

## Labour Commodification and Classification: An Illustrative Case Study of the New South Wales Boilermaking Trades, 1860–1920

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**SUMMARY:** Labour commodification is a core process in building capitalist society. Nonetheless, it is given remarkably little attention in labour and social historiography, because assumptions about the process have obscured its historical character. Abandoning these assumptions, a close study of labour commodification in the boilermaking trades of late colonial New South Wales (Australia) illustrates the historical character of the process. In these trades, labour commodification was deeply contested at the most intimate level of class relations between workers and employers. This contest principally took the form of a struggle over the scheme of occupational classification used as the basis of pay rates. It was a highly protracted struggle, because workers developed strategies that kept the employers' efforts at bay for four decades. Employer efforts to intensify the commodity character of boilermakers' labour were largely ineffective, until they were given great assistance in the early twentieth century by the state arbitration system.

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The centrality of labour commodification to working-class formation is widely acknowledged in much of the social theory that informs labour, social, and working-class historiography.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, it is curious that labour historians have given remarkably little detailed attention to the process. This is graphically illustrated by the absence of the term in any of the contributions to Van der Linden and Rojahn's 1990 edited collection of twenty-eight national case studies on the *Formation of Labour Movements*.<sup>2</sup> Neither does the term appear actively in the national studies of *Working Class Formation* edited by Katznelson and Zolberg (1986), nor in more recent works such as Tilly and Tilly's comprehensive 1998 analysis of *Work Under Capitalism*.<sup>3</sup> These examples could easily be expanded

1. See Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), "Introduction", *Peripheral Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization, International Review of Social History*, Supplement 4 (Cambridge [etc.], 1996), pp. 1–7, 3.

2. Marcel van der Linden and Jurgen Rojahn (eds), *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870–1914: An International Perspective*, 2 vols (Leiden, 1990).

3. Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (eds), *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, NJ, 1986). Katznelson makes the

many times over, to show that the term “labour commodification” is generally absent in approaches to the history of labour across many national and historical contexts.<sup>4</sup>

The historiographical absence of the term does not by any means imply that historians have completely overlooked labour commodification. After all, labour commodification is the heart of the analytical article of faith shared by Marxist and non-Marxists alike, that a working class is defined by its reliance on the sale of the commodity labour power. Because of this centrality, labour commodification is often implicit in key terms used by historians. For example, some notion of labour being a commodity is a necessary background assumption before one can sensibly use the terms “labour market” or “wage labour”. Some historians, influenced by canonical texts of international labour historiography such as Hobsbawm’s 1963 essay “Custom, Wages and Work-load in Nineteenth-Century Industry”, mobilize the idea of labour commodification more explicitly.<sup>5</sup> Wilentz, for example, referred to how “masters and contractors” in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century United States, “transformed craft wage labour into a commodity”, and Bridges used the concept “labour as a commodity” to summarize the transformations she described.<sup>6</sup> However, even in these examples, as with the literature more generally, the analysis of labour commodification remains underdeveloped and marginal.

The main purpose of this article is to reverse this treatment, by placing labour commodification in the analytical foreground. A critical examination of working-class and labour historiography suggests some of the reasons why labour commodification has remained relatively underdeveloped. Drawing on this, the elements of an alternative approach are outlined, in which the static notion of labour commodification as an “event” is replaced with a more dynamic one that sees labour commodification as subject to varying degrees of intensity. How this approach

sole use of the term in this volume, in his Introduction, “Working Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons”, pp. 3–44, 14; Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 1998).

4. For example, Neville Kirk, *Comrades and Cousins: Globalization, Workers and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (London, 2003); Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History* (Melbourne, 1991); Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1992); Hagen Koo, *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

5. Eric Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages and Workload in Nineteenth-Century Industry”, in *idem*, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), pp. 344–370.

6. Sean Wilentz, “The Rise of the American Working Class, 1776–1877: A Survey”, in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (eds), *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problem of Synthesis* (DeKalb, IL, 1989), pp. 83–151, 87; Amy Bridges, “Becoming American: The Working Classes in the United States before the Civil War”, in Katznelson and Aristide, *Working Class Formation*, pp. 157–196, 175–79.

enables a more historical treatment of labour commodification is illustrated through a case study of boilermaking labour in New South Wales (NSW) between 1860 and 1920.

This history shows that the struggle over labour commodification in the boilermaking industry revolved around the issue of control over the scheme by which boilermaking labour was classified. While at first the struggle was undertaken almost reflexively, as time went on workers and employers became increasingly aware of the intimacy of its connection to the commodification of labour. The nexus between labour commodification and occupational classification became the crucial dynamic around which the struggle to control the extent of labour commodification was waged.

As Amin and Van der Linden observe, “the category pure ‘free wage labour’ [...] is an ideal type, the conceptual nucleus of far more complicated historical realities”.<sup>7</sup> Although the case study presented here is necessarily limited in scope, it nonetheless illustrates some of the ways that labour commodification relates to the complex realities that Amin and Van der Linden refer to. In particular, the study shows that labour commodification was an historically real process that was actively organized, pursued, and contested even “after” the transition to wage labour.

#### LABOUR COMMODIFICATION AND LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY

A number of factors have contributed to the general historiographical neglect of labour commodification. As McNally writes, “So imbued is modern society with the commodification of labour, so normalized even ‘naturalized’ has it become, that few bother to question it.” And, despite somewhat overstating the case, Biernacki is right to point out that this naturalization of the commodity-form of labour means its “original strangeness now eludes us”. This context makes it easier to see why the sustained historical examination of labour commodification has been slow to develop.<sup>8</sup> It is as though labour commodification is so fundamental that it has been unconsciously passed over as the necessary but unproblematic background condition on which labour’s history has been constructed. This taken-for-granted status has meant that labour commodification has

7. Amin and van der Linden, “*Peripheral*” Labour?, p. 3.

8. David McNally, “The Commodity Status of Labour”, in Gordon Laxer and Dennis Soron (eds), *Not for Sale: De-commodifying Public Life* (Peterborough, 2006), pp. 39–54, 43; Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labour: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), p. 1. It is rather an overstatement because it ignores the efforts to contest the naturalization of the commodity form of labour, such as the 1953 statement by the ILO that “labour is not a commodity” (1953 Report, ILO).

been treated as a conceptual or theoretical underpinning intrinsic to the definition of “working class”, something that occurred in the dim distant past, or even more remotely, in the paragraphs of social theory.

Other assumptions have contributed to consigning labour commodification to the historical background as marginal, passive, and inert. The most important of these is the assumption that labour commodification begins and ends with the processes that separate direct producers from ownership of the means of production and alienate them from the products of their labour. Typically, this occurs when independent producers – either peasants or artisans – are expropriated and turned into wage labourers. The resulting workers are forced to sell their abilities for wages: their labour has thus become a commodity, and a working class has come into existence.

While this familiar description describes a crucial point in the history of labour commodification, it portrays labour commodification as an “event” at the “moment” of transition to capitalism. It assumes that the most significant and problematic phase of labour commodification lies in the transformation of independent producers into wage-workers: once this has been achieved, and commodified labour is established as the economic and social norm, the crucial threshold has been crossed, and the historical importance of the process ends. This view has kept labour commodification anchored at the threshold, and has made it more difficult for historians to incorporate the process into the subsequent history of wage-workers.

