionists fewer in number than shop stewards, paid by the company but working on site on union affairs, sometimes effectively full time.[151] They would provide a rival pole of leadership to the official union apparatuses.

While drawing heavily on mobilisation theory, this article has also been cognisant of the Marxist theory of the trade union bureaucracy.[152] Kelly's analytical framework

149.   Herb Thompson, interview with author, 28 March 2017.
150.   Haynes, interview.
151.   Dufty, *Industrial Relations in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry*, 97.
152.   Ralph Darlington and Martin Upchurch, "A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File Versus Bureaucracy Debate," *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 77–95; Tom Bramble, "Labour Movement Leadership," in *Class and Struggle in Australia*, ed. Rick Kuhn (Sydney: Pearson Education Australia, 2005), 73–89; Ralph Darlington, "Strike Waves, Union Growth and the Rank-and-File/Bureaucracy Interplay: Britain 1889–1890, 1910–1913 and 1919–1920," *Labor History* 55, no. 1 (2014): 1–20. The contradictory role of full time union officials in both encouraging activism but also imposing constraints on it has been the subject of some debate. See, for instance, Sheila Cohen, "Revisiting Hyman: Direct Democracy, Shop Steward Organisation and Labour Process Conflict at Ford's Dagenham Plant," *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 10, no. 1 (2016): 80–95; Richard Hyman, "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory," *Capital and Class* 8 (1979): 54–67; Julie Kimber, "'A Case of Mild Anarchy'? Job Committees in the Broken Hill Mines, c1930 to c1954," *Labour History,* no. 80 (May 2001): 41–64; John McIlroy, "Marxism and the Trade

is extremely useful in examining this period of union militancy and growth in an emerging mining region, however, it does have weaknesses. It does not distinguish between rank-and-file leadership, and leadership shown by union officials, as Darlington has recently argued.[153] Further, the *type* of union leadership matters, as leaders can demobilise as well as mobilise, for instance, by making political arguments attributing employer actions to the state of the world market rather than employer greed.[154] The theory neglects this almost entirely. In this early period of Pilbara iron ore labour history, union officials and rank-and-file leaders played mobilising roles in fighting for union recognition. However, the role played by union officials was a contradictory one, as they also directed workers to stop striking on numerous occasions. The tensions between union officials and rank-and-file unionists only intensified in later decades as grassroots union representatives increased their own authority and influence *vis-à-vis* metropolitan-based officials. The theory of the trade union bureaucracy would suggest that trade officialdom – due to its structural location in capitalist society as negotiators between capital and labour[155] – is more inclined to towards demobilising workers (in order to maintain a stable bargaining relationship) than grassroots union militants in a period of union strength. Valuable further research could be done on the period of "union power" in the Pilbara iron ore industry from this starting-point.

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Unions: The Bureaucracy Versus the Rank and File Debate Revisited," *Critique* 42, no. 4 (2014): 497–526.

153. Darlington, "The Leadership Component of Kelly's Mobilisation Theory," 627–29.
154. Kelly's discussion of attribution does not examine leaders consciously attributing grievances to external causes, which can demobilise, rather than mobilise. That is, he assumes that leaders will attribute grievances to the employer and play a mobilising role. See Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 29–31, 45–48.
155. Darlington and Upchurch, "A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File Versus Bureaucracy Debate," 3; Darlington, "Strike Waves, Union Growth and the Rank-and-File/Bureaucracy Interplay," 11.