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***Merging with the metals: An analysis of the role micro-political relationships played in the merger of the Printing and Kindred Industries Union with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union***

**Introduction**

In the spring of 1987 the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU), Federal Executive Committee (FEC), reluctantly concluded that membership decline and the resultant fall in income meant that the union needed to find an amalgamation partner. By taking this decision the PKIU FEC acknowledged they had been unable to recruit enough members to offset their ever-diminishing numbers in newspapers and the general print.

In common with many other Australian unions, which felt similarly compelled to merge, there was initially a lack of consensus over a preferred merger partner (Blissett, 2014; Griffin, 2002). These disagreements in the PKIU and other unions, publicly revolved around how the political, structural and organisational makeup of any potential merger partner, would impact on the union and its members (Blissett, 2014; Griffin, 1994, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989). In most other Australian unions these initial disagreements were eventually resolved, an amalgamation deal negotiated, and membership endorsement of the merger secured. (Blissett, 2014; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Tomkins, 1999). This was not to be the case in the PKIU. Instead the union remained in intense internal conflict, throughout the seven-year amalgamation process (Blissett, 2014).

Scholars have suggested that, along with other Australian unions, the PKIU's amalgamation fissures were caused by political, economic, industrial and institutional disagreements (Bramble 2008, Costa and Hearn, 1997; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989). Some of these authors go further and argue that the

dramatic shifts in the PKIU's and other unions amalgamation policies, during the 1980s and 1990s, were the result of alterations in the strengths of different internal political factions (Costa and Hearn, 1997), or the rejection of a union's merger policy by the rank and file membership (Bramble, 2008).

This article, while accepting that political, economic, industrial and institutional factors all influenced the PKIU's internal debate, puts forward an alternative hypothesis. It asserts that micro-political factors, specifically personal animosities, friendships and loyalties, played a significant role in determining both the PKIU's eventual choice of an amalgamation partner, and the results of its two merger ballots. Such an influence, is barely acknowledged, let alone credited with importance, by other scholars (Bramble, 2008; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Chaison, 1996; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Tomkins, 1999).

To test this paper's hypothesis, extensive research was undertaken, involving in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with PKIU and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Federal and State full-time and lay officers. A good deal of this fieldwork was undertaken as part of a wider study of union policy-making in the British and Australian printing and telecommunication industries (Blissett, 2014). The majority of the original interviews were conducted in the mid-1990s, with follow-up interviews taking place in the late 2000s.

### **Understanding Australian union mergers in the 1980s and 1990s**

Membership decreases, and the ensuing loss of subscription revenue, were problems that were then affecting not only many Australian unions, but also unions from many other developed capitalist nations in the 1980s and 1990s (Blissett, 2014; Chaison, 1996). Employment levels in many trades and industries, where historically unions had achieved high membership densities, via compulsory unionism, were now rapidly shrinking. Unions were also struggling to recruit in new sectors of the economy, or their own industries, which had been created by the application of new technologies. Here, many 'new' employers did not recognise trade unions and were hostile to union attempts to organise

their staff (Blissett, 2014; Chaison, 1996; Dabscheck, 1995; Griffin, 2002; Griffen and Scarcebrook, 1989; Undy, 1996, 2008; Waddington, 1988, 1995; Waddington et al, 2005;).

The PKIU had been severely affected by these technological and industrial developments. For many decades previously, the union had benefitted from securing pre-entry closed shop agreements in the pre-press and production areas of newspapers and the general print. These compulsory union agreements were rigorously enforced by the union's powerful workplace chapels<sup>1</sup>, which ensured that non-union members were unable to gain employment. As the newspapers and the general print shed large numbers of pre-press and production jobs in the 1980s, thanks to the introduction of direct text inputting and the application of new printing technologies in the press shops, the union's membership shrank. The union did attempt to address these losses by making efforts to recruit in the then rapidly developing areas of the industry, such as photo-composition, small jobbing shops, instant print and graphic design. However, even though the union's largest branch, New South Wales (NSW), took the constitutionally bold step of employing dedicated recruitment officers<sup>2</sup>, their efforts were not able to stem the ever downward spiral of membership losses and declining income (Blissett, 2014).

The financial and organisational pressures to amalgamate were augmented by the pro-merger policies of the 1983-1996 Australian Labor Party (ALP) Federal Government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). They believed that trade unions and Australian industrial relations would benefit from unions merging to form large, federal, industrial entities. Their theory being that the creation of such unions would streamline collective bargaining, diminish union demarcation

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<sup>1</sup> Chapels were the PKIU's local workplace units of organisation. The chapels historically were designed to represent workers in the different trades and crafts that existed within a workplace. In the craft areas of the printing industry the chapels and their locally elected representative the Father or Mother of Chapel (FoC/MoC), performed a supervisory and training role. This role dated back to the PKIU's British printing union roots. Here, from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, printing craft guilds and their successor printing craft unions, trained and managed apprentices entering a specific printing trade. These training and supervisory roles were retained by the chapels and their FoC/MoC, in both Britain and Australia, until the latter decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> To avoid the PKIU rulebook's insistence that all officers had to be members and face election, NSW appointed 'recruitment officers' on staff grades. This allowed the NSW branch leadership to appoint recruitment officers who possessed recruiting experience, from outside of the union.

disputes, while allowing unions to devote more resources to recruitment in developing areas of the economy where union membership was low (Blissett, 2014; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Chaison, 1996; Dabscheck, 1995; Griffin, 2002; Griffen and Scarcebrook, 1989). To this end they came up with proposals for a series of mergers, which would bring together unions in specific sectors of the economy to form industrial unions (Blissett, 2014; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Dabscheck, 1995; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffen and Scarcebrook, 1989)

To drive this policy forward the ACTU and the ALP Federal Government placed considerable political, industrial and legislative pressure upon unions to amalgamate. At its 1989 Congress, the ACTU affiliates adopted a policy which called on all small and medium sized unions to merge to form federal industrial unions (Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Dabscheck, 1989; Griffin, 2002). The pressure on unions to amalgamate had previously been increased by the passing of the 1988 Industrial Relations Act (Bramble, 2008; Davis 1999; Griffin, 2002). This legislation gave powers to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) <sup>3</sup> to review the registration<sup>4</sup> of trade unions with less than a specified number of members.

In 1990, after extensive ACTU lobbying, the initial Federal Government decision that all unions with 1,000 members or less would be subject to AIRC review, was extended to those with up to 10,000 members. This was a highly significant alteration in policy as many unions in Australia had fewer than 10,000 members, often because they only organised workers in a specific industry or occupation in one of the country's six States. The reason why many unions had adopted this 'state-centred' organisational model related to the creation of the Australian nation state. When, on January 1st 1901, the six self-governing British colonies, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania had come together to form the 'Commonwealth of Australia',

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian Industrial Relations Commission was a **quasi-judicial** body which could bindingly arbitrate on wages and conditions across all the various industrial sectors that made up the Australian economy. The AIRC also had the power **to bindingly arbitrate** in industrial disputes which involved a company that operated in more than one State.

<sup>4</sup>A union's de-registration would effectively mean that they were unable to use the Federal arbitration system. Their membership coverage protection and use of the Federal industrial awards system would also, effectively, be removed.

they agreed a written constitution, which guaranteed considerable levels of political, economic and judicial autonomