

LABOURERS

BEVERLEY BURGMANN

OVER 610 000 AUSTRALIANS worked in factories, more than in any other employment. More than half were in Sydney or Melbourne; most of the rest were in the other capitals or in cities such as Newcastle and Geelong. On average they were paid less in real terms than they would have been in 1930. For adult men the average wage was between £4 10s and £5 a week; for adult women it was about £2 10s a week. The average wage was significantly higher than the basic wage—the minimum wage legally payable—which varied from state to state between £3 11s 6d and £3 18s for adult married men, and about half that for adult women. Wages for workers on factory floors were closer to the basic than the average wage, but relatively high margins were paid for skill.

Printers were labour's aristocrats. The minimum wage for a male linotype operator on night shift at a Sydney daily newspaper was £8 1s a week. Bricklayers were also paid well above the average. A Melbourne brickie working in a sewer or tunnel earned £6 3s a week. In Sydney masons carving marble or stone made £7 9s 8d a week and patternmakers, the highest paid workers in engineering or metal works, earned £5 17s.

Of the capital cities, Sydney usually paid the highest minimum wage rates and Adelaide the lowest. Food, groceries, housing and clothing were dearer in Sydney than in Adelaide, but Adelaide was the third most expensive capital. In Adelaide unskilled workers in bakeries or factories making agricultural implements or nails earned only £3 14s. The same jobs in Sydney earned £4 4s for a shorter working week. A general hand in an Adelaide soap factory took home £3 11s, 1s 6d more than labourers in the sewerage and water supply industries, but less than the state basic wage of £3 14s.

Australia had no uniform working week, for state governments and courts often dealt independently with industrial law and policy. New South Wales and Queensland had a 44-hour week in industries governed by state awards, South Australia a 48-hour week in food and drink factories, Queensland a 40-hour week for building construction workers, Melbourne newspaper printers a 40-hour week



John Barlow, bootmaker for the New South Wales Fire Brigade, measures leather uppers for a custom-made pair of fireman's boots. Pix, 18 June 1938.



Workers at Humes Ltd, pipe manufacturers, lay pipes in a Perth suburb. The award wage for this kind of work was £3 14s 11d for a 44-hour week. This was 11d higher than the Perth basic wage, the lowest wage legally payable by an employer. Humes Limited papers.

ANU ARCHIVES OF BUSINESS AND LABOUR

on day shift and a 35-hour week on night shift. Some workers, such as Sydney Coombe of Hazelwood Park in Adelaide, had no set work hours. He worked for his father, a dairyman, for £2 a week and his board and lodging. He minded cows on the street and jogged over thirty kilometres a day delivering milk. 'There were no days off.'

It was a seven days a week job. I started about five o'clock. My father and mother did the milking and when they got enough milk ready I went and delivered it. I finished at nine o'clock. In those days we had about two deliveries a day. So I didn't have to do anything until twelve o'clock. From twelve o'clock onwards after the cows had been milked again, I went out and made the afternoon's delivery—that was about half past one until four o'clock. A lot of people around here thought you were on tap all hours of the day and some of the big houses would ask you in the afternoon to come back again and deliver some cream. In those days you just didn't refuse them.

Other labourers toiled hard and long in unhealthy environments. Engineering plants were particularly dangerous. Lorna Sincock, a 28-year-old housewife in South Plympton, an Adelaide suburb, has memories of her husband, an iron-moulder, coming home burnt with spraying metal. 'Even a pinprick of a burn would keep burning for a fortnight. By the time the fortnight was up the pinprick would be the size of a two shilling piece.' Edmund Edwards, a Perth factory blacksmith, who wore a big leather apron to protect his clothes, has memories of sheer physical effort:

It was all physical work. You had to hit everything with a hammer yourself, then your striker would hit the tools to cut things and you had to work all the time because they quote for things and you had to do so many things an hour. You can't stop, you're on the time all the time. You had a time sheet to write down when you finished a job, then you'd start on another one.

Fatigue, cramped working conditions and ancient plant all caused industrial accidents. Mines were more dangerous than factories, but in factories health was threatened by heat, noise and dust. Even in a relatively safe industry, tailoring, Joy Percy, an eighteen-year-old from Subiaco in Perth, knew one lass whose lungs were destroyed by dust from the cottonwool used to pad the shoulders and backs of men's coats. As in many factories, ventilation and lighting were poor, and Joy was forced to wear glasses after twelve months as a tailoress.

