

# INVOKING GHOSTS FROM THE PAST: THE FORMATION OF THE VICTORIAN TEACHERS' UNION, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA, 1916-1926

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The industrial organization of the public school teachers in Victoria, Australia, is an aberration in the modern character of Australian teacher unionism because its union fragmentation remains the order of the day. Elsewhere in Australia, as in most of Canada, a single union has represented public school teachers in each of the states for many years. During the 1980s Victoria's three largest teachers' unions, representing elementary, secondary, and technical school teachers, moved purposefully towards the creation of a single federation, prompting local observers to predict that the days of "the Victorian aberration" were numbered. But in 1990 negotiations for a federation collapsed. Union fragmentation and inter-union rivalry have reappeared in the form of the Federated Teachers' Union of Victoria (a merger of the Victorian Teachers' Union and the Technical Teachers' Union of Victoria) and the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association. As a historian of teacher unionism, I should have known that the "house of unity" in Victorian teaching is still haunted by the old ghosts of tribalism. I have not investigated this latest episode; instead I wish to explore the ghosts of the past, specifically to understand the difficulties of attaining teacher unity during the formative years which led to the establishment of the Victorian Teachers' Union in 1926.

To carry out this task, I have resurrected my "labour theory of teacher union growth" which attempts to explain teacher union formation, and re-formation, in terms of the convergence of three strategic variables of union growth: changes in the work situation of teachers, the role of union leadership, and a favourable socio-political climate for growth. All three variables must exist in correlation before a "successful" stage of labour/teacher union development can occur.<sup>1</sup> I

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1. This was developed from J.T. Dunlop, "The Development of Labor Organizations: A Theoretical Framework," in *Insights into Labor Issues*, ed. R. Lester and J. Shister (New York: Macmillan, 1948): 163-93; J. Shister, "The Logic of Union Growth," *Journal of Political Economy* 51 (Oct. 1953): 414-20; V. Lombardi and J. Grimes,

first used this approach in the study of nineteenth-century teacher unionism in Australia. The formation of the State School Teachers' Union of Victoria in 1886, the first single, central teachers' union in Australia, was the centrepiece of a 1984 study. The same study suggested that the collapse of a central union was always possible if the endemic occupational tensions between head teachers and classroom teachers, country and capital city teachers, men and women teachers, and later, primary school and post-primary teachers, could not be accommodated within the one union structure. Union fragmentation on these lines became the pattern in most states in the early twentieth century, and no more so than in Victoria, where by 1912 some five teachers' unions existed, including the weakened remains of the State School Teachers' Union of Victoria.<sup>2</sup>

My next study concerned the period of re-formation of Australian teachers' unions. Again using the three strategic variables of growth, I searched for an explanation as to why Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia were able to consolidate into central unions from fragmentary sections between 1916 and 1920. My basic conclusion was that although the three variables were important in this unifying process, one of the elements in the favourable socio-political climate was pre-emptory: the states' offer to school teachers to join their industrial systems for the "compulsory" arbitration of their employment conditions.<sup>3</sup> In return, these state tribunals, like the federal arbitration system, insisted on dealing with only one union, and bestowing on that union not only legal entity, but the benefits of "union-security" principles which favoured and protected the growth of a single union. Victoria's teachers' unions were not studied in depth because the state in Victoria (generally governed by conservative parties) did not share the Labor Party's predilection for compulsory arbitration for all employee groups. Nevertheless, by August 1926, Victorian teachers had formed a single central union. We need to know not only why it had taken so long in Victoria, but why this had occurred at all in the absence of state intervention in union formation.

By the start of the 1914-18 war, Victoria still contained the shell of the Teachers' Union<sup>4</sup> formed in 1886, but it comprised only head teachers, men and

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"A Primer for a Theory of White Collar Unionization," *Monthly Labor Review* 90 (May 1967): 46-49; and various recent approaches to the labour process and work summed up in R. Price, "The Labour Process and Labour History," *Social History* 8 (Jan. 1983): 57-76. For a full account of labour development theory applied to teacher union growth, see A.D. Spaul, "The Origins and Formation of Teachers' Unions in Nineteenth Century Australia," *Melbourne Studies in Education* 1984, 134-38.

2. *Ibid.*, 144-58.

3. A.D. Spaul, "The State and the Formation and Growth of Australian Teachers' Unions 1915-1925," *History of Education Review* 15 (1986): 34-48.

4. Throughout this essay I will refer to this union as the State School Teachers' Union

women assistant class teachers in Melbourne, and some thirty country branches. Only about ten percent of teachers belonged to this union, and it seemed headed for expiration as the *Australasian Schoolmaster* had predicted in its final issue in March 1910. Besides the Teachers' Union there were various unions and informal groups which had left the Union over the years. The main ones were the Victorian Lady Teachers' Association, formed in 1884—the oldest union of teachers in Australia—the Sixth Class Lady Teachers' Association, formed in 1912, and an indeterminate number of country associations which had not renewed their affiliation with the Teachers' Union. Two new unions, representing the new post-primary teaching service, the High School Teachers' Association and the Technical Teachers' Association, had been formed in 1912 and 1914 respectively. These small unions, of not more than 100 members each in 1914, had never belonged to the Teachers' Union, although some of their members had when they had been part of the classified teachers' roll for primary and other schools.

The old defectors and the new formations confirmed the popular view abroad that Victoria was riddled by fragmentation and this impeded the quest for improved conditions, or indeed, as Victoria's school leaders said, limited the possibility of a harmonious working relationship with the administration.<sup>5</sup> How this situation of fragmentation was transformed into the formation of a single union, and by what means, serves as the primary focus of this essay. I start with an examination of the three strategic variables of union growth and how they operated in Victoria between 1916 and 1926.

## 1. The Changing Work Situation of Teachers

This variable comprises two elements: the decline in material conditions of teaching, and changes in the work processes of teaching whereby teachers become more subordinate to bureaucratic management of the school system. Changes in the work situation of teachers lead to a greater tendency towards collective organization and industrial action to resist this decline in teachers' work.

Victorian state school teachers had worked in a highly centralized, bureaucratic, statewide system since the 1870s. Ministerial power had been

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of Victoria (1886-1906); Victorian State School Teachers' Union (1906-21); Victorian State Teachers' Union (1921-26).

5. See *Queensland Education Journal* [QTEJ], 1 July 1912 and *The Program*, 1 Aug. 1920, for Frank Tate's views on union fragmentation.

delegated to the Director of Education, who along with senior school inspectors shaped and imposed most employment policies and practices affecting the teacher. This was no more apparent than during the directorship of Frank Tate (1920-27). The supervision of these policies was the responsibility of school inspectors, who increasingly in this period became assessors of teaching efficiency rather than school improvers. Tate had hoped the old days of mistrust between inspector and teachers had passed, for as he told the annual conference of the Teachers' Union in 1918, the visit of the inspector should be "a red letter day for children and a day of inspiration for the teacher." But as one delegate from the floor declared, it was more fitting that such visits from the inspector be viewed as "a day of desperation" for the teacher.<sup>6</sup>

The managerial powers of the Education Department's leadership were constrained only by Parliament. Salaries, number of promotions, and the classification system for the teaching service were decided by the government of the day on the advice of the Public Service Commissioner. An independent classifiers committee with an elected teachers' representative on it decided the actual teachers to be promoted, and to which school, after receiving the reports of their inspection. It also took into account their further education qualifications and length of service. Appeals over its promotion decisions were heard by the Public Service Commissioner, and all things being equal, the teacher who had been teaching longer succeeded in the appeal.

The teaching service, separate in classification from public servants (except if the teachers were in the new high schools and technical schools), was hierarchically structured in classification. The primary teaching service was mainly dispersed between small "bush" schools (60 percent were one- or two-teacher schools) and large urban schools in Melbourne, the provincial cities, and the larger country towns. The teaching force in each school would consist of a head teacher (generally a man, and always a man in a school other than a rural school), a number of assistant teachers, and a number of apprentice teachers, known as junior teachers, who taught and studied simultaneously. Over 65 percent of men were in the lowest two classifications, while 75 percent of women were on the lowest rung of classification. Nearly 60 percent of classified assistants were women, but this level of feminization was greater as 80 percent of junior teachers were also women. Because of the difficulty in recruiting men teachers, junior teachers represented 27 percent of all classroom teachers in 1921. Only a few of these would be nominated to attend the Education Department's teachers' college. The rest qualified as teachers after passing departmental examinations.<sup>7</sup>

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6. *The Program*, 29 Apr. 1918.

7. A.D. Spaul, "John Smyth: Principal of the Training College," in *Pioneers of Australian Education—The Twentieth Century*, ed. C. Turney (Sydney: Sydney University Press): 81-97.

Between 1916 and 1926 the shortage of teachers became more acute as many young men teachers enlisted in the war, and then the growth of manufacturing and commerce enticed men teachers to new industries and other forms of work. The expansion of closer settlement and (returned) soldier settlement schemes after the war placed more pressure on the need to staff small schools. At the same time, the growth of Melbourne's suburbs and the expansion in country towns meant a boom in new schools and classrooms which could not be staffed from the existing supply of recruits. As a result, classes became overcrowded in these schools and 70-80 pupils in each class was not uncommon.

The elementary school curriculum, which had been revised by Tate and the school inspectors in 1911 and 1922, had become more crowded and complex as elementary (or primary) schools were no longer seen as providing the direct link to work. During the war more content was added to civics and history, for instance, as part of the schools' contribution to the war. Schools also became the centre of local patriotic fund-raising and teachers were assessed on their contribution to the schools' war work.<sup>8</sup> After the war, this aspect was transformed into community work and social service, again precipitating an outburst of complaints from overworked teachers.<sup>9</sup> New emphases on personal development and rounded social skills of students added to the pressures on the curriculum. For instance, teachers were unsettled by the trend towards group singing instructed by teachers without the accomplishments imposed on a "crude garden bed of voices."<sup>10</sup> Similarly the introduction of the project method as an attempt to provide local content into a statewide programme was opposed by teachers because of the variation in resources available in schools and home. Much of it depended on the teachers' resources, yet too much of his or her input was condemned by inspectors as undermining the child-centred activity required of the project.<sup>11</sup> More widespread were complaints that the new emphasis on wider reading skills could not be implemented unless the student or teacher had their own personal library.<sup>12</sup> The *School Paper* (a monthly magazine issued by the Education Department) was not enough, and the Education Department did not publish its long-awaited *Victorian Reader* until 1928. The basic problem of the elementary school curriculum was that it was difficult to attain a balance between the academic and the practical, or between the class standard and individual learning, while the elementary school was still dominated by exit examinations at grade 6 and grade 8. These examinations favoured the academic, so that abstraction in thought was valued over more progressive or practical activities.

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8. *The Program*, 30 Apr. 1919.

9. *Courier* [Ballarat], 9 Jan. 1921.

10. *The Program*, 20 Dec. 1921.

11. "Inspectors' Meeting with Teachers," *The Program*, 1 Nov. 1921.

12. "Utility" (correspondent), *The Program*, 1 Nov. 1921.

Teachers could not win in either situation. They were expected to embrace the new, while triumphing over the old. If they strayed too far into the suggestive syllabus they were penalized by the inspector for ignoring the basics. If they played safe and conformed to the old content and practices they were penalized for not being enterprising in their methods.<sup>13</sup> Inspectors' reports, which had recognized the difficulties teachers faced during wartime<sup>14</sup> (when there were many more inexperienced teachers), were more critical in the early 1920s. Few of their reports acknowledged the new problems that the new curriculum had imposed, or that it was delivered in large crowded classrooms or new rural outposts. One inspector felt that the problems he encountered on visits to rural schools resulted from city-bred junior teachers coming "to the bush" and that there were not enough men in these schools as there had been before the war. Another suggested that the problems which teachers faced in the new urban population areas could be overcome by using student-monitors as teacher assistants in the larger classes, just as they were used in the one-teacher school.<sup>15</sup> Teacher stress arising from these pressures was hardly commented upon—not that it did not exist, but it was still associated with the influx of inexperienced women teachers during the war.<sup>16</sup> Few school officials admitted publicly that the problem of large classes in schools must have been accentuated by the reliance on the junior teacher as a classroom teacher. In private conference with teachers' unions, inspectors acknowledged that it was time to move towards pre-service training, or at least attainment of secondary education qualifications or their equivalents, and demonstrated classroom competency, before these young junior teachers were given their own classes.<sup>17</sup> Continuing shortages of teachers, and parsimony towards funding the teachers' college, meant that this form of cheap sweated labour had to be retained in these years.

The overloaded curriculum posed enough new problems for teachers, but it was made more difficult by the increasing attacks on the schools from outside sources. School committees, which had no formal power in the school system, added to the pressures on the teachers after a new state organization wanted to monitor the quality of schooling.<sup>18</sup> School committees were joined by business and other groups who complained frequently in the early 1920s that the new

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13. Reports of Inspectors Burgess, Parker, and Rowell, in *Annual Report of Minister for Public Instruction, Victoria, 1924-25*, 37-43.
  14. *Annual Report of the Minister for Public Instruction, Victoria, 1916-17*, 3.
  15. Reports of Inspectors Hurley and Ellwood, in *Annual Report of the Minister for Public Education, Victoria, 1924-25*, 34, 37.
  16. *Ibid.*, 37. During the war women teachers had been the subject of a special medical investigation into the causes and incidence of neurasthenia and hysteria. See *Annual Report of the Minister for Public Instruction, Victoria, 1916-17*, 22.
  17. "Inspectors Meeting with Teachers," *The Program*.
  18. *The Program*, 15 Feb. 1924.

curriculum was turning out students who could not spell or write.<sup>19</sup> At one time Tate would have intervened on behalf of the teacher, but in the 1920s he was often away interstate and overseas, and when back in head office, he seemed reluctant to take the side of the teachers in these public disputes.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the Education Department was finding it difficult to deliver in this mood of fiscal restraint and Tate was forced to become more dictatorial over his teachers than he had in the years before the war.<sup>21</sup> A case in point was teacher transfers. Teachers had the right to transfer to another school (on the same classification) after two years in the one school. In the 1920s these rights were ignored because of the difficulties of staffing schools. The teachers' representative on the Classifiers Committee found that in 1923 not only were teachers being refused transfer for periods up to five years, but that Tate refused to publish the regulation that teachers could apply for transfer after two years service at a particular school.<sup>22</sup>

Teachers would have probably tolerated these new demands on their work if they had been accompanied by improvements in material rewards, and if there had been a major overhaul of their system of promotion and inspection. Sadly these were not forthcoming in any substantial way as to ameliorate the burdens of teaching. Teachers' salaries were not revised between 1912 and 1920, or between 1920 and 1925. During the war years, and beyond, their salaries had been pegged; indeed the small annual incremental increases had been suspended between 1916 and 1918. Teachers' incomes also could not keep up with the increases in cost-of-living, which rose by over 35 percent between 1915 and 1919. All teachers suffered from the effects of this government restraint, but none more so than teachers in the lower classifications. In 1917 the majority of women assistant teachers received less pay than barmaids, hairdressers, boot clippers, or saleswomen. Men teachers in the same classification with eight years of teaching experience by 1919 received less wages than a bricklayer, plumber, or assistants in pharmacies did at the age of twenty-one. As the Labor Party's newspaper editorialized, "it is up to the Victorian Government to lift this department out of the list of sweatshops and increase teachers' wages to something like an equivalent to the importance of their work."<sup>23</sup> Union submissions to the government emphasized that lower salaries for these groups of teachers frequently meant

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19. Ibid., 1 Feb. 1922.

20. R.J.W. Selleck, *Frank Tate: A Biography* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1982), 243-45, 250-53.

21. G.A. Reid, "The Origins and Early History of Secondary School Teachers in Victoria, 1872-1926" (M.Ed. thesis, Melbourne University, 1968), 181-83. See also Selleck, *Frank Tate*, 240, 249-50, 263.

22. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Apr. 1924): 22, N86/4, The Australian National University [ANU] Archives of Business and Labour, Canberra.

23. *Labor Call*, 16 Aug. 1917, and on teachers' salaries generally see *Public Service Journal of Victoria* [hereafter *PSJV*], 30 Apr. 1918.

that teachers could not pay tuition fees to send their children to state high schools. Often teachers survived by "moonlighting" or working as farm labourers or harvest hands during school vacations.<sup>24</sup> Even in 1924 it was not uncommon for teachers to find themselves penniless between fortnightly pays and having to "pawn my sleeve links" to pay for a night's accommodation in Melbourne.<sup>25</sup> Secondary and technical school teachers were just as vulnerable. They had enjoyed a higher salary and better promotion prospects before 1914, but during and after the war, they had seen their salary differential reduced from about 10 percent above primary teachers to less than 3 percent by 1920. Furthermore, their promotion opportunities were delayed even more than those of elementary school teachers after the war.<sup>26</sup>

The plight of classified women teachers (single women) became so acute that the government had to offer some relief to prevent a public scandal. In November 1917, it awarded women teachers a £10 bonus, "a small something," to ameliorate the increases in the cost of living.<sup>27</sup> Twelve months later it offered "a new package" which consisted of restoring annual increments, but no back-dating, and the restoration of the four-fifths principle (of the men's salary) for all women teachers' salaries. Finally in 1920 the *Public Service Act* was amended to abolish the lowest class of teachers, thereby increasing starting salaries—and more competition on places for promotion—and general increases of elementary teachers' salaries in the order of 25 percent. Secondary teachers did not receive the same level of increases, and women secondary teachers fell behind that of many primary women. The main beneficiaries of this salary increase were men head teachers and higher classified assistants. Secondary teachers complained that their status in the school and community associated with the increased responsibilities of secondary teaching had not been adequately rewarded.<sup>28</sup> Other sections complained that the starting point of salary was still too low and that as it took a teacher at least five years of teaching "to enjoy" the basic wage paid in industry, it was an insufficient incentive for young people to join the teaching service.<sup>29</sup>

Salaries, however, were not the question of the moment in the early 1920s; they had been replaced by promotion, classification, and inspection methods as the basic concerns of both young and experienced teachers. The Nationalist

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24. G.A. Reid, "The Victorian High School Teachers' Association 1912-1926," *Melbourne Studies in Education* 1971, 111, and *Age* [Melbourne], 26 Jan. 1920.
  25. Interview with Cliff White by Dallas Isaacs, 7 Mar. 1990. (Dallas Isaacs' collection for the study of the growth of secondary school teaching, Ph.D. in progress, Monash University).
  26. Reid, "Victorian High School Teachers' Association," 102-3.
  27. *PSJV*, 31 Jan. 1918.
  28. Reid, "Victorian High School Teachers' Association," 112-13.
  29. *The Program*, 1 Nov. 1923.