There are many examples within international historiography of this logic in operation. Because of the exemplary systematic character of the analysis employed, it can be seen clearly in Reich’s 1989 periodization of the “Three Stages in US Labor History”. In this schema, the first stage is characterized by “initial proletarianization”, which saw in the six decades from 1820 “the emergence of wage labour as the dominant form of employment”. This was followed by a period of “homogenization” (c.1890 and c.1940), in which workplace reorganization and mechanization meant that “the working conditions faced by the vast majority of workers became much more similar”. Stage 3 (1945–1975) was characterized by “segmentation”, with massive expansion of “the secondary labor market [...] divergent labor processes, pay rates, and skill levels among the three labor submarkets”.<sup>9</sup> While this sketch omits much of interest in Reich’s rich and detailed argument, it nonetheless illustrates how the “threshold” view of labour commodification anchors discussions of labour commodification to those very specific times and places in which “transition” has occurred, in this case stage 1. The subsequent stages involve alterations in the material and political context in which wage labour is set, with little focus on the

9. Michael Reich, “Capitalist Development, Class Relations, and Labor History”, in Moody, *Perspectives on American Labor History*, pp. 30–54, 37–41.

subsequent labour commodifications that the “initial proletarianization” of the first stage has led us to expect.

The vast majority of working-class and labour history operates on the basis of this “threshold” view, anchoring labour commodification to the very specific times and places at the shear-points between non-capitalist and capitalist societies. Although much in this vast body of literature is germane to the history of labour commodification, its utility is limited by the fact that it is filtered through other categories and the processes on which they focus. This happens when, as is typically the case, labour commodification is treated implicitly as a by-product of “deskilling”, “specialization”, “division of labour”, “mechanization”, “proletarianization”, or “industrialization”. As crucial as these processes are to understanding the history of labour, this approach assumes that labour commodification is simply an ancillary or automatic accompaniment to them. This article abandons that assumption, and argues that – like those processes themselves – labour commodification has its own features, techniques, language and rhythm.

In summary, the general historiographical absence of the term “labour commodification” has discouraged historical engagement with the specific processes named by the term. Because of this, it has been difficult to isolate the historical dimensions of labour commodification, and this in turn has made it difficult to identify its relationship to other key factors in the history of labour. In addition, the ingrained habit of thinking about labour commodification as a by-product of other processes has rendered the process almost invisible, “flattened” its historical dimensions and drastically simplified complexity.

#### HISTORY OF LABOUR COMMODIFICATION IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Nineteenth-century depictions of labour did not generally display the “flattened” or “bleached” approach to commodity relations that characterizes many twentieth-century accounts.<sup>10</sup> Because they were invariably written by people living on the frontier of commodification, nineteenth-century accounts often display an acute sensitivity to the controversial impacts of the process itself. Thus, in the nineteenth century one did not need to be a Marx[ist] to agree with the idea that labour commodification was contested, and that this made it a continuous historical process, rather than a one-off and limited “event” whose completion was marked by the appearance of wages and a labour market. The widespread nature of this recognition can be seen in its influence even

10. An observation derived from James G. Carrier, “Introduction” in *idem* (ed.), *Meanings of the Market: The Free Market in Western Culture* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 1–67, 6.

within bourgeois political economy, such as in the comments of a conservative Australian journalist-politician Andrew Garran, who remarked in 1891 that labour was “A very remarkable commodity”, because

It is a live commodity, capable of social and political action, [...] a commodity that can think, [...] talk, [...] read [...] attend meetings, [...] be fired with class-enthusiasm, [...] can link itself hand-in-hand with other like commodities, [...] can form trades unions, that can strike, [...] raise barricades, [...] can vote, get into Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

Garran was an acute observer of the labour and class tensions that were emerging in late nineteenth-century Australia. His comments capture what worker resistance and employer actions demonstrated – that the appearance on the historical stage of this “live commodity” the wage-worker, wage labour, and the labour market were only the technical, formal conditions under which labour commodification announced its existence. Rather than marking the end of the process of labour commodification, they ushered in an extended process of struggle between workers and bosses over the real scope and intensity of commodified labour.

While Garran’s comments had general applicability across the nineteenth-century capitalist world, they also contributed to the late nineteenth-century colonial debate about the nature of labour as a commodity.<sup>12</sup> On one side of the debate were those who held views such as Garran’s, often rendered in a more straightforward manner such as in the comment of the employer E.D.S. Ogilvie in 1879 that “The price of labour must rise and fall like the price of any other commodity”. At the other extreme were views such as that of the stonemason, William Roylance, that “Demand and supply does not effect the rate of wages as it does commercial commodities”, or the colonial politician who asserted in 1891 that the idea of labour as a commodity was “an entirely wrong concept”.<sup>13</sup>

As theoretical as it often tended to become, this social discussion over labour commodification reflected the fact that, while the majority of the workforce in the later decades of the nineteenth century were classified as

11. Andrew Garran, “Trade Unions: A Criticism”, *The Australian Economist*, 24 August 1891, II, No. 17, p. 145.

12. Some sense of the geographic range of this contestation can be gained in Biernacki, *Fabrication of Labour*, ch. 6; Jurgen Kocka, “Problems of Working Class Formation in Germany: The Early Years, 1800–1875”, in Katznelson and Aristide, *Working Class Formation*, pp. 279–351; Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000), ch. 2.

13. The quotes from Ogilvie and Roylance can be found in “Select Committee on Assisted Immigration”, *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers*, 1879/80, V, qq. 1678–1679, q. 395 respectively. The comment of politician Samuel Griffith can be found in *Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes* (Sydney 1891), q. 7200.

“wage-earners” (and their “dependents”), this term included a multitude of labour conditions and their equally varied relationships to commodified labour. At the start of the period of this study, many skilled urban workers gained their living by combining self-employment with wage-work. This was especially true in the metal trades, where engineers and blacksmiths were intermittently employed on railways and in shipyards, resorting to manufacturing metal goods on their own account when wage-work ran out – or indeed vice versa. This kind of alternation between waged and independent work was also prevalent amongst highly skilled building craftsmen, such as carpenters and joiners, as well as other skilled workers. While by the 1890s this practice was generally much diminished, and wage-work had become more permanent, it was still possible in the 1880s and 1890s for a Sydney wheelwright to eke out a precarious living, alternating wage-work with making carts and furniture on his own account.<sup>14</sup>

Alluvial or “surface” gold miners were a distinctive group of workers who occupied an equally ambivalent position in relation to the commodity-form of labour and wage-work. During the 1850s tens of thousands of British, European, and Chinese people journeyed to Australia, many of the British and Europeans spurred on by the independence from wage-labour that the hope of a lucky strike on the goldfields held out. Whilst these hopes were usually unfulfilled, after the peak of the gold rush had passed in the late 1850s many thousands stayed in Australia. Through the later decades of the nineteenth century a significant number of independent alluvial gold miners journeyed from goldfield to goldfield, and formed a semi-nomadic class on the periphery of the wage-earning world.<sup>15</sup> Many others sought similar independence from wage-work by taking advantage of reforms in the land laws in the 1860s, and established small family farms.