Some labourers were treated with contempt by their employers. According to George Huxley, a Perth tiler, the Sydney-based firm of Wunderlich treated employees as slaves. They provided no holiday, sick or wet pay, and when it rained he and his mates were forced to put a bag on their heads and work on. A director of an Adelaide soap factory epitomised the kind of attitude resented by workers. He thought his factory

dirty and smelly but very healthy. I don't think any illnesses could possibly be laid at the door of the trade. But a lot of it was unpleasant work and we had men that kept at it for years and years. Mind you some of them were of low intellect and they didn't mind what they were doing as long as they got their money at the end of the week.

He also thought soap workers needed discipline and recalled with approval a floor manager, 'an old nigger driver', who scared the men into working hard by

force of character and yelling at everybody. He was a terrific worker. He used to drive an inch and a half nail into a soap case with two hits . . . He was a tiger of a puritan, absolutely conscientious and faithful to his church.

On the other hand, Vera Collins and the twelve girls who worked in the millinery workroom of Foy and Gibson's department store in Perth were treated as part of a family. The workroom was large and airy, overlooking Hay Street. The girls were stood down without pay twice yearly, during the lulls between seasons in January and June, and they had no paid holidays; but Vera liked the atmosphere, and when rich people came to preview the latest hats they did not talk down to her. Similarly, George Huxley appreciated the support of his boss, Sir Lance Brisbane, when he damaged the cartilage of his knee. The insurance company refused him compensation, claiming that his injury could have been sustained pushing his bike to work, but Sir Lance warned that if the insurers did not pay he would withdraw his business from them. George received £2 9s a week, half his weekly wage, for nine months.

Sick pay was rare. If a worker was 'an old hand' and 'highly thought of', his company might give him full or half pay. Geoffrey Cooper, a manager of Cooper's brewery in Adelaide, acknowledged that sick pay provisions were

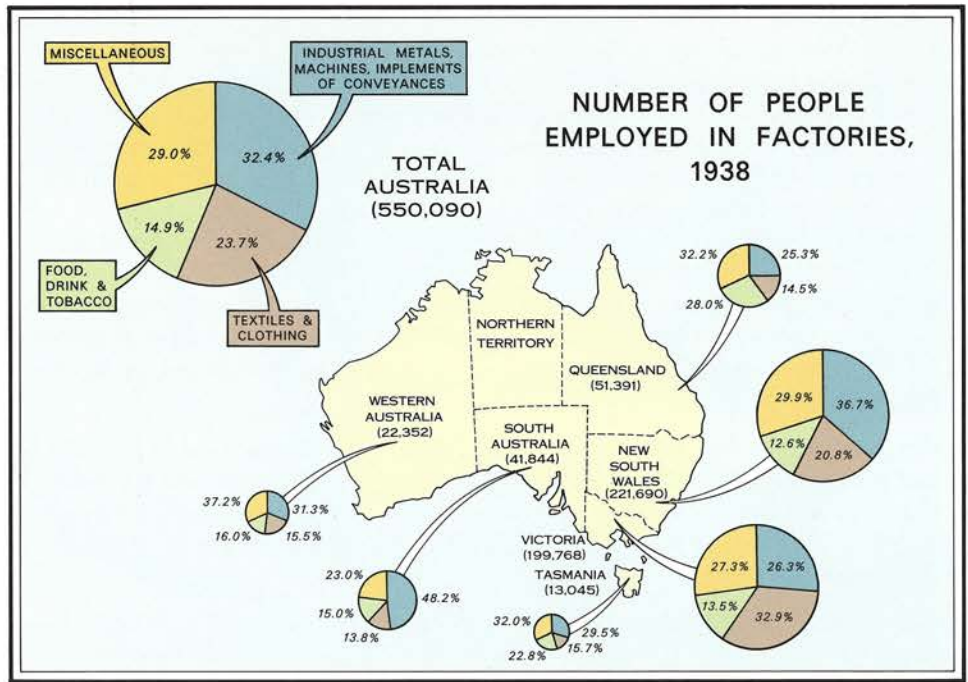
very much a hotch-potch of take your luck with your employer, whether he was kind or whether he wasn't. I think it was generally recognised that a working man didn't have any money put behind him worth noting and he had to be carried if he was a decent chap until he got through his sickness.