(conservative) government, as part of its restraint on public spending, had refused to liberalize the number of promotions on the annual promotions list. In 1921 it announced that 105 positions for primary teachers would be funded for 1922, about the same number offered before the war, when there were fewer teachers. The next year it reduced the number of promotions to 78 (about 1.5 percent of total classified teachers), disregarding the Education Department's request for many more promotions to take account of the increased numbers in teaching since the end of the war and the increase in the number of teachers who had acquired additional qualifications.<sup>30</sup> The government's decision offered no encouragement for teachers to study further, or even to improve their skills so that they could respond to the inspectors' expectations that they become innovative within classrooms. This retrograde step came at the very time when teacher morale was at its lowest because teachers felt powerless to change the way their salaries were decided, powerless to change the number of annual promotions, and above all else, powerless to modify the methods of inspection.

Since the middle of the war teachers had argued for a new form of evaluating and reporting on teachers' work to take account of the larger number of teachers trapped in the lower rungs of classification. In 1918 a group of teachers called for a royal commission into the administration of education, particularly the promotion and teacher evaluation systems.<sup>31</sup> Three years later a national conference of school inspectors heard that inspection methods were the main cause of discontent in Victorian teaching.<sup>32</sup> The discontent varied according to the status of primary teachers. Experienced teachers who had been trained on the job felt that inspectors and classifiers placed too much emphasis on educational qualifications as an indicator of effective teaching. For most teachers there were too few opportunities, or indeed time, to undertake further studies. More widespread was the claim that the use of the "numerical estimate" (a score out of a hundred) had become so inflated in a time of promotional ceilings that a teacher needed almost a perfect score over two years of inspection to be considered outstanding.<sup>33</sup> This recommendation was regarded by the classifiers as a pre-

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30. *Ibid.*, 1 July 1923.

31. *PSJV*, 31 Aug. 1918. Much of this union dissatisfaction on promotion, salaries, and classification is contained in the Education Department file "Teachers Associations 1914-1932" which is missing from the Ministry of Public Records Office of Victoria records. It was consulted by the author in 1980.

32. B.J. McKenna (District Inspector of Schools, Queensland), Report on Annual Conference of Inspectors, Melbourne 1921, 3 pp., in Queensland Education Department file A/20869, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane.

33. G.S. Browne, "Victoria," in *Education in Australia*, ed. G.S. Browne (London: Macmillan, 1927): 136-38. For a general account of teachers' promotions see A.D. Spaul, "Spencer Button: A Centenary Tribute to the Careers of State School Teachers," in *Australian Teachers' Careers*, ed. R. McLean and P. McKenzie

requisite for promotion. This was unfair to the bulk of teachers who were scoring high points for efficient teaching but who could not achieve the almost perfect score. A more fundamental criticism was that because the "numerical estimate" was so detailed in scoring it promoted not excellence in teaching, but competition between teachers and subservience to head teachers, inspectors, and the system. As one critic observed in 1918, this might "satisfy Prussians, but not free-born Australians."<sup>34</sup> A women teachers' deputation to the Minister claimed that the numerical estimate gave too much power to the inspectors, relative to the duties of the classifiers' committee, "and it harasses and depresses the teacher."<sup>35</sup> Another teacher suggested in 1923 that this form of competition had become "a distinct menace to the well-being of the teacher and the liberal education of the pupils."<sup>36</sup>

Running through these complaints was the argument that a numerical estimate was impossible to administer fairly because different inspectors valued different parts of its schedule. "GEW" depicted inspectors as four basic types: those who valued thoroughness rather than brilliance in teaching, those who admired logical action and strong organization, those who were fastidiously correct, and those who were always destructive in criticism.<sup>37</sup> Inspectors' impressions of teachers as found in the numerical estimates produced an arbitrariness that made it almost impossible for a committee of classifiers to moderate the marks to allow for differences in inspectors' personalities. Most complainants offered few suggestions for an alternative system, other than for the government to create more promotion positions, but towards the end of the period the idea of a written report, or an alphabetical ranking, was finding favour among teachers and inspectors alike.

## 2. A Favourable Socio-Political Climate

The second strategic variable for union growth is the existence of a favourable socio-political framework necessary for white-collar workers to establish or restructure new collective organizations. Public and political opinion

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(Hawthorn: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1991): 108-18.

34. *PSJV*, 29 June 1918.

35. "Women Teachers' Association's Deputation to the Minister," *Herald* [Melbourne], 10 Sept. 1918. For later complaints see Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (June 1925): 64, N86/4.

36. *The Program*, August 1923. For concern about the use of secret reports on teachers, see Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Mar. 1924): 21, N86/4.

37. *The Program*, 1 Nov. 1921.

had to be conducive of this activity, especially when the occupational group was employed by the state. But more significantly, inspiration and precedent in the traditional spheres of the labour movement had to be available, so that white-collar unions could “learn” from their example. Finally, examples of successful organization in similar industries, interstate or overseas, were an important element in the construction of a supportive climate for organization. For example, Victorian and Queensland teachers had found the emergence of the National Union of Teachers in England a positive encouragement for the creation of similar central unions in the 1880s. By the 1920s Victorian teachers were attracted to the organizational models of the successful teachers’ unions in other parts of Australia.

The period 1916-26 was a critical period in the expansion of the labour movement in Australia. This was particularly true of public sector unionism when both blue- and white-collar state employees had borne the brunt of wartime economics, then post-war adjustments, that had aimed to restrict the levels of government outlays. In most states public servants and teachers were threatened with the levy of a special tax on salary to maintain revenue levels. These did not eventuate in a formal sense, but fears of such impositions helped mobilize public service unionism. In Victoria, the cessation of automatic annual pay increments for teachers and public servants between October 1915 and December 1918 was regarded as an imposition of a sectional levy on these two groups.<sup>38</sup>

The driving force that mobilized public sector unions was their attempts to resist increased workloads, shortage in staffing and materials, and the pegging of their salaries during a period of high price inflation. The period is identifiable as one of growth of public sector unionism, industrial unrest, and even overt militancy. If the early twentieth century belonged to the revival of traditional trade unionism (after the Great Strikes and the Depression of the 1890s), then the decade after 1916 belonged to public sector unionism.

Railway unionism dominated the scene in Victoria and it acted as a beacon to public service, police, and teacher unionism. The restructuring of disparate sections into the Victorian Railways Union, and its militant bid to gain access to an independent industrial tribunal in 1919, had a salutary effect on other state employee organizations.<sup>39</sup> As the *Public Service Journal of Victoria* observed in February 1919:

This is the age of organization....we are on the threshold of effective organization, the swaddling days are past, and we conjure all believers

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38. “Annual Report of the VSSF for 1917,” *PSJV*, 31 Jan. 1918.

39. For the growth of the Victorian Railways Union and its industrial activities, see *Railways Union Gazette* [Melbourne], 22 May 1919. Also “Frank Hyett,” *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 9 (1983): 422-23.

in unity to put the [Public Service] Federation on that sound foundation which only financial and numerical strength can give.<sup>40</sup>

In most states valuable informal co-operation had existed between teachers' unions and public service unions to achieve common objectives such as access to industrial arbitration or the introduction of state-funded superannuation schemes for public servants.<sup>41</sup> By 1921 only Victorian teachers had failed to obtain these conditions. In the strong Labor Party states, and especially Queensland, public servants, police, and teachers had won the right to bargain by being granted access to state arbitration systems. This led to major salary increases in these states at the end of the war. Access to a state arbitration system also meant that for effective conciliation and arbitration to occur, the system had to negotiate with one central union for each industry. Where these processes were unavailable, or collapsed during negotiations, occasional outbursts of direct action occurred such as in the Commonwealth clerks' strike of 1920, the Western Australian teachers and public servants' strike of 1920, or the Victorian police strike of 1923.<sup>42</sup> Among teachers there were occasional demands for a similar expression of militancy, but such demands were ignored by more compliant colleagues, who were often the head teachers' groups that still wielded considerable influence in the corridors of union halls.