These were usually marginal affairs, hovering between subsistence agriculture of a sort, selling a minimal surplus on local markets and making up the shortfall by engaging in temporary wage labour, often as seasonal shearers. The males of the farm might be classified as “wage-workers” by the late nineteenth-century statisticians (whose work subsequent generations of labour and social historians rely on), but only by erasing the large amounts of totally uncommodified labour of women and children that underpinned the male “wage earner”.<sup>16</sup> Neither was the uncommodified non-wage-work of women and children confined to the rural areas – many

14. See Ken Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia 1852–1920* (Canberra, 1970), ch. 1; Graeme Davison and Shirley Constantine (eds), *Out of Work Again: The Autobiographical Narrative of Thomas Dobeson 1885–1891*, Monash Publications in History, No. 6 (Monash University, Clayton, VIC, 1990).

15. Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851–1861* (Melbourne, 1977); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining*, 3rd edn (Melbourne, 1978).

16. Accounts of the socio-economic conditions of the small farmers (known as “selectors”) can

an early twentieth-century Sydney waterfront family depended on a variety of uncommodified activities of women and children.<sup>17</sup>

If wage-work was far from universal, it followed that neither was the money form of the wage. The payment of wages in money as a universal medium of exchange was important, both as a precondition for more intensively commodifying labour and the establishment of a labour market. While there were many occupations in which pure wage payment was the norm, it was nevertheless the case that in the 1860s some urban employers continued an older practice of paying workers in goods as well as money.<sup>18</sup> While this practice disappeared from urban areas in the 1870s, it persisted for the thousands of workers who worked as pastoral labourers in the sheep and cattle-raising industries, and whose remuneration was a composite – of food and accommodation, alcohol and tobacco, and a money amount that was often still paid annually into the 1860s and 1870s, and even the 1880s in some cases.<sup>19</sup>

This was for white, male workers – for Aboriginal workers in the late nineteenth century pastoral industry, money wages – where they existed – were often paid into police bank accounts for “safe keeping”, after amounts for alcohol, opium, tobacco, food, and accommodation was subtracted. Often, the latter were provided directly by indigenous workers, utilizing traditional economic practices, and thus constituting a massive subvention to the pastoral employers, especially in the northern Australian cattle industry, where indigenous stockmen provided the bulk of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century workforce.<sup>20</sup> These conditions existed alongside those of indentured Melanesian labour, which formed the workforce of the colonial sugar plantations from the 1870s,

be found in Duncan Waterson, *Squatter, Selector and Storekeeper: A History of the Darling Downs 1859–93* (Sydney, 1968); John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak 1878–80: The Geographical Dimensions of Social Banditry* (Carlton, VIC, 1987); Bill Gammage, *Narrandera Shire* (Narrandera, NSW, 1986); Graeme Buxton, *The Riverina 1861–1891* (Melbourne, 1967); Michael Cannon, *The Roaring Days* (Mornington, 1998). See the account of women’s and children’s roles in family farm work in Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia* (Melbourne, 1977), and their erasure by statisticians in Katrina Alford, *Production or Reproduction: An Economic History of Women in Australia 1788–1850* (Melbourne, 1984), and Desley Deacon, “Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11 (1985), pp. 27–45.

17. Margo Beasley, “Sara Dawes and the Waterfront Domestic Economy”, (Ph.D., Department of History, University of Wollongong, 2003); Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, chs 3 and 4.

18. John Child, *Unionism and the Labour Movement* (Melbourne, 1971), p. 38.

19. John Merritt, *The Making of the AWU* (Melbourne, 1986); Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labour Movement* (Melbourne, 1944).

20. Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney, 1987); Dawn May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to the Present* (Melbourne, 1994).

often growing their own food and receiving wages intermittently or on completion of their several year period of service.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the Australian “labour market” was a complex mix of “intermediate”, “semi-proletarian”, and wage-workers.<sup>22</sup> This variegated pattern was spawned by the energetic growth of the colonial economy, which expanded at an annual rate of around 4 per cent between 1860 and 1890, leading historians to characterize this period as “The Long Boom”. While the pastoral industry continued to be the dominant economic activity during the Long Boom, there was considerable economic diversification into urban manufacturing, building, and transport sectors. In the process an array of production forms and employment relations proliferated: sectors like clothing and footwear industries retained many of the features of pre-industrial production, such as putting-out. At the same time, in sectors such as the metal trades, older workshop and artisanal relations gave way to more recognizably industrial conditions.<sup>23</sup>

The small-scale but expanding nature of economic activity and the opening-up of small-scale, state-assisted farming, meant that colonial society to 1890 was characterized by considerable social mobility out of the working class. While in the fine grain the Long Boom was punctuated by periods of economic downturn, none compared to the depression that hit the colony in 1890–1894. The 1890s depression brought economic growth to an abrupt halt, closed off the avenues for social mobility, and the flexibilities of the earlier colonial order were reduced as the class-structure solidified. Increasingly, being born working-class was a permanent life-long condition.<sup>24</sup>

As a key industrial skill, the evolution of boilermaking labour in colonial New South Wales (NSW) was closely related to these general economic and industrial conditions. Boilermaking in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century NSW was clustered around the ship-repair, engineering, and railway industries that serviced the transport needs of the NSW

21. See Charlie Fox, *Working Australia* (Sydney, 1991) ch. 6.

22. This typology is developed in Amin and van der Linden, “Peripheral Labour”?, pp. 3–5.

23. For the general economic conditions see Noel G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861–1900* (Canberra, 1976); Edward Shann, *An Economic History of Australia* (Melbourne, 1948); A.G.L. Shaw, *The Economic Development of Australia*, 7th edn (Melbourne, 1980). For general views of the labour conditions see Fox, *Working Australia*, chs 3–6; Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880–1939* (Melbourne, 1993); Ray Markey, “The Labour Aristocracy and Productive Re-organization in NSW, c.1880–1900”, *Australian Economic History Review*, 28 (1988), pp. 43–59, and *idem*, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880–1900* (Kensington, NSW 1988).

24. The preceding period of flexibility, and the solidification of the capitalist class structure from 1890, is covered by a host of historians including Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia*, IV, 1901–1942: *The Succeeding Age* (Melbourne, 1986), pp. 45, 303, and *idem*, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Melbourne, 1991), p. 186. Macintyre is the most recent exponent of the “hardening” image. For an earlier example see Fitzpatrick, *Short History of the Australian Labour Movement*, p. 14.

colonial economy. In the period of this study, the specifically boilermaking workforce numbered around 1,000 “skilled” and “unskilled” workers. In the 1870s, handwork and craft skills were at a premium. Specific ideas about the hierarchy of skill within boilermaking were implanted in colonial NSW by early immigrant boilermakers, such as those who were brought from Britain to build breweries in 1855. They expressed, in classic British artisanal style, that a competent, well-trained boilermaker had the “all-round” boilermaking abilities that had been developed during an apprenticeship. In particular, excellence in the activities of “rivetting”, “plating”, and “caulking” were considered to be the most important.