Reviving prosperity allowed some workers to object to such conditions. Working days lost from strikes leapt from 557 111 in 1937 to 1 337 994 in 1938. The largest dispute, a nationwide coalminers' strike affecting 21 000 workers, began in September, lasted several weeks and ended with the miners triumphant. In chapter 20 we look at the organisation of this campaign among miners and their communities in the Illawarra region. A significant strike involving 1500 iron-workers began in Newcastle in January, and a month later steel moulders went out



Women making silk stockings at Bond's Industries Ltd, Sydney. Pix, 9 Apr 1938.

Throughout Australia factory work varied greatly. Some was largely female: clothing and textiles, for example, accounted for half the female factory workforce in Sydney. On the other hand metal manufacturing was a male occupation. Over 40 per cent of factories had fewer than five workers. More than three-quarters of the industrial workforce and two-thirds of the factories were in New South Wales and Victoria. Factory work was an expanding area of employment: the number of both male and female factory employees increased by 75 per cent between 1933 and 1939. Outside the capital cities, the most important areas of industrial growth were those associated with iron and steel, especially at Whyalla and Port Pirie in South Australia and Newcastle and Port Kembla in New South Wales. Commonwealth year book.



in Sydney. Both strikes lasted about fourteen weeks. In the longest strike, at Mortlake in Sydney, 65 engineers at the Australian Gas Light Company stayed out for five months. In Perth 2000 building labourers struck during March for improved wages and working conditions, but 90 per cent of all strikes were by New South Wales miners or steelworkers. In South Australia there were only two disputes and in Western Australia seven.

Memories from the worst years of the depression discouraged many workers from complaining. Elsie Mitchell, who worked for a paper bag manufacturing firm in East Perth, was given notice every week in her pay envelope, which made her 'very careful what you do or say. Jobs were still very scarce and you didn't know whether you would be put off the following week so you were kept in line more or less'. In other factories a combination of paternalism and shrewd management ensured good industrial relations. 'People didn't go on strike' at Cooper's brewery in Adelaide, says Geoffrey Cooper: 'We had a tradition of sitting around the table and arguing about what could and couldn't be done; what people were or were not prepared to do. I think our employees had pretty good conditions'.

Strikes were few in industries where most factories were small. As the following table shows, 42 per cent employed fewer than five people. The Redfern-Waterloo area of Sydney, for example, was a jumble of small workshops, terrace houses and tiny backyards, where

Chimneys were prominent as wood and coal were used every day for cooking, washing, bathing, and for warmth in winter. Horses and carts clattered along the narrow streets, selling and delivering goods such as milk, bread, rabbits, fruit and vegetables, wood and coal.

The delivery men lived locally and chatted with customers as they moved along the street. People lived close to the factories that hired them. There were shoe factories, carrying businesses, bakeries and box factories. There were two printeries, Cryers, which made Christmas and greeting cards, and William Brooks, which

LABOUR-TIME

Labour-time could be policed rigorously. For some employers every second counted. For others it was a matter of their authority: wasted seconds represented disobedience. Walter Fox, a coppersmith with CSR, was handed a small glass disc every morning. It was 'about the same size as a penny' and on it was a number. 'When you went out at nighttime, you handed that in and a chappie'd mark your number down in a book. That worked. It had its humorous points. If you were a minute late you were docked a quarter of an hour. They had a long bench outside the timekeeper's office and they put these little discs out in rows in order. And the last tram that would get you there by 7.30, if it was a few minutes late, it would get you there with about a minute to go. The chap stood at the window and when they pulled the lever to let go with the steam whistle, he scooped all the docket in. Anyone who still had their docket in their hand was docked a quarter of an hour. Course, what would happen would be a chappie would come along and he'd be looking for 114 and he'd be saying "114, where is it", and of course they're mixed up. He's looking for 114 and moving them all around with the result that they were in a helluva mess by the time that the whistle was about to blow. The timekeeper would be trying to scoop them out and they'd finish up all over the footpath alongside the office and they'd be down on their hands and knees looking for these things. What a mess! But a quarter of an hour in those times when wages were such it was quite a lot of money.'

W. FOX, 1938 COLLECTION

printed the Sydney telephone directories. Food and drink factories included Cook's caramels, Peters ice cream, and Resch's brewery. In Waterloo, Australian Glass Manufacturers employed about five hundred people; Wunderlich was in Redfern, along with the largest district employer, the Eveleigh railway workshops next to Redfern station.

People walked or cycled to work, the railway workshops' siren at 7.28 am warning them to hurry. It sounded again when work began at 7.30, and then at the end of the working day, at 5 pm. Bikes were popular among those who lived close to work:

For every car there were a hundred to two hundred pushbikes on the road. Miles of pushbikes and every now and again, 'honk, honk, honk' there was a car coming along. They couldn't get the bikes out of their way.