Victoria's public servants and teachers watched these local and interstate developments with a mixture of admiration and envy. David Black, a leading activist in the Teachers' Union, pointed out in June 1919 that Victoria was the only state not to have a strong single teachers' union, and it was therefore not surprising to understand how teachers' material conditions had deteriorated since the outbreak of war.<sup>43</sup> Several years later Victorian teacher union leaders learnt first-hand of the advantages of strong unionism, and industrial arbitration, from the first interstate conferences of teachers' unions.<sup>44</sup>

Teacher and public service unionism received a fillip from the expansion of the federal arbitration system following the High Court's *Engineers* decision of 1920. Henceforth, the states could no longer rely on the constitutional "doctrine of states' immunity" to restrain state employees from seeking federal awards adjudicated by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The clearing away of this

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40. *PSJV*, 1 Feb. 1919.

41. For example, see "Public Servants and Teachers Joint Campaign for State Superannuation in Queensland," in *A History of the Queensland Teachers' Union*, ed. A.D. Spaul and M.G. Sullivan (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989): 115-17.

42. A.D. Spaul, "The State School Teachers' Decision (High Court 1929) Revisited," *Australian Journal of Education* 31 (Nov. 1987): 242-43.

43. *The Program*, 30 June 1919.

44. A.D. Spaul, "The Establishment of a National Teachers' Union in Australia 1921-1937," *History of Education Review* 18 (1989): 26-42.

restraint ensured that state-employed “manual” workers could enjoy the “superior” benefits of federal industrial arbitration. It also opened up the possibility for other occupations to “try their hand” in the federal jurisdiction. Between 1920 and 1926 the High Court and the Arbitration Court permitted state-employed groups such as engineers, hospital workers, nurses, firefighters, municipal clerks, professional officers in the railways, and clerks in state banking and insurance the right of access to the federal industrial relations system. Public servants and teachers also showed their hand by establishing separate federal unions in 1924.<sup>45</sup>

This probably would not have been the case had Victoria, like elsewhere, moved back to popular support for the Labor Party following its split over conscription in 1916. Victoria, however, remained the jewel in the crown of conservative politics in Australia. The Nationalist party was hostile to public service unionism, especially after its Protestant establishment detected a whiff of Catholic assertiveness behind the emergence of public service militancy.<sup>46</sup> In the 1920s they were joined by the Farmers’ (Country) Party and both were implacably opposed to public servants and state teachers having the right to bargain in either the state or federal jurisdictions. Despite the dominance of “Tory” rule in Victoria between 1916 and 1926, the Labor Party began to win back electoral support after 1920.<sup>47</sup> But when it finally won government, its term was limited to four months (July–November 1924), which was not enough time to introduce legislation for a state industrial tribunal for teachers and public servants, or a state superannuation scheme for these groups. Nevertheless, the revival of the Labor Party in Victorian politics after 1920 was a sign to teachers that another element had been added to the climate conducive to the development of a strong teacher union movement in Victoria.

### 3. Union Leadership

This strategic factor is regarded as essential for workers like school teachers, who do not have social class, family, or occupational intimacy with labour collectivity. Leadership can be charismatic, or institutional once a teachers’ organization has been established. Union leadership, whatever its character, needs to demonstrate patience and dedication, and the skills of organization and

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45. Spaul, “The State School,” 238–47.

46. M. Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop* (Melbourne: McPhee, Gribble, 1988), 131–33.

47. C.A. Hughes and B.D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics, 1890–1964* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1968), 120–22, 478–83.

persuasion, to bring "middle class," state workers like teachers to accept the need for collective organization.

Whereas in the 1880s the leadership of teachers emanated from a small group of Melbourne head teachers, in the period 1916-26, teacher leadership was scattered among a number of existing unions. There was no one charismatic leader, "a union boss," or a sectional elite, able to lead the tribes of Victorian teachers out of the wilderness. The most significant aspect of teacher union leadership in this period was that from their scattered offices, leaders believed that teacher unionism could not become a major industrial or political force while it remained in a debilitated, discordant condition. Without union re-formation, rank-and-file teachers would continue to remain either outside a union, or apathetic within one. The problem for union leadership was to decide by what means, and in what form, a stronger brand of unionism could be offered to teachers. Three broad options were available: a restructured Teachers' Union operating as either a federation or central union; a number of separate teachers' unions bound together by a public service federation; or a number of separate teachers' unions. The past had shown fragmented teacher unionism was a recipe for further ineffectiveness of the individual unions and the corporate whole. Rank-and-file teachers would not join while fragmentation and inter-union rivalry persisted. Public opinion was of a like mind, if Victoria's oldest newspaper had accurately captured this mood: "The necessity for a strong combination of teachers—call it a union or anything else—is recognized by all teachers....[they must] put an end to the want of unity which has sickened every lover of his [*sic*] profession for years past."<sup>48</sup> The other two options remained open until 1924, thereby contributing to the climate of disunity in Victoria, and the snail's pace sense of a final resolution. Thus the role of union leadership in promoting new growth tended to be the governing variable in the three strategic variables of union formation in Victoria.

Among the leadership of the smaller unions, women, high school and technical school teachers, the main objective was to find security in a larger federation.<sup>49</sup> Melbourne High School's principal, Joseph Hocking, and John Peart, a Geelong technical school teacher, believed that this could be achieved by affiliation with the public service federation.<sup>50</sup> John Braithwaite, another high school principal, Miss Van Hooten, a primary teacher in Melbourne, and Henry Hart, head teacher of a country town school, believed that they should build a strong Teachers' Union but when this failed, they were willing to co-operate with

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48. *Geelong Advertiser*, 13 June 1919.

49. D.M. Hudson, "Post-Primary Teachers Organizations in Victoria, 1905-1950" (M.A. thesis, Melbourne University, 1971), 33, 42.

50. Reid, "Victorian High School Teachers' Association," 121; Interview with J. Peart (1969), Tape No. 17, Monash University Faculty of Education, Oral History Archives.

the public service federation.<sup>51</sup> Anton Vroland, a president of the Teachers' Union and owner/editor of *The Program*, was of a similar disposition, but argued that the Teachers' Union should never lose its identity or independent spirit. Vroland was always willing to explore ways of bringing the sectional unions into the Teachers' Union's fold.<sup>52</sup> David Black, the first organizer of the Teachers' Union, stressed that a strong union based on local branches should be the primary objective of his union, and it should ignore the public service federation because teachers had different interests than public servants.<sup>53</sup>

The leadership of the High School Teachers' and Technical Teachers' Associations eventually accepted that if they joined the Teachers' Union they would have a minority voice. But this was the price of belonging to a strong union; it was a price Florence Johnson was not prepared to pay for women teachers. Johnson always supported the notion of women teachers belonging to a larger organization with greater strength, providing that it nurtured the economic interests of women teachers.<sup>54</sup> She and other women leaders made the first gesture of *rapprochement* when the Women Teachers' Association and Women's branch of the Teachers' Union merged into a single branch of the Union in 1921. This was a demonstration that teachers could forget past differences and unite in common purpose. But Johnson was not prepared to see the Teachers' Union ignore the interests of women teachers, and when it did in the early 1920s, she took her leave from the union and helped form a breakaway union of women teachers.

The other leadership group, which may be ignored in this study, comprised that of the country teachers' associations, like that of Geelong, Warragul, and Bendigo. They, and other smaller groups, were unwilling to remain in a teachers' union that was ineffective. Their transfer to the public service federation in 1919 was more than a symbolic protest, for it convinced the Teachers' Union leadership that their own union must start to organize systematically to meet the needs of teachers outside of the capital city. This was the first step on the long road to the successful formation of a single teachers' union in 1926.

To restate the framework necessary for teacher union formation or re-formation, the three strategic factors of growth—changing work situation of teachers, favourable socio-political climate, and union leadership—must all be present and interact to produce a successful new stage of development in teachers' organization in Victoria. The influence of these variables will now be studied by outlining the three phases of teacher union re-formation in the decade after 1916.

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51. "Report of Teachers' Union Annual Conference 1919," *The Program*, 30 May 1919.

52. *Ibid.*, 28 Mar. 1918; 30 May 1919.

53. *Ibid.*, 30 June 1919; 1 June 1921.

54. W.J. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson: Melbourne's Forgotten Feminist," *Victorian Historical Journal* 51 (Feb. 1980): 131-48.

**Teachers' Union versus Public Servants' Federation (1916-20)**

During a period of growing awareness of the need for robust teacher unionism, the Teachers' Union continued to decline in membership support and political influence. At the same time the public service unions and the teachers' unions which did not belong to the Teachers' Union emerged as a persuasive voice in public service labour relations. The vehicle for their emergence was the State Service Federation, which was a central council of most white-collar, public employee unions. In contrast to the Teachers' Union, it made a spirited response to the decline in public service employment conditions that had resulted from both wartime economic restrictions, and the revival of conservative populist economic proclivities at the end of the war.<sup>55</sup> Standing in the wings of this white-collar union militancy was state railway unionism, which came to the forefront of Victorian trade union politics in this period. The success of the Victorian Railways Union in obtaining an independent industrial tribunal for the arbitration of railway workers' conditions acted as both an inspiration and model for State Service Federation's behaviour in these years.<sup>56</sup>

As a result of the State Service Federation's emergence in labour relations, teachers began to transfer their loyalties to this public service federation. The two post-primary teachers' unions, small in size and limited in voice, were first attracted to the Federation. The Technical Teachers' Association affiliated in 1915 and the High School Teachers in 1916. The leaders of these unions were immediately elected to the executive of the Federation and the interests of their members were sympathetically processed by the Federation's general secretary, George Carter, who had been a leading teacher unionist in the 1900s. The post-primary unions were joined by Sixth Class Lady Teachers' Association in November 1916 and the Victorian Lady Teachers' Association in September 1917. A teacher, Florence Johnson, who had helped launch the Sixth Class Lady Teachers' Association in 1912, was instrumental in recruiting the Lady Teachers' Association to the Federation because of her role in the Federation's successful campaign to obtain increased salaries for younger women teachers and junior teachers.<sup>57</sup> Having secured the affiliation of Victorian Lady Teachers' Associa-

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55. "Annual Report of the VSSF for 1918," *PSJV*, 28 Feb. 1919. For a general account of trade unionism and politics in these years see I. Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics* (Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1979): 162-202.

56. For the role of VRU in obtaining an industrial tribunal see "Industrial Board for Railway Employees—A Short History," *Railways Union Gazette* [Melbourne], 20 June 1919. For operations of this tribunal see *Annual Reports of Victorian Railways Commissioners*, June 1920, 26, and *Railways Union Gazette*, 20 Jan. 1920, 20 Aug. 1920.

57. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 137; J. Biddington, "The Role of Women in the Victorian Education Department 1872-1925" (M.Ed. thesis, Melbourne Univer-

tion, Johnson persuaded both Women's Unions to merge into the one Women Teachers' Association [WTA] in December 1917.<sup>58</sup> Twelve months later the Women Teachers' Association was able to muster over 300 women teachers to protest against government procrastination in introducing a general salaries bill for all women teachers.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to these activities, the Teachers' Union remained inert. Whereas it could point to an affiliation of 33 city and country branches at the outbreak of the war, this had fallen to 25 in 1916-17 and 22 in 1917-18.<sup>60</sup> Its inability to resist the abolition of annual salary increments in 1916 put pressure on its head teachers' leadership to consider the Federation's offer to affiliate with the public servants' federation.<sup>61</sup> Delicate negotiations with the Federation were finally suspended when the State Service Federation insisted that the Teachers' Union would have to become a single central union with separate branches for men and women. Reorganization on these lines would also mean a sharing of power with the post-primary teachers unions and the Women Teachers' Association.<sup>62</sup> This was unacceptable to the Teachers' Union given the elementary teachers' antagonism towards the "high flyers" in the teaching service (the high school teachers) and the growing tensions between men and women teachers and between women teachers who were loyal to the WTA and those loyal to the Union.

Beneath this agenda was mounting concern in the Teachers' Union that the State Service Federation was becoming too closely identified with the Labor Party. This issue had come to a head in late 1917 when the Federation, acting allegedly outside its non-party-political objective, provided informal support to Maurice Blackburn, MP, in his fight for the state parliamentary seat of Essendon. Blackburn, who had acted as a legal counsel to the Federation, also had successfully amended the *Public Service Act* in 1916 to allow public servants openly to join political parties. The Federation had been grateful for his intervention. But Blackburn was also the leading anti-war activist in state politics.<sup>63</sup> His defence

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sity, 1977), 133-52, 191-242.

58. *Thirty Third Annual Report of the Victorian Lady Teachers' Association* (Melbourne: Phoenix Press, 1917), 4, 6.
59. *PSJV*, 31 Dec. 1918.
60. At the Teachers' Union Annual Conference in 1918, only 11 branches attended. Branch affiliation figures are taken from Teachers' Union Executive Minutes 1910-1923, N86/2 and N86/3 ANU Archives.
61. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Nov. 1916): 71, N86/3, ANU Archives.
62. Resolution No. 2, Teachers' Union Annual Conference (Agenda and Decisions), Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Apr. 1917): 83 N86/3, ANU Archives.
63. "Maurice Blackburn," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 7 (1979): 310-12. Arthur Calwell, a young public servant (and later secretary of VPSU), and later Federal Leader of the ALP, recalls Blackburn's campaign for political rights for

of his seat during the state elections of 1917—in which he lost the seat—had been furious, and the Federation's quiet endorsement of him during the election led to bitter controversy in the Federation. In the end, the Federation disaffiliated the Professional Officers and the Dairy Inspectors' Association because of their public criticism of Federation council's support of Blackburn.<sup>64</sup>

Undoubtedly this dispute in the Federation convinced the Teachers' Union to steer clear of the public servants' federation. Instead the Teachers' Union issued another round of pleas to teachers to form more local branches and to impress upon their colleagues the intrinsic value of "independent teacher unionism."<sup>65</sup> Such appeals invited a cynical response even from its own members. Why should teachers remain in, or join, the Teachers' Union, questioned one member, when "the past record of the Union will not recommend this effete organization to teachers." Another member went further by accusing the executive of being "the most hopeless body" in existence. "They have no fight, no energy, no ardour, no enthusiasm, no anything, but a lot of Polonius-like twaddle."<sup>66</sup>

The initiative passed to the Federation and its teachers' affiliates, especially the High School Teachers' Association. Its motives for seeking a stronger teachers' union were driven by the continuing decline in high school teachers' material conditions, as well as by its concern over the treatment of the professional officers by the Federation during the Blackburn incident. The High School Teachers' Association had seen itself as a kindred spirit to the Professional Association because high school teachers were classified as members of the professional division in the public service. In July 1918 the High School Teachers' Association invited all teachers' unions to a meeting to consider an all-embracing teachers' federation. No progress was made because the Federation's teachers' unions insisted that any teachers' federation should also be affiliated with the public servants' federation. This was again unacceptable to the Teachers' Union because the State Service Federation continued to recruit teachers' groups.<sup>67</sup>

Why not? The Federation had won major concessions for classroom teachers throughout 1917-18. Its most spectacular success was its role in the

people like Calwell; see A.A. Calwell, *Calwell: Be Just and Fear Not* (Melbourne: Lloyd O'Neil, 1972), 37-38.

64. *PSJV*, 30 Mar. 1919.

65. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Nov. 1917): 95 N86/3, ANU Archives.

66. Quoted in W.J. McDonald, "Aspects of Unionism and Professionalism in Victoria: The V.T.U. 1926-1936" (M.Ed. thesis, Monash University, 1978), 25; for other internal critics see "Observer," *The Program*, 25 Apr. 1919, and "Bolsh," *The Program*, 27 June 1918.

67. "Annual Report of the HSTA, June 1918," *PSJV*, 29 June 1918 and Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Aug. 1918): 107, N86/3.

shaping of the *Women Teachers' Act* 1918, which had restored the four-fifths principle for women teachers' salaries after the abandonment of this principle in 1893. Because of its input into this legislation the Federation had won the admiration of most women teachers, including a public endorsement that "only since the sweated servants of the state have joined the SSF have their cries been heard and heeded."<sup>68</sup> The Federation had also publicly ventilated the growing concern of teachers over the abuses in the use of the "numerical estimate" by inspectors' appraisal of teachers. The Federation's message towards the end of 1918 was directed towards its detractors in the public service and the teaching service: "When public servants organise in an effective way and develop a little more militancy then and not till then, will they succeed in enforcing their just demands."<sup>69</sup>

The Federation launched a major campaign for teacher support with a circular pointing to the stagnation of the Teachers' Union and the futility of the Federation's attempts to enlist the affiliation of the Teachers' Union. It followed this with the appointment of Florence Johnson as organizer and secretary of its women's division. Johnson's objective was to recruit both men and women teachers into the Federation camp.<sup>70</sup> To counteract this thrust, the Teachers' Union executive called on all its members to defer any decision to transfer to the Federation until the executive formulated a new proposal for the Teachers' Union affiliation with the Federation. In June 1919 the executive's special sub-committee announced that "there seems no possibility of gaining advantages for teachers in any way commensurate with the risks which would be taken" in joining the Federation.<sup>71</sup> The Teachers' Union leadership had already pre-empted this conclusion by appointing an organizer, David Black, to meet the challenge of Florence Johnson.