Most boilermakers were employed in ship-repair and minor shipbuilding, the construction of boilers for the increasingly steam-driven production, rail, and shipping transport systems that were developing from the 1870s, in steel-wagon and rail construction and assembly workshops, and on the construction of iron bridges throughout the colony. The “craftsmen” were “assisted” by offsidiers who were classified as “unskilled”. Their work involved a range of activities, from heavy manual lifting, to more demanding work using lifting tackle, cranes, hammer, press, and forge. Technologically, there was a move towards increased mechanization of boilermaking around the turn of the century, with the introduction of steam-riveters and shears. Nonetheless, handwork and craft skill continued to be important elements of boilermaking labour well into the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

The centre of the artisanal boilermaking cultures and structures were the Sydney shipbuilding yards and the government railway workshops. Here, the collective artisanal ethos and structures were strongest, and the extremely varied nature of work in and around the shipyards was a material basis that sustained the idea of properly qualified boilermakers’ “all round” skills. Beyond this core, in the railway-wagon assembly manufactories such as Hudson’s, or in bridge-construction sites in the rural areas, the artisanal structures and ethos were weaker. In these sites, the distinctions between “craft” and “labouring” were less sharply drawn and more difficult to maintain, and the employment of non-apprenticed workers and specialists rather than “all-round” men was more prevalent.<sup>26</sup> As will be seen below,

25. The British origins of these distinctions can be traced in Keith McClelland and Alistair Reid, “Wood, Iron and Steel: Technology, Labour And Trade Union Organization in the Shipbuilding Industry, 1840–1914”, in Royden Harrison and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Divisions of Labour* (Brighton, 1985), pp. 151–184. Their use in the Australian context can be followed in John Shields, “Skill Reclaimed: Craft Work, Craft Unions, and the Survival of Apprenticeship in New South Wales, 1860–1914”, (Ph.D., University of Sydney, 1990), pp. 143–148, 174–187 [hereafter “Skill Reclaimed”]. For general characterizations of the colonial iron trades, see Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers*, ch. 1; Tom Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia 1920–1972* (Melbourne, 1975), ch. 1. Markey, “The Aristocracy of Labour [...] in NSW, c. 1880–1900” provides a comprehensive examination of the changes towards the end of the “Long Boom”.

26. See Shields, “Skill Reclaimed”, pp. 174–187.



Figure 1. Riveters building the Murray Bridge, New South Wales, early twentieth century. *State Library of South Australia; image no SLSA: B 3 161. Used with permission.*

these variations from the artisanal norm were to become important for the way that the commodification of boilermaking labour evolved.

Despite some fluctuations, the colonial “labour market” for boilermakers and other occupations more generally was buoyant between 1860 and 1890, and in this period employment for boilermakers expanded, in line with employment more generally. In the 1850s and 1860s skilled boilermakers oscillated between periods of self- and waged employment, like their counterparts elsewhere in the metal trades. However, the size of dockyards, railway yards, and steam-driven factory equipment expanded from the 1870s, so that by the early twentieth century wage labour had become the permanent condition of boilermaking labour.

Accompanying this expansion, and especially during the 1870s, was a substantial growth in the formation of permanent unions across the workforce. During this decade at least six craft and unskilled unions were formed in the NSW metal trades. This had the effect of separating out into distinct “crafts” the previously entangled and impermanent attempts at organization. While by the time the depression hit in 1890 union coverage in the metal trades was comprehensive, overall workforce unionization was far less impressive, covering only around 20 per cent of the work force.

Boilermakers were thus one of the more privileged sections of the working class.<sup>27</sup>

THE CONTEST OVER LABOUR COMMODIFICATION,  
1860–1890

While the small size of colonial manufacturing industry meant that many boilermakers in mid-nineteenth-century NSW fluctuated between self-employment and wage-work, the existence of wage rates (5s a day in 1853) shows that boilermaking labour was at least formally commodified in the mid-century.<sup>28</sup> However, it was not until the 1860s and early 1870s that the development of larger ironworks, dockyards, and railway workshops started to employ boilermaking labour on a more permanent basis. This in turn stimulated the formation of the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron-Shipbuilders (USB) in 1873, the first permanent trade union specifically for boilermaking labour.<sup>29</sup>

From its inception, the USB disrupted the employers' expanding capacities to control the conditions under which boilermaking labour was employed. During the 1860s, the larger ironmasters had taken advantage of ephemeral employment conditions and the chronically disorganized state of the embryonic metal trades unionism, and had begun to employ unskilled workers on work that had traditionally been claimed as the province of the skilled. After a struggle, in which the early union of the "unskilled" boilermakers' assistants proved more of an antagonist than the employers, by 1876 the USB had effectively divided the boilermaking workforce into the "skilled" and "unskilled" sections typical of British craft unionism.<sup>30</sup>

Drawing a rigid boundary between the "skilled" and "unskilled" was the first step in the evolution of the USB's defensive strategy against their employers commodifying tendency. At the most basic level, it meant that the union now had an enhanced capacity to influence both the supply of

27. For these developments see J.T. Sutcliffe, *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia* (Melbourne, 1967), pp. 45–89; Ben Maddison, "Skill and the Commodification of Labour in New South Wales, 1840–1915" (Ph.D, Department of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, 1996), ch. 9. Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales*, calculates that in 1891 the overall union coverage in NSW was 21.5 per cent of the workforce. See also Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900–1921* (Canberra 1965), ch. 1 and Appendix III, p. 250.

28. T.A. Coghlan, *Wealth and Progress of New South Wales 1890–91* (Sydney, 1891), p. 681, and *idem*, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, (Melbourne, 1968), I, p. 60, II, ch. 7.

29. See Report of Proceedings, Second Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, Melbourne, 1884, J. McGowan (USB Secretary), p. 107. McGowan mentioned "the twenty-nine years of the Boilermakers' Association in Sydney".

30. These processes can be traced in, Sydney Trades and Labour Council, Minutes of General Meetings 1871–1876, 16 May, 17 June, 12 August 1875; 17 February 1876, University of Wollongong Archives, D 167.



Figure 2. Men at work in the boiler shop at the Ballarat North Railway workshops, early twentieth century.

*Reproduced by courtesy of Museum Victoria; image MM 001581. Used with permission.*

“skilled” boilermaking labour, and the price at which it was sold. To be effective this strategy required the union to enroll a majority of “skilled” boilermakers. To this end, the USB built widespread coverage of skilled boilermaking workers during the 1870s. This was achieved by a pragmatic policy that opened membership to the spectrum of “non-assistants” – be they craft boilermakers with the full repertoire of boilermaking abilities (“all-rounders”), or the more specialized workers – riveters, caulkers and platers – that had been allowed to flourish under the employers’ freewheeling employment practices of the 1860s.

By the early 1880s the vulnerabilities in these arrangements were becoming evident. The pragmatic admittance policies of the 1870s resulted in a membership with a variety of levels of boilermaking skill. The USB acknowledged this variegation in its official wages scale, which allowed members to be paid at rates ranging from 10s to 18s a day.<sup>31</sup> In 1880 and 1881 large Sydney employers such as Morts Dock and Atlas Works

31. United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders, General Minutes, 10 August 1878 gives the upper and lower limits – Boilermakers’ and Blacksmiths’ Society of Australia – Records, 1876–1972, NSW State Library, MLMSS 2422 [hereafter USB minutes], Minute Book 3, K52391.

attempted to intensify the commodity character of boilermaking labour by exploiting the existence of the wages scale. When the specific requirements of the work-in-hand suited, they dismissed individual “all-round” boilermakers, with their premium rates of pay, and re-hired those same men, and paid them as if they were specialists.

This was an attempt to intensify the commodity-character of boilermaking labour, because rather than paying for the “skilled worker”, employers were now starting to pay only for the specific “bits” of skill they needed (caulking, riveting, plating), rather than all the abilities of a skilled worker with “all-round” skill. In addition, the payment for a craft boilermaker was always more than a payment for his technical abilities, embodying as it did a recognition of the more intangible status of the craftsman. In trying to pay the craftsman for the work that he was required to do, rather than on the basis of a pay rate that, at least in part, reflected some intangible component of status, the ironmasters were trying to remove some of the social and cultural integuments, and thereby transform the commodity status of skilled boilermaking labour. In other words, employers were trying to align more precisely the amount they paid for labour with the quality of labour power (“level of skill”) they required for the work.

The ironmasters’ first concerted attempt to reshape the “rules of the game” in line with a commodifying logic provoked considerable conflict and debate within the USB. When a union delegate reported in 1881 that at Morts Dock “some of the men, having been discharged were re-employed at a lower rate of wages”, the USB took its first significant steps, when one of the members proposed “having a standard scale of wages”.<sup>32</sup>

However straightforward establishing a standard rate of wages appears to be in hindsight, from inside the Boilermakers’ Union the process was one of great complexity and controversy. The union records capture this complexity, and in doing so offer a fascinating insight into how a group of workers enmeshed within the complexities of the labour commodification process, thought their way through the difficulties to evolve an effective policy. The 1870s’ membership policy of admitting both specialists and “all-rounders” meant that by the early 1880s a third of the USB membership were specialists, and the rest “all-rounders”.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, when a USB delegate from Mort’s Dock March 1881 introduced the motion “that there be a standard scale of wages for members of the Society with a minimum (say) of 14d”, he was well aware of the contentious nature of the issue, appending to the motion the unusual condition that

32. *Ibid.*, 15 March 1881.

33. This figure is deduced from comments of Secretary McGowan, who in considering a proposal for recognition of a two-tiered wage scale by the USB, reckoned that the higher rate would apply to “about two-thirds of the members”, leaving one-third as specialists. See *ibid.*, 27 July 1882.

“*Voting on this subject be by Ballot*” (original emphasis).<sup>34</sup> Over a couple of months of discussion the boilermakers’ understanding of their position within the commodification process, and the strategy that might effectively deal with it, developed considerably. Where the first motion had allowed for “a standard scale of wages”, this equivocation was removed in the final formulation put forward by Brother Crystal in July 1881 “that the time has now arrived for this Society to have a fixed rate of wages”.<sup>35</sup>

This form of words approached the issue of a standard rate of wages much less ambiguously, and at the same time catalysed tensions arising from the variegated character of the union’s membership. A significant section of those who spoke against the motion deplored the idea of a standard rate, and supported the continuation of the system of setting wages according to the flexibility allowed by the broad scale of wage rates. One speaker argued that “it was not right to fix a rate of wages as some of the older men might not be able to get employed at the required rate”. Another asked what was to happen to those members “who might be thrown out of employment by this resolution on account of his employer not thinking them worth the wages”, and opposed the motion because “he considered it an injustice to inferior men of whom there were several in the society”. Significantly enough for the future, the advocates of these perspectives argued that, instead of a fixed rate, the motion should be amended to establish “two rates of wages [...] for First and Second class riveters [,] the men to classify themselves”, First Class being those for whom riveting was only one among a number of abilities, and Second Class being those for whom riveting was their sole speciality.<sup>36</sup>

These arguments – and especially the amendment, with its proposal for a self-classification of boilermakers into two “grades” – were ineffective in diluting the much stronger level of support within the union for the principle of a standard rate of wage. The strongest current of opinion accepted that there were specialists in the union, but argued that this did not justify “grading” and paying members at different rates, because all were of the same level of skill. This was a particularly important perspective in rebutting the suggested classification of riveters into two grades, because as one member pointed out “a great many men were not first class riveters”, and yet could claim to be equally skilled as the latter. Under the proposed scheme of classification these men would be classed as Second Class and would consequently “get lower pay than their equals”, despite the fact that they “could do other work equally well or better perhaps” than “First Class” riveters.<sup>37</sup>

34. *Ibid.*, 29 March 1881.

35. *Ibid.*, 18 July 1882.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 27 July 1882.

Ultimately the arguments in favour of adopting the standard wage prevailed, and the motion establishing a standard minimum wage rate (of 14d per hour) was carried by a “very large majority”. The seriousness with which this was considered is indicated by the passing of a further motion that provided for an extremely heavy punishment of £5 for a first infringement and expulsion for the second in the case of “any member proved to be working at a lesser rate of wages than the minimum”.<sup>38</sup>

The decision to establish a standard wage rate, rather than a graduated scale of wages based on “grading”, was the hub around which USB oriented itself for the following quarter century. By replacing the scale of wages with a standard wage rate, and strictly enforcing members’ adherence to it, the USB had built an effective defence against the increasingly evident intention of iron trades employers to divide up the boilermaking workforce in order to pay more precisely for the abilities that they needed – that is to say, to intensify the commodity character of their labour, as they had begun to do in 1880. This was absolutely critical for the development and character of the USB from 1880, because the standard wage halted the tendency to create a space for an intermediate category of worker (the “Second Class riveter”) between “skilled” and “unskilled”.

From this time on, union strategy came to pivot not simply on enforcement of the standard wage, but more fundamentally on the USB’s ability to project itself as a union whose members were equal in level of skill, whether they were “all-round” boilermakers or specialists. The difficulties that this entailed, even in the 1880s, was indicated in the equivocations and fears expressed by one member in a discussion over whether two young men should be admitted. Uncertain as to their levels of ability, he commented that “he would not take upon himself the responsibility of proposing” them as members because while admitting them “might be the means of getting them journeymen’s wages”, he had “some doubt as to whether [they] would get the Minimum [i.e. standard] rate”. If this was the case, he continued, and “the money was refused “to the men by their employers”, “the Society would be placed in an awkward position”, by revealing to the employers that its membership was heterogeneous in ability.<sup>39</sup> This was a prescient anticipation of a central vulnerability which in 1880 was a quarter of a century away – the union’s claim to standard wages rested on its ability to project itself as a community of equally skilled workers.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 12 September 1882.

EMPLOYERS AND THE TECHNIQUE OF  
COMMODIFICATION

The combination of the relatively propitious economic climate of the 1870s and 1880s, and the growth of the USB alongside a general growth of iron trades unionism in the period, meant that most iron trades employers perhaps had little option than to accept the containment of labour commodification in boilermaking by the standard wage. In addition, the relatively small scale of colonial engineering and dockyard works meant that flexible and all-round craft skill continued to be important, and this probably made bearable the practice of paying the standard rate to USB members, as well as to the “unskilled” boilermakers. Their unions had also adopted the principle after 1880, establishing a standard wage of 7s per day.<sup>40</sup>

While iron trades employers had little choice at this stage but to accept these limits to labour commodification, they nonetheless sought to achieve the same ends through alternative means. From the time that the standard wage was established in the early 1880s, the ironmasters persisted in the project of tapping the reservoirs of labour power that they believed were being withheld from them, by trying to establish piecework. The advantage of piecework was, as Thomas Irons (manager of Meadowbank Engineering Works) put it in 1908, that it instilled in each individual worker “a commercial knowledge of his own value”.<sup>41</sup> Implicit in this was the employer’s plaint that workers had a “non-commercial” view of the value of their own labour, a view perpetuated by unions and the practice of paying according to the standard wage. Paying by piecework would more accurately align the wage paid with the “real” value of individuals’ labour. The USB, aware of these implications, steadfastly refused to consent to piecework in boilermaking on the many occasions that the ironmasters tried to introduce it. Despite recurrent attempts through the 1880s and 1890s, by the early twentieth century the ironmasters were as far away as ever from being able to introduce piecework. In 1903/4 the Iron Trades Employers’ Association (ITEA) was still unsuccessfully trying to get “the principle [of piecework] [...] admitted as far as the [USB] rules were concerned”.<sup>42</sup>

It was probably the effectiveness of USB resistance to the employers’ repeated attempts to establish piecework that prompted the latter, during the 1890s, to reassess their strategies for intensifying the commodity character of labour power. Thwarted in their attempts to introduce piecework, the employers now began to attack the principle of the

40. See Shields “Skill Reclaimed”, pp. 175–177.

41. Amalgamated Society of Engineers, *New South Wales District v. Iron Trades Employers Association*, 1908. Transcript. New South Wales State Archives, 2/111, vol. 58, p. 554.

42. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1904, p. 5; *Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 1903, p. 7.

standard wage and its foundation in union control over occupational classification. The onset of this attack was indicated by Henry Hudson, the director of Hudson Brothers Engineering Co and ITEA President, when he commented in 1891 that “some men can earn twice as much as others, and great difficulty must necessarily arise by having any standard rate of wages, where one man would be overpaid and the other not paid enough”.<sup>43</sup> Delayed by a severe depression in the mid-1890s, it was not until the economic recovery later in the decade that this analysis began to be applied more instrumentally.

It was this logic that informed Mr Broad, the Superintendent of the Government Dockyard, when he commented in 1899 that paying all boilermaking labourers in the Dock the standard 7s a day constituted “unfairness to the skilful labourer” [*sic*], because “he only gets the same as the absolutely unskilled, and I may say, comparatively useless one”. Broad thought that the latter should be paid “at a lower rate – say 6s a day”.<sup>44</sup> In making these discriminations between two different levels of skill within the boilermaking labourers, Broad was articulating what was to become the heart of the ironmasters’ labour commodification strategy.

By the start of the twentieth century iron trades employers had thus developed the strategy of eroding union control of occupational classifications. That this was consciously and concretely linked by the employers to an objective of intensifying labour commodification became apparent in a dispute that erupted in 1901 between the Iron Workers Assistants’ Association (IWA) and ITEA. The dispute, which severely disrupted work in Sydney’s engineering shops and dockyards for eight weeks, was ostensibly about the employers’ attempt to reduce the minimum rate of pay for IWA members from 7s to 6s 6d a day. Yet it soon became clear that something more than a struggle over sixpence was at stake. As a journalist observed “the proposal of the employers is really to grade the employees”.<sup>45</sup>

Innocuous as it may appear nowadays, the employers’ determination to “grade” the employees, and to thereby establish a more fine-grained scheme of occupational classification, was controversial at the time, as the discussion over just this issue in the USB twenty years earlier indicated that it would be. Although initially reluctant to admit their objective publicly, in private the ITEA explained to the Sydney Marine Underwriters’ Association that they were “endeavouring to grade the Labouring men”.<sup>46</sup> As the dispute continued, the employers’ coyness receded and

43. *Report of the Royal Commission into Strikes*, Minutes of Evidence, q. 3788.

44. “Report of Committee of Inquiry on the Working of the Government Docking Establishment, at Biloela (Cockatoo Island)”, *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers*, 1899, III, p. 89. Broad was Superintendent of the New South Wales Government Dockyard.

45. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1901, p. 7.

46. Mort’s Dock and Engineering Company, Out Letter Books [hereafter Mort’s Dock Out

they publicly revealed that they were trying to dismantle the existing practice of paying all union members at the same rate. The ITEA hoped to replace this system of payment with one that would “see (IWA members) classified [...] according to their abilities”, and paid “according to their value” so that “First class men” would be paid 7s and “second class men” 6s 6d.<sup>47</sup>

We can see in these comments about value how consciously the strategy of eroding the standard wage and job classification was connected to plans to intensify the commodity character of boilermaking labour. By breaking apart the monolithic occupational category “ironworkers’ assistants” into its component parts, the employers hoped to enhance their capacity to align more precisely the amount they paid for labour with its quality. By doing so they would crack open and harvest the reservoirs of labour power they believed lay within the bodies of workers, but which was being withheld from them by union controls over occupational classifications. It was precisely this relationship between labour commodification and occupational classification to which ITEA President and dockyard manager J.P. Franki referred to when he explained during the 1901 dispute that the employers were trying to “classify the work”, and in this way “fix a value on it on a commercial basis”.<sup>48</sup>

While the 1901 dispute resulted in a compromise agreement, its broader significance lay in the fact that it was the ITEA’s first practical test of the difficulties that might be encountered in trying to translate their analysis of the nexus between labour commodification and occupational classification more widely across the skilled and unskilled workers in the boilermaking workforce. The ITEA objectives in the dispute were helpfully summed up by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which maintained that occupational “classification [...] might naturally [*sic*] be supposed to belong of right to [the employers] and not to the men”.<sup>49</sup> Thus, at the end of the 1901 dispute the ITEA continued – with an eye to the future – to “claim the right as Employers to grade the men according to their ability”.<sup>50</sup>

#### STATE ARBITRATION AND OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION 1901–1915

If the ironmasters’ found it difficult to give this “right” practical effect in relation to the unskilled, this was even more the case when it came to the skilled workers in the USB. Even though many trade unions were

Letter Books], State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 434, Franki to Woodthorpe, 21 June 1901, fos 440–441.

47. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1901, p.10.

48. *Daily Telegraph*, 1 July 1901, p. 9.

49. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 July 1901, p. 4.

50. Mort’s Dock Out Letter Books, Franki to the Secretary of the ITEA, 25 July 1901, fo. 452.

decimated during the 1890s, in the early twentieth century iron trades employers continued to be confronted by skilled workers intent on resisting, from positions of considerable strength and status, all attempts to erode the structures and strategies they had devised over the preceding quarter century. Confronted with this industrial equation, the initial approach of the iron trades employers in the several years after 1901 was to pursue traditional strategies, such as seeking wage and overtime rate reductions, removal of limitations on apprenticeship, the lifting of restrictions on the numbers of machines which could be worked by one worker, and agreement to work under piecework conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Yet the stance of the ironmasters in regard to the skilled workers was now marked by an aggression largely absent from their pre-1890 approach. Whereas previously, the ITEA had shown itself willing to work within the framework of craft unionism and its rules, now there was a distinct drawing away from that approach. Reflecting this shift, the ITEA pointed out in 1903 that “There were several things in the rules of the various unions which the employers had [previously] not taken cognizance of, and they had worked harmoniously without taking notice of them.” Now, however, they hoped that “some of the restrictions might be removed and others modified”.<sup>52</sup> The unions remained intransigent on these issues (they included piecework, apprenticeship, and machine working), and in 1904 the ITEA filed claims against the USB in the New South Wales Arbitration Court, albeit without much optimism about securing a favourable outcome.<sup>53</sup>

The New South Wales Arbitration Court had been established by the New South Wales government in 1901 to regulate the wages and conditions of work in specific occupations. Initially greeted with scepticism by many trade unions because it seemed to diminish their rights to engage in strike action, the Court nonetheless quickly became the hub around which employment relations revolved in early twentieth century NSW. Despite this, it was several years before the ITEA and the USB confronted each other in this arena. While initially (1903) the USB looked on the Court as being sympathetic to the claims and rights of craft unions, by 1905 it reassessed this view, and encouraged “any Union that could get a fair agreement with their employers to accept it rather than fight the case out in the Court”. Taking its own advice, the USB managed to extract itself from the arbitral proceedings initiated by the ITEA, and come to an out-of-court agreement with the employers.<sup>54</sup> These agree-

51. For the details of employers' proposals, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 1903, p. 7; 19 November 1903, p. 7; *Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 1903, p. 7.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 1904, p. 2.

54. “September Quarterly Report”, enclosed in USB Minutes, 21 November 1905.

ments made little qualitative change in the status or condition of commodified labour.

The capacity of the USB to avoid the state's industrial tribunal was brought to a halt by the revisions to the arbitration system that were the result of the Industrial Disputes Act of 1908. While historians often describe the Industrial Disputes Act as significant for its coercive anti-working-class provisions, it provided employers such as the ITEA with less obvious, quieter, and ultimately more significant advantages over organized iron trades labour.<sup>55</sup> Although the Act recognized the role of unions in arbitration, it positioned them rather differently than had been the case since 1901.

The 1901 Act automatically gave unions and employer associations an important structural position at the centre of the arbitral process; the 1908 Act diminished this centrality by instituting wages boards defined by specific industry, and gave primacy to that industry's employers and employees, rather than simply to unions and associations. The Industrial Disputes Act thus reoriented the direction of arbitration away from a forum for negotiation between institutions, and towards shaping conditions of industry; and in doing so it provided an important mechanism for employers to contest and ultimately erode many of the established principles underpinning craft unionism.<sup>56</sup> These changes greatly enhanced the capacity of employers such as the ITEA to confront historically rooted claims of the USB. As a union advocate put it, whereas the 1901 Arbitration Court only considered "claims by different classes of mechanics, and you did not deal with any industry [...]. It is only under this Industrial Disputes Act, which enables a Board to be granted for the articles to be made, that [employers] could possibly claim" that those employed making rolling stock were not skilled tradesmen.<sup>57</sup>

These capacities for occupational redefinition that the USB referred to opened up a whole new world of possibility for the ITEA. Several ITEA members who manufactured rolling stock applied to the Industrial Court to be considered an "industry" in their own right, and were allowed to be

55. This understanding of the 1908 Industrial Disputes Act is based on J.H. Portus, *The Development of Australian Trade Union Law* (Carlton, VIC, 1958), pp. 110–111; H.V. Evatt, *William Holman, Australian Labour Leader*, abridged edn (Sydney, 1979), pp. 167–169; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, pp. 35–38; Edna Ryan, *Two Thirds of a Man: Women and Arbitration in New South Wales 1902–20* (Sydney, 1984), pp. 24–36; Raymond Markey, *In Case of Oppression: The Life and Times of the Labour Council of New South Wales* (Sydney 1994), pp. 139–140.

56. Ryan, *Two Thirds of a Man*, p. 28; Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers*, p. 178.

57. Industrial Court of New South Wales: Appeal by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Australian Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Coachmakers' Society, United Society of Boilermakers, Iron Workers' Assistants against Award of Coachmakers' Board (hereinafter Appeal against Award of Coachmakers' Board), August 1910, vol. 99, NSWSA 2/151, address of Mr Tayler, p. 288.

considered a part of the coachmaking industry, whose conditions were governed by the Coachmaking (Rail) Board.<sup>58</sup> The key purpose in their doing so was to establish that the court recognized a difference between boilermakers' work in rolling stock manufacturing and that in general engineering firms.<sup>59</sup>

It did not take long before it became evident that allowing firms within the ITEA to appear before the Coachmakers' (Rail) Board, posed a real threat to the trade status of skilled iron trades workers in general.<sup>60</sup> As a union advocate analysed the situation :

[...] because the Industrial Disputes Act is passed [...] the employers set up [i.e. claim] that "we are a separate industry, [...] and] the man who is working on a railway wagon is a railway wagon smith". The man who is working on a coach would be, I suppose, a coachbuilding smith, and the man who is working on a locomotive would be a locomotive blacksmith, and so it would go until the engineers, taking them as an example of the trade, would be split up into every class there is of an article to be manufactured and they would no longer be engineers, but they would be the particular smiths or the particular engineers in the article they were making.<sup>61</sup>

This was principally the dynamic against which all the iron trades unions, including the USB, were fighting when they appealed against the Coachmakers Award. It was best summed up by the argument of Tayler, the advocate for the Iron Moulders' Union, who commented that the Industrial Disputes Act "enables the Court to appoint a Board to deal with an industry", and thereby allows employers to argue that: "these men are no longer mechanics in their particular trade, [...] no longer tradesmen as defined by their particular Unions, but tradesmen classified by the particular work which they are doing. [The Act allows the Court] to separate tradesmen from their particular class of trade which they call themselves".<sup>62</sup>

Tayler's remarks (in this and the preceding extract) cast light deep into the interior processes of labour commodification that were now unfolding under these new conditions. Tayler's analysis indicated the importance of eroding the salience of union-based artisanal structures and occupational classification, because doing so made work the focus of arbitration, rather than workers and their collective self-definitions. This was the term

58. Industrial Court of New South Wales: re Iron Trades (Boilermakers) Board. Transcript. Application for Nomination of Members (hereinafter Boilermakers' Board – Nomination of Members), vol. 83, 1909, NSWSA 2/136. See the exchange between Heydon and Wegg-Horne, pp. 53–54.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

60. ITEA Minutes, Special Extraordinary Meeting, 28 June 1909, Metal Trades Industry Association archives, Minute Book 1.

61. Appeal against Award of Coachmakers' Board, Tayler, p. 286.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

“objectification” made concrete and real: separating the work itself from the body and identity of the worker allowed the objectification of work – literally giving skills and abilities an object form that they previously had not, when they had been contained within the interior of the body and identity of the artisan, and protected there by the carapace of craft unionism.

As Tayler’s critical assessment of the new situation had anticipated, the ITEA immediately began taking advantage of the new possibilities for fracturing the unitary classifications within the USB. They first did so by arguing that the industry was differentiated into two “essentially different interests” – shipbuilding *versus* structural and bridge work – and that the latter had become “a specialty with certain firms and certain classes of workmen”. The ITEA pounced on evidence produced in court comparing work between the two sections, which showed that “the work of riveting, in connection with bridge and girder work, was by no means of so high a character as that which has to be put onto Boilermaking, and Iron Shipbuilding”.<sup>63</sup>

These developments within the Industrial Court unsettled the USB, which now began to struggle hard to maintain the integrity of key concepts such as that of the “trade”. Evidently worried about the comparisons across the newly defined industrial sections, the USB requested Mr Blackett, the chair of the Coachmakers’ Board, to at least “put the iron part [of railway wagon making] under the Boilermakers Board, and if unable to do that to keep the evidence of all trades separate and distinct”.<sup>64</sup> Blackett refused these requests, and in February 1910 handed down the first Coachmakers’ (Rail) Award.<sup>65</sup> Some idea of the importance of it can be gained from the official response of the USB, whose Secretary described the award as “a scandalous and ridiculous one”, because Blackett had “altered the term ‘Plater’, which has been in use for the past 70 years, to the term ‘Assembler’, and has reduced the wages of those workers”.<sup>66</sup> This was the classic nexus between classification and commodification, enabled by the changes in the terms of engagement within the state’s industrial tribunals.

Blackett’s award pleased the ITEA to the same degree – and for precisely the same reasons – that it angered the USB. The Award meant that several ITEA members could now undertake rolling stock-making, free of the wages and conditions established by the craft unions. More importantly, it also provided employers in general engineering and shipbuilding with important ammunition to attack the standard wage,

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 5 October 1909.

65. *New South Wales Government Gazette*, No. 164 of October 26 1910.

66. “Secretary’s Report, for the Half Year to 30th June 1910”, enclosed at USB Minutes, 9 August 1910.

by eroding the credibility of USB's long-standing claim that all its members were equally skilled. The ITEA secretary explained the importance of Blackett's Award to the Association's overall aim: although the work considered by the Coachmaking Board "was not actually included in the Industry of Iron Trades, still it dealt with the features of riveting plates etc. claimed by the Boilermakers". The evidence showed "that the men who did riveting *only*, were not held to be Boilermakers, and therefore not entitled to Boilermakers' wages".<sup>67</sup> The ITEA's annual report for 1909/1910 described how that the Coachmakers' Board had been important for all members of the ITEA,

[...] because this class of work and workmen were graded. This was markedly to the benefit of the Iron Trades in subsequent proceedings in connection with the Boilermakers. It was held that a wagon riveter was not a boilermaker or shipbuilder and (as the Boilermakers' Board would shortly be sitting) the countervailing claims put in by the Association were for classification and grading.<sup>68</sup>

The possibilities illustrated in the Coachmakers' Board propelled the ITEA further towards the strategy of classification. In the next case in which it was involved, (vs the Moulders), the ITEA Secretary rather smugly reported to the members that the claims put forward by the ITEA "had astonished the Employees' Union on account of the grading which had taken place".<sup>69</sup> The ensuing Award instituted "grading" of iron moulders, and thus reiterated to the ironmasters the value of pursuing "grading" more generally within the Wages Boards.<sup>70</sup> In March 1911 Irons explained to ITEA members that the results of the Moulders' Board indicated "how very necessary it was for employers now to insist on Grading wherever applicable". Franki – always the avatar of grading – went even further, commenting that "[w]ithout [grading] [...] it would be difficult indeed to carry on", and that "members could rest assured that the Association would pass that claim in every case".<sup>71</sup>

Making good this promise, from 1911 the "grading" of skilled boilermaking occupations was the central point at issue between the ITEA and the USB. When the ITEA was formulating its strategy in the Boilermakers' Board hearing in early 1911, Franki suggested that while the employers might make "some little concessions" on issues like payment for meal breaks or additional payment for working in hot places "of course as to grading and the wages for the different grades they must stand firm".

67. ITEA Minutes, March 14 1910.

68. *Ibid.*, Special Extraordinary Meeting, 13 May 1910.

69. *Ibid.*, 10 October 1910.

70. *New South Wales Industrial Gazette*, July, 1912, pp. 460–464.

71. The statements in this paragraph are drawn from ITEA Minutes, General Meeting, 7 March 1911.

Other members supported Franki's tactics and especially "his remarks as to grading and the wages for the different grades", referring to grading as a "necessity".<sup>72</sup>

While there were many intervening circumstances between the articulation and the realization of the goal – for example, World War I disrupted the process – nonetheless the trajectory towards "grading" and its connection to objectives of commodifying boilermaking labour was unmistakable. First articulated in 1890 and then given a practical trial in the 1901 dispute, during the 1920s USB members were "graded" and paid on a scale of wages according to the different levels of skill that their labour was deemed to embody.<sup>73</sup> Reflective of this new terrain, Judge Curlewis in 1919 described as "a farce" the hallowed old craft union principle "that because a skilled labourer has been employed on particular work [...] that when an unskilled labourer can do it that skilled labourer is still to be employed", and concluded that "I shall never countenance the flat rate [i.e. standard wage]. I shall set every class of man on his own merits."<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In their luminous beacon of contemporary working-class studies, Linebaugh and Rediker remark critically on the way historians take for granted basic phenomena, such as fields, cities, ports, plantations, and "the commodities of commerce", as though these things are just given in history rather than wrought out of a dramatic process of expropriation and exploitation.<sup>75</sup> Labour commodification occupies a similar historiographical position, as an assumed part of the background. Yet, as this study of the boilermaking trades has illustrated, labour commodification was a dynamic and continuous point of conflict between employers and workers. Boilermaking labour had taken the commodity form since the 1850s, but this was the start, not the end, of the story. From the 1870s, boilermaking workers and employers struggled to control the intensity of labour commodification. For about thirty years, the upper hand in that struggle lay with the USB, which constructed itself as a classic craft union and was able to enforce the standard wage and project itself as a community of equally skilled workers, despite differences in degrees of specialization. Throughout this time, the ironmasters continually but

72. *Ibid.*, "Special Meeting in re. Boilermakers", 27 April 1911.

73. For these transformations see Sheridan, *Mindful Militants*, pp. 73–107. Also see Sandra Cockfield, "Arbitration, Mass Production and Workplace Relations: 'Metal Industry' Developments in the 1920s", *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, March 1993, pp. 19–38, 26–27.

74. Quoted from "Skilled Workers Doing Unskilled Work", New South Wales Industrial Court, 4 December 1919, re Brass Finishers' Award, NSWSA, 7/1857.

75. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra*, p. 42.

unsuccessfully attempted to penetrate the defences that the workers had erected.

The strategy of labour commodification pursued by the ironmasters was principally aimed at breaking down the collective controls over occupational classification that the boilermakers had developed since 1870. In the case of the boilermakers, the decisive moment in the struggle to intensify the commodity character of labour came when the USB was finally forced to engage with the arbitration system. While, to be sure, systems of state regulation of labour relations, such as those in New South Wales in this period, were complex and multivalent institutions, in this case it seems clear that the preparedness of the arbitration courts to support the employers' classificatory efforts, proved a decisive turning point in the struggle over the intensification of the commodity character of boilermaking labour.

That this was the case ought not be seen in any simple or conspiratorial sense as reflecting the class role played by the state industrial court system. While the arbitration court did give decisive support to the ITEA's strategies of occupational classification, longer-term developments were to indicate that the process of labour commodification was far more contradictory than this. By breaking apart the USB's standard wage, and finding degrees of skill spread across the occupational continuum, the iron trades employers were also unwittingly creating the ground on which workers hitherto classified as "unskilled" could now claim a degree of skill. It was precisely these conditions that allowed the leader of the "unskilled" boilermakers to claim in 1915 that their work was "highly skilled", and to make aggressive new claims on this basis for wage increases.<sup>76</sup>

It is this contradictory aspect that makes it difficult to resolve the process of labour commodification into a simplistic story of class relations. While labour commodification closed down older ways of doing things – as in the case of the craftsmen boilermakers – it simultaneously opened up new possibilities for other categories of workers. Thus, in 1939 an observer of Australian labour attributed the success of trade unions in increasing wages in the preceding decades to "[t]heir policy [which] has been to minutely classify grades of work, and to attribute to the workers in the different grades some degree of skill".<sup>77</sup> Although this overstated the level of material success of the strategy, it accurately identified the principal mechanism through which it was prosecuted. Commodification was a double-edged sword and its principal technique – occupational classification – could cut both ways.

76. Royal Commission of Inquiry on Industrial Arbitration in the State of New South Wales, *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers 1913, Second Session*, I, q. 16886.

77. G. Anderson, "Industrial Tribunals and Standards of Living", in F.W. Eggleston *et al.*, *Australian Standards of Living*, (Carlton, VIC, 1939), pp. 65–112, 75–76.