Assembly worker at the Arizona radio works, an electrical components factory in the Sydney suburb of Auburn.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS

FACTORY SIZE 1937-38

No people employed	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	Aust
<i>Number of factories</i>							
Under 4	2616	3229	1081	481	979	257	8643
4	878	741	309	211	104	133	2376
5-10	2431	2221	812	625	508	355	6952
11-20	1289	1267	385	280	215	107	3543
21-50	1054	1008	266	237	180	66	2811
51-100	435	405	109	90	55	16	1110
Over 100	394	370	101	56	25	14	960
Total	9097	9241	3063	1980	2066	948	26 395

Source: Commonwealth year book

But many people walked everywhere: to work, to the shops, to the pub, greeting neighbours along the way.

Life in factory suburbs imposed strong pressures to conform. In Melbourne Theodore Anderson's father was a delegate of the Printers' Union and a staunch Labor voter. Theodore, a twenty-year-old labourer, dreamed of studying accounting and business management.

There was a spare room at home which was full of junk and I asked whether I could clean that out because I wanted to use one half of it for sleeping (I used to sleep on the back verandah) and the other half as an office. I was going to study so that when I came out of my time in the printing trade I would be able to start my own business. That was when I was laughed at by the family. The old man said, 'why don't you get professional chambers in Collins Street?'

For a working-class child a more realistic ambition was to secure an apprenticeship and learn a trade. Joy Percy of East Victoria Park in Perth had a mother who

was very, very proud that the four of her children had apprenticeships. I can remember her always telling me that if we had our apprenticeships we had something to fall back on for the rest of our lives.



Allan Cox was a turner for Duly and Hansford, engineers, at Marrickville in Sydney. The firm made parts for cars and trucks, and found it difficult to keep up with demand. Working conditions were harsh. The proprietors were 'self-made men' and 'got the best out of everybody'. Allan remembers

There was no union in the place—all you did was put your head down and if you played up or didn't do what they thought you should do you were out on your neck. They were pretty hard days ... Nobody had any right to go to the boss and state their case ... And that upset me. So I thought I'm going to do something about this—and boy I did something about it. I organised the whole show.

The factory, in a hollow near Marrickville station, was a 'sweat shop'. Bib and brace overalls and a blue shirt were Allan's uniform six days a week. 'Cripes, it was terrible in the summertime', he recalls, and in winter

The only heating was when you went out. I was working shift work, starting at six in the morning and working till three, and the other week three to eleven. The six o'clock in the morning one I'd leave here about five, and walk all the way to the station, there were no buses. I'd get on the train, go to Tempe and walk across the paddock and then work on my machine ... wishing I could get out in the sun at half past ten and get meself warm.

Early morning shifts included working on Saturdays from 6 am to 11.30 am. There was a half-hour break at 10.30 for lunch, which Allan ate either outside or at a table in a corner of the factory. His wife, Jessie, packed his lunch for him, and when he was on early morning shift she got up before five to cook him breakfast: 'Cornflakes or porridge and an egg or something and away I'd go'. On afternoon shifts he had breakfast with his two children, Betty and Allan. Sleeping in was impossible with 'the kids running around'.

Allan Cox was pleased to have his children growing up in Bexley, a better



Wheel of industry: Newcastle float in the sesqui parade. Photograph by L. Pimblett, 1938.



Milk was delivered at 7d a quart to the household's own container, or 8d in bottles. In this factory men remove bottles from the cap sealing machine at the rate of 4800 an hour. Pix, 5 Nov 1938.

suburb than his former haunt, Newtown. He insured himself and his family by joining the Protestant Alliance Friendly Society.

You paid so much a quarter. It used to cost us about one pound and threepence. You could go and see your doctor when you wanted to and he'd prescribe you whatever was necessary, and you went to the dispensary and had it made up and it was written down in a book and that was it.

A contented family man, Cox was dissatisfied with the premier, Bertram Stevens, whose conservative government looked after the people with money. Labor, he believed 'was the only party for the working man'.

John Cook, nine years younger than Allan Cox, was also a battler. After years of intermittent employment, he was a sheetmetal worker at Holden's motor body

works at Woodville in Adelaide, but his job was not secure. 'In those days',

you worked wherever there was work available. It might last a week, it might last three months, it might last three years, you went where it was. It would not be unheard of to be told at 10 o'clock that there was no more work for you today, go home and come back again in the morning. At Holden's, I worked overtime on the Monday and I was put off on the Thursday because there was no work for me.