Winter 1919 saw the opening of organizational battle for the hearts and minds of Victorian teachers. Both unions travelled throughout Victoria seeking new associations. The Teachers' Union, using scare tactics that the Federation was a form of the "One Big Union," would revive branches in the large towns only to see them, or parts thereof, defect to the State Service Federation. Geelong went first, then Bendigo, Warragul, St. Arnaud, and Ballarat women.<sup>72</sup> Castlemaine, Dunolly, and other goldfield towns remained evenly divided between Union and Federation.<sup>73</sup> Shepparton and several smaller towns declared

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68. *PSJV*, 31 Oct. 1918.

69. *Ibid.*

70. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 133.

71. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (June 1919): 125, N86/3.

72. *Geelong Advertiser*, 17 May 1919, 2 June 1919; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 22 May 1919; *St. Arnaud Times*, 9 Sept. 1919; *PSJV*, 30 June 1919.

73. *Argus* [Melbourne], 21 Aug. 1919.

their loyalty to the union.<sup>74</sup> Finally, a Men Teachers' Council was formed by the Federation,<sup>75</sup> while the Junior Teachers' Association in Melbourne, which had been formed the year before, also crossed to the Federation.<sup>76</sup> Indeed the rush of blood towards militant unionism was so strong that assistant class teachers in Melbourne wanted the Federation to organize a stop-work meeting over the decline in salary levels.<sup>77</sup>

The Teachers' Union campaign for teacher support was not a complete failure. During 1919 its increased public visibility encouraged the establishment of fourteen new branches in the last half of 1919, bringing its total number of branches to over fifty.<sup>78</sup> Most of the new branches comprised only some of the elementary teachers in the smaller country towns and hamlets. Its total membership at the end of 1919 was only 1,120, whereas the Federation had the support of nearly 1,000 primary school and junior teachers, as well as 280 post-primary teachers.<sup>79</sup>

In one last bid to deflect the State Service Federation's momentum in schools, the Teachers' Union helped establish a rival public service federation to the Federation. Formed in October 1919, called the Public Service League, it comprised the Teachers' Union and two dissidents in the Federation, the Professional Association and the State Clerical Association. This action drew barbs from the Federation, which warned that it encouraged "small coteries of public servants...that still have enough persuasive power to split and render asunder the organization of the whole."<sup>80</sup> The Public Service League adopted parallel interests to the Federation, concentrating its efforts on an independent salaries tribunal for public servants and superannuation. It also left open the option for closer co-operation with the State Service Federation and the Victorian Railways Officers' Association.<sup>81</sup> The Federation took up the option and convened a series of meetings between the two executives in early 1920. Both peak organizations hosted a "monster rally" of 2,000 public servants in May 1920 to press on the government the urgent need for an independent salaries tribunal for public servants similar to that granted to state railways employees in 1919. The rally (later termed "the night had come") was addressed by the secretary of the

74. *The Program*, 30 June 1919.

75. *PSJV*, 31 Oct. 1919.

76. *Ibid.*, 30 Sept. 1919.

77. *Argus* [Melbourne], 9 June 1919.

78. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Nov. 1919): 136, N86/3 ANU Archives.

79. In this round of inter-union conflict the Director of Education, Frank Tate, who as a young teacher helped form the Teachers' Union in 1885-86, seemed to favour his "old union" over the claims of the State Service Federation's teachers' unions. See *PSJV*, 30 Aug. 1917.

80. *Ibid.*, 30 Nov. 1919.

81. "Annual Report of Victorian Public Service League," *The Program*, 15 Feb. 1921.

Victorian Railways Union who on outlining his union's campaign to obtain the Railways Classification Board described the pioneering work of his predecessor in merging a number of small "segregated and jealous" railways unions into the powerful VRU.<sup>82</sup>

The message was not lost on public servants and teachers. Almost immediately after the rally the High School Teachers' Association and the Women Teachers' Association urged the Teachers' Union to reconsider affiliation with the State Service Federation.<sup>83</sup> Women teachers in both the Federation and Union went further, again under the guidance of Florence Johnson, and offered to form a single Women's branch of the Teachers' Union if the Union would affiliate with the Federation.<sup>84</sup> On July 1, 1920, at the initiative of the Teachers' Union, the Public Service League amalgamated with the State Service Federation and a provisional council established the Victorian Public Service Union [VPSU]. It comprised the existing affiliates of the Federation, an enlarged Teachers' Union because of the inclusion of women teachers, and country branches of former "Federation teachers," the Professional Association, and later the State Clerical Association.<sup>85</sup> At last, the teachers' unions of Victoria had achieved an organizational unity which had eluded them since the 1880s. Or had they?

### Teacher Union and Public Service Union Co-operation (1920-23)

The teachers' unions formed the largest constituents of the Victorian Public Service Union, with some 4,000 of its 5,783 members in 1921. They became an integral part of VPSU's vigorous political campaign for substantial improvements and reforms in all public service employment conditions. The *modus operandi* of this peak council was that all affiliates retained sovereignty over domestic issues, while the VPSU council was to "direct policy on all areas of common interest," including issues related to industrial tribunals, appeal boards, equal pay for women, pay for juniors, the basic wage, annual and sick leave, hours of work, and superannuation.<sup>86</sup> The VPSU prosecuted these issues vigorously in the early 1920s using mass meetings, but not strikes, parliamentary and ministerial deputations, and electoral campaigns canvassing the opinions of

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82. *PSJV*, 31 May 1920.

83. *Ibid.*, 31 July 1920.

84. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 137.

85. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (July 1920): 183, N86/3 ANU Archives; VPSU Council Minutes, 9 Aug. 1920, Minute Book 1920-1924, Archives of Victorian Public Service Association [VPSA], Melbourne.

86. VPSU Council Minutes, 14 June 1921, Minute Book 1920-1924, VPSA.

candidates for parliament during State elections. The VPSU secured the parliamentary support of the Labor Party, with its sponsorship of a bill for a public service tribunal.<sup>87</sup>

Although the teachers' unions were satisfied with the VPSU's carriage of these areas of public employment policy, an ambivalence about the VPSU's "politics" continued, indeed intensified, in these years. Certainly, the VPSU seemed more politicized in the early 1920s: Tom Tunnecliffe, a former Labor MP, was appointed the VPSU general secretary, and Florence Johnson, the assistant secretary, was an ALP member as were the more prominent State Clerical Association's leaders, Frank Mazaroni and Arthur Calwell. Both men were anxious for the VPSU to develop even closer links with the Labor Party, for as Mazaroni argued, the only way for the VPSU to achieve its industrial agenda was to work with the Labor Party.<sup>88</sup> This type of argument did not sit well with the Teachers' Union or High School Teachers' Association's leadership. When a new VPSU secretary was to be appointed in 1922 after Tunnecliffe resigned to again enter parliament, Hocking, as vice-president of the VPSU, declared that he was not in favour of the secretary belonging to any political party. This view prevailed on the VPSU Council.<sup>89</sup> Twelve months later when council debated closer co-operation with Labor's parliamentary party, all but one of the teacher unions' representatives voted against such action.<sup>90</sup> To the more militant and pro-Labor members on the VPSU council this was yet another indication of the teacher unions' inherent conservatism. Just before this debate, the Teachers' Union had opposed the raising of a mass petition on the need for an industrial tribunal because it doubted the value of such petitions. In turn, Mazarini blasted the Teachers' Union's attitude as another example of its "insincerity" in supporting the struggle for reform of public employment.<sup>91</sup>

Twelve months later the uneasy relations between the teachers' unions and the VPSU became obvious, when the VPSU joined the Australian Public Servants' Federation. This had been an interstate conference of public service unions which had met spasmodically since 1913,<sup>92</sup> but the Australian Public Servants' Federation now intended to become a federal union which would seek registration in federal arbitration court as a preliminary requirement for seeking

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87. *Victorian Parliamentary Debates* [VPD] 155 (1920): 754-62. For Government's opposition to federal or state arbitration for public servants, see VPD 155 (1920): 763-67 and VPD 167 (1924): 220-23. For ALP's "promises" to public servants and teachers when in government, see *Labor Call* [Melbourne], 5 June 1924, 13 Nov. 1924.

88. VPSU Council Minutes, 13 June 1922, Minute Book 1920-1924, VPSA.

89. *Ibid.*, 13 Sept. 1921.

90. *Ibid.*, 13 June 1922.

91. *Ibid.*, 14 Mar. 1922.

92. Spaul, "National Teachers' Union," 27-28.

a federal salary award. As a federal union, Australian Public Servants' Federation would have to be based on an "industry of state public servants" to meet one of the requirements of registration; its membership in the state branches would of necessity exclude the coverage of railway officers and school teachers.<sup>93</sup> The Teachers' Union, which was the main financial contributor to the VPSU, questioned whether its high cost of affiliation should continue to support the VPSU, which was determined to join a federal union which would exclude school teachers from its membership coverage. John Braithwaite, however, cautioned that the Teachers' Union should not be too hasty in reducing its affiliation fees to the VPSU, because "in one sense it should be regarded as the price we had paid for the unity of teachers which the experience over the last two years had abundantly justified."<sup>94</sup> Yet this phase of teacher unity had become more symbolic than real. There were still tensions in some of the country branches that had been Federation affiliates in 1919, while women teachers were disenchanted by their lack of effective representation in the Teacher Union's leadership and at annual conference.<sup>95</sup> Many of the new branches and new members which had swelled the Teachers' Union numbers to over 3,000 in 1922 (an increase of over 1,000 new members in two years) had joined in the expectation that the Teachers' Union and the VPSU would achieve major breakthroughs in their salaries, promotions, and inspection methods. Nothing really had happened. In addition, the teachers' unions' leadership was aware that interstate teachers' unions had made substantial breakthroughs in salaries and employment conditions and as the Queensland Teachers' Union general secretary told Victorians when he visited Melbourne in May 1921, they had done so in a single central union that was independent of state public service federations.<sup>96</sup>

But when the Teachers' Union proposed a similar idea for the possibility of a federation numerically dominated by elementary school teachers, this was opposed by both the High School Teachers' and Technical Teachers' Associations.<sup>97</sup> To allay these fears, the Teachers' Union offered a more practical scheme of a consultative group with each union having five representatives on a teacher council. The main agenda of the group would be to see if teachers' unions could work together on matters of common industrial and professional interest, while its constituent bodies would still have rights of autonomous action. They agreed to call this group the Victorian State Teachers' Federation.<sup>98</sup> Not surprisingly the Teachers' Federation achieved little because it lacked executive powers.

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93. VPSU Council Minutes, 12 Dec. 1922; 27 Feb. 1923; Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Mar. 1923): 361-62.

94. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (May 1922): 299.

95. *The Program*, 1 Mar. 1924.

96. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (May 1921): 264-65.

97. *PSJV*, 30 Apr. 1921, 31 May 1921.

98. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Aug. 1921): 270-71.

At best, it kept union leaders talking. Teachers with memories of 1918-20 still perceived the VPSU as their main hope of achieving material reforms. Reliance on the VPSU to "get things done" for teachers was brought to an abrupt halt when the VPSU formed the Victorian branch of Australian Public Servants' Federation in November 1923. (This new federal union was granted registration as an employee organization by the federal arbitration court in 1924, but this was overturned on appeal the same year.)<sup>99</sup> The Teachers' Union and the High School Teachers' Association, having no place in a state branch of a federal union which did not cover school teachers, graciously withdrew from the VPSU. (The small Technical Teachers' Association initially remained affiliated with the VPSU.)

The Teachers' Union decision prompted an angry request from its Women's branch as to why their union had left the VPSU.<sup>100</sup> This brought into the open the complaints of women teachers that their interests were being ignored by the Teachers' Union, and that they were being discriminated against by decisions of its council and annual conference. They also pointed to the treatment of Florence Johnson, who had been appointed assistant secretary of the Teachers' Union in March 1921. In early 1923 Johnson's position had been downgraded to that of organizer (on the same salary) and despite the protests of the Women's branch, the position was confirmed by council.<sup>101</sup> The Teachers' Union council also rejected the branch's proposals to elect its membership from the rank and file, a move which would have produced more women representatives from country branches on the Union's governing body.<sup>102</sup>

A week later Johnson resigned as organizer allegedly on medical grounds, but undoubtedly she was motivated not only by the Teachers' Union treatment of women, but because its secession from the VPSU had robbed her of formal contact with her Labor Party colleagues, such as Arthur Calwell, and the women's section of the VPSU.<sup>103</sup> Publicly she had resigned because she could not "continue in the service of an organization whose policy as formulated was not in the best interests of women teachers, who comprised 65 percent of the Union membership."<sup>104</sup> Within a month Johnson and like-minded members of the Women's branch and other branches revived the Women Teachers' Association as an entity separate from the Teachers' Union. It attracted the initial support of about 100 women (and never became larger than about 350 members). Johnson

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99. R. (Victoria) v. Australian Public Servants' Federation, *Commonwealth Arbitration Reports* 20 (1924): 11-27.

100. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Dec. 1923): 427.

101. *Ibid.* (Mar. 1923): 363, 369.

102. *Ibid.* (Feb. 1924): 16.

103. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 140.

104. *Argus* [Melbourne], 11 Feb. 1924.

became the Women Teachers' Association secretary.<sup>105</sup> The Women's branch in Melbourne voted 177 to 33 to stay with the Union. The period of Teachers' Union co-operation with public service unionism had ended with teacher union unity appearing as elusive as ever.

### **Towards a Central Union (1924-26)**

Teacher union unity was loosely retained under the umbrella of the Victorian State Teachers' Federation, which was now conscious that in the absence of the VPSU it must strive to find an acceptable single union for all teachers. Women teachers provided the stumbling block. The Women's branch although loyal to the Teachers' Union continued to complain that women teachers were grossly underrepresented in the Teachers' Union's councils and conferences. It also insisted that the Teachers' Union executive attempt to persuade the Women Teachers' Association to rejoin the Union. The Teachers' Union leadership was unconvinced, except for a small minority. Most of the executive came to the same conclusion as David Black that the Teachers' Union should "recognize that there was a section of the women teachers who would not work in any organization in which there were men," but the Teachers' Union should at least co-operate with the Women Teachers' Association. Others were adamant their union should not regard the breakaway as "a sister Association."<sup>106</sup> No olive branch was offered to the Women Teachers' Association and Johnson continued to recruit women teachers in schools until 1927, when the Minister for Education intervened, declaring he would not allow schools to become "battlegrounds" of inter-union rivalry.<sup>107</sup>

Other forms of teacher union disunity re-emerged in 1924. Geelong could not find a suitable branch organization to accommodate rival teachers' groups in the city, and there were fears that another Geelong breakaway would occur from the Union.<sup>108</sup> The University Teachers' Association (for teachers who had studied at the University) was revived in 1924 and it expressed interest in joining the VPSU, as it had done in 1919.<sup>109</sup> About the same time, the Technical Teachers' Association fragmented when senior teachers in technical colleges not

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105. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 141-45.

106. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Nov. 1924): 43, N86/4, ANU Archives.

107. McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson," 143.

108. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Sept. 1924): 34, N86/4.

109. Hudson, "Post Primary Teachers," 56.

under the direct control of Education Department formed a separate body called the Technical Instructors' Society. It was concerned that academic or secondary teachers in technical schools and colleges were given promotional advancement over those with vocational or higher technical skills. The Society remained a small group of not more than sixty teachers.<sup>110</sup>

This expanding face of teacher fragmentation acted as one of several incentives in 1925 for the creation of a single teachers' union. Obviously the Teachers' Union, with nearly 3,500 members, would not accept the existing senate formula (equal representatives) on the Victorian State Teachers' Federation as a model to create a new union. Instead it proposed a governance structure based on differential representation, so that the smaller groups of high school and technical teachers would be overrepresented but not have numerical dominance in a single union. The leadership of all three teachers' unions accepted this proposal in April 1925.<sup>111</sup> They did so not only to resist the possibility of further encroachments from "outside" teachers' groups, but because of the emergence of new external imperatives which required the response of a united teachers' voice.

The first external imperative was that the long-awaited legislation for a state superannuation scheme for public servants and teachers was being prepared for Parliament. The teachers' unions were anxious that the special interests of the teaching service were not ignored by the VPSU and the VRU-dominated superannuation campaign committee. Moreover, the three teachers' unions were able to present a united front during the elections for a member representative. The result saw the election of a teacher, not a public servant or railway worker, to the State Superannuation Board—much to the chagrin of the VPSU, which had been the true champion of the cause.<sup>112</sup>

The second imperative was that Frank Tate, the Director of Education, had at last convinced the government of the need to design a more flexible promotion and classification scheme for teachers which would take account of the growth in the teaching service and its segmentation since 1910. The teachers' unions were consulted on the preparation and amendments to this Teachers' Bill in 1925. The main beneficiaries of the new system were to be primary men teachers but the eventual creation of a separate classification system for post-primary teachers ensured that at least the High School Teachers' Association supported the proposal. The Technical Teachers' Association concurred, but only after it had been reassured by the Minister that its members would also belong on the new secondary roll and thereby receive better promotion opportunities. Women

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110. *Ibid.*, 51-53.

111. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (May 1925): 59-60, N86/4.

112. *PSJV*, 26 Jan. 1925.

teachers felt that they had been unfairly treated, yet again, in their career restructuring.<sup>113</sup>

At one stage, plans for the creation of a new union seemed in jeopardy when it was rumoured that the Education Department would impose a common classification on all teachers. Primary teachers feared that in such a scheme their better-qualified post-primary colleagues would be promoted ahead of them. Because of this threat, the special conference of the Teachers' Union in May 1925 rejected the executive's recommendations for a new central union.<sup>114</sup> By the end of the year, however, the mood of elementary school teachers had changed after the actual legislation revealed that there would be two classified rolls: one for primary and one for post-primary teachers. A combined mass meeting of the three unions in December 1925 not only gave public endorsement to the legislation during its final passage through parliament, but also revealed the depth of teacher unity in the state.<sup>115</sup>

The third external imperative which gave shape to the plans for a new union was the perennial issue of teachers' access to industrial arbitration. Until 1925 the teachers' unions had relied on the VPSU's campaign to obtain a tribunal similar in structure and objectives to the Railways Classification Board. The collapse of the Prendergast Labor government in November 1924 put to rest any prospects for a public service tribunal. Events interstate immediately provided a new glimmer of hope for the Victorian teachers. In New South Wales, the teachers' union and the Public Service Association had been removed by conservative government edict from the state arbitration system in 1922. Both unions then established separate federal unions in the hope of obtaining arbitrated salaries from the federal industrial tribunal. (This, we recall, precipitated the withdrawal of teachers' unions from the VPSU when it became a branch of the Australian Public Servants' Federation.) The new federal teachers' union, the Federated State School Teachers' Association of Australia [FSSTAA], consisting mainly of New South Wales teachers and a few individual members from other states, obtained registration from the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in mid-1924.<sup>116</sup>

Initially the Victorian teachers' unions had paid little heed to these developments. But after FSSTAA withstood objections from the states to its registration as a federal union, the unions perceived that perhaps their only chance for arbitration lay with a federal union. They also came to appreciate that to join

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113. Selleck, *Frank Tate*, 248-50; Reid, "Victorian High School Teachers' Association," 126-29; Education Department of Victoria file on Teachers Act 1925, special case No. 1274, Public Records Office of Victoria.

114. *Teachers' Journal*, 1 July 1925.

115. *Argus* [Melbourne], 11 Dec. 1925.

116. Spaul, "National Teachers' Union," 30-32.

FSSTAA as a state branch they would have to create a single union to act as that branch. In September 1925, FSSTAA invited Victoria to become a branch, and to share the costs of maintaining the federal union. The Teachers' Union agreed in principle, but responded it could not provide more tangible support; "Owing to our disunity we are not in a position to take advantage of registration...in the near future [however] it will be found possible to remedy the existing state of affairs."<sup>117</sup>

The "remedy" was to push ahead with plans to create a single union. This was made easier after the passing of the *Teachers' Act* 1925, thereby resolving the issue of the common roll. By mid-1926 the three unions had endorsed what was essentially the April 1925 proposal for the establishment of a single central union with separate country branches and sectional branches for head, women, high school, and technical school teachers. The last two branches would have overrepresentation on the council in proportion to their memberships, but the dominant control would reside with primary teachers. The two existing post-primary unions accepted this as the price for a stronger union movement. The Teachers' Union, however, still contained pockets of resistance to the merger, emanating both from primary teachers' distrust of secondary teachers, and "personality rivalries" among the leadership in the union. Both sources of tension were apparent at its special conference in June 1926, but they were not sufficiently persuasive as to distract the conference's determination to create a new union.<sup>118</sup>

Unfortunately these undercurrents were still present at the final meeting of the Teachers' Union on August 13, 1926. They carried over into the first meeting of the Victorian Teachers' Union council held the same day. Such was the depth of acrimony displayed by a small petulant minority therein, that there were fears that the new union would be stillborn. Wiser counsels prevailed from the eleven women and most of the thirteen men, and the Victorian Teachers' Union was launched.<sup>119</sup>

After an absence of forty years all Victorian public school teachers now had the opportunity to join a single union. "Teacher Unity" again, but qualified by the presence of the Women Teachers' Association and the Technical Instructors' Society. "Teacher Unity" at last, not in the absolute form practised by other Australian teachers' unions, but still close enough to be absolute for Victorian teachers, given their long discordant history.

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117. Teachers' Union Executive Minutes (Oct. 1925): 77, N86/4.

118. *Teachers' Journal*, 1 July 1926.

119. *Ibid.*, 1 Sept. 1926.

## Conclusion

This study has suggested that in Victoria there were several occasions between 1918 and 1925 when the three strategic variables for union growth nearly converged in strength to help shape the formation of a single teachers' union. "Nearly" was not close enough, however, and the contraction of one or more of these variables ensured the failure of any strategy to find an acceptable union structure. Certainly, the changing processes involved in teachers' work acted as a forceful reminder to teachers that they required a stronger organization. But the presence and force of this variable could not always be aligned with the other two variables of growth. In particular, a favourable socio-political climate only emerged after the establishment of robust public sector unionism in Victoria, and the consolidation of teacher unionism in the other states. These two movements created an ambivalence in the minds of teacher union leaders: should they pin their hopes on public service unionism, or on a form of separate teacher unionism practised successfully in New South Wales or Queensland? Ultimately, public service unionism abandoned Victorian teachers by excluding them from the Australian Public Servants' Federation. This development removed the ambivalence of Victorian teachers as to which organizational route to follow. But they were not as fortunate as their interstate colleagues who had gained the benefit of "teacher unity" from state incorporation of teacher unionism. The absence of access to compulsory arbitration in Victoria suggests not only the retarded pace of movement towards a single union, but a contradistinction, that Victoria was the only mainland state to restructure its teacher unionism into a single organization without the benefit of state intervention.

The strategic variable which was often absent in Victoria during this period was a union leadership dedicated to improving the strength and character of teacher unionism. Despite the efforts of individual union leaders, the tribalism in Victorian teacher unionism prevailed, thereby impeding any genuine moves to find a single union. Leadership's different, often conflicting, perceptions of what constituted the form of teacher unity hindered most attempts to find a suitable union organization. Only after 1923, with the other two variables of growth weighing upon union leadership, did it realize that they must follow the example of their interstate colleagues, even if it meant activating the federal union to resist further erosion of teachers' conditions. Only after this point had been reached did the formation of the Victorian Teachers' Union appear inevitable. Even then, the moves towards attaining teacher unity were marred by the defection of the Women Teachers' Association, and more importantly, by the unwillingness of the Teachers' Union's leadership to sweep a path of reconciliation towards this union of women teachers. This "breakaway group," and genuine lack of conciliatory response from the mainstream teacher union movement, tainted the very success of Victorian teachers to atone for the disunity and discord of the past.

## Epilogue

Victoria, the cradle of teacher unionism in the nineteenth century, was to become the last state to consolidate its separate, fragmented unions into a single union in the twentieth century. It still remained the weakest of the mainland states in attracting membership over ensuing decades.<sup>120</sup> The true era of union unity only came in the 1940s, but it was so short-lived that it has been described by others as “a moment of unity.”<sup>121</sup> During this moment the Victorian Teachers’ Union scaled the dizzy heights of militancy to bring down a state government (in 1945). This electoral intervention was necessary because the union, having been denied a federal award for salaries by the High Court’s decision of 1929 (the *State School Teachers* case), also found its access denied to a state tribunal until 1946. Unfortunately the glow of teacher unity (which had also seen the remnants of the Women Teachers’ Association and Technical Instructors’ Society return to the Union) lasted only a few years. Between 1948 and 1978 the Victorian Teachers’ Union fragmented into separate unions for high school, technical school, and principals’ unions. By 1980 the Victorian Teachers’ Union had become mainly a primary school teachers’ union.<sup>122</sup>

A decade later the Victorian Teachers’ Union disappeared as a separate entity. To its credit, along with the other two major unions in Victoria, it had hoped to create a new single teachers’ union. But its plans for a Teachers’ Federation collapsed in 1990 because of a new outbreak of inter-union rivalry. Instead of a single union, Victoria has given birth to two rival school teachers’ unions. The old ghosts of teacher discord and union fragmentation stalk the land once more.

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120. Most Australian teachers’ unions had increased their membership to over 80 percent of eligible teachers by 1940. McDonald shows the highest Victorian figure was 64.1 percent in 1929, and only 62.2 percent in 1939; see W.J. McDonald, “Aspects of Unionism and Professionalism in Victoria: The V.T.U. 1926-1936” (M.Ed. thesis, Monash University, 1978), 57.

121. B. Bessant, “A Moment of Unity, the Establishment of the Victorian Teachers’ Tribunal,” *Melbourne Studies in Education* 1967, 28-101.

122. Kate Nash and A.D. Spaul, “Victoria’s Teacher Unions,” in *Teacher Unionism in the 1980s: Four Perspectives*, ed. A.D. Spaul (Hawthorn: Australian Council of Educational Research, 1986), 29-59.