Cook was by temperament someone who stood up for his rights, a person who 'always managed to pick an argument with the boss'. But at Woodville he had to restrain himself, despite provocation:

I was in the door section and the fellow in charge . . . had a unique way of talking to the men. More than once he has come up to me and said 'Bend your back, you bastard, there is a hundred men out on the Port Road waiting for the job you've got.' And what's more you bent your back because you knew what he said was just too true. Anyone who had a job in those days, you stuck to it.

The Woodville plant was modern, but John did not feel threatened by the new machines:

When I started at Holden's, they had fellows hammering out the tail end of the mudguard. When that job was lost the fellows realised that skill was going to be redundant but they didn't resent it because there always seemed to be something else for them to do. Instead of panel-beating they would be dent knocking because the presses did not turn out a perfect job and they would be required to touch up the pressed metal and get it back to where it should be. And also when a thing was welded it was distorted and that had to be dressed out. Although they realised their skill was being undermined, their job was still there.

Holden workers laboured in noisy and unhealthy conditions. One developed 'a bad crop of boils' caused by the lubricant on the steel sheets, and without protective gear the banging sheetmetal gave others a permanent ringing in the ears. John Cook remembers the workshop being very draughty:

The spray line, that was ventilated and also steam heated for quick drying, I think that was more for safety from explosions so that the fumes from the thinners didn't get out. I don't think it was done so much for the protection of the men as to benefit the job. Being in the sheetmetal and plumbing section, the effect of lead was acknowledged because the foreman that was there before the one I knew had been a plumber and he used to roll his cigarettes and he was also working with lead and apparently the lead from his hands got into the tobacco and papers and he was smoking lead. That didn't do him any good.

Joan Crump, like John Cook, was single. Aged twenty, she earned £2 2s 7d a week as a seamstress at Thurman and Evans's clothing factory in Murray Street, Perth. She had left school at fourteen and endured numerous interviews before getting work. The factory was big, employing 50 machinists, pressers, interlockers and finishers. Promoted to head finisher, Joan was in daily contact with the boss, Mr Thurman: 'Every Monday morning I had to get the grass seed out of his golf pants and fix them up for him. He used to have tears and things like that so he used to get me to mend his clothes'. Joan started work early.

There was all the noise of the machines going and we had to start earlier, before the machinists started, to oil all these machines. There were two big rows of



Women pack some of the 13 billion biscuits made at the Arnotts factory in the working-class suburb of Homebush, Sydney. The biscuits were carried from the ovens by endless moving belts. Arrowroots were in their package or tin within three minutes of emerging from the oven. Pix, 14 May 1938.



them and we had to lift them up and dust them, oil them, before we started every morning. We worked from 8 until 5 in those days and we had to work very hard. We weren't allowed to look up from our sewing. We weren't allowed to talk. I used to have to use a pinking machine. I'd turn the handle and put the seams in and many a time there would be a hole in the garment ... I used to cry every morning I went to work and my father used to follow me up on his bike and he used to say 'Never mind, Joanie, you'll be home soon'. I hated it, I really did.

Women at sewing machines in the costume workroom of a Sydney theatre company.

PIX COLLECTION

Most employees were young women. The only men seen on the shop floor were Thurman and Evans, the owners, and buyers. Vacancies occurred often because women left as soon as they married. Joan's job as the head finisher in the factory was then

to start teaching another lot. It was rather difficult because they had to get used to not looking up. Many a girl used to have a needle through her finger because they really had to work hard. They had to do a certain section and pass it on to another girl. It was very rushed work. You weren't allowed to talk and you weren't allowed to look up and in summer time you would be doing these huge winter coats ... furs—great big fur coats—it was terrific. You really had to work hard else you wouldn't be there for long.

Joan worked a 44-hour week. She had half an hour lunch break in a little lunch room packed with girls:

You could hardly move. Mummy used to make sandwiches, cake and fruit but every Thursday I used to meet my boyfriend in William Street and we'd go to the same restaurant ...

Joan's life in 1938 was one of hard work, insecure employment, tough employers and long hours.



Workers resting near the open hearth. From left, front: Jerry Bent, Charlie Dean, unknown; from left, back: unknown, Dave Bowen, Jack McIntosh. Photograph by B. Strong.

AIS PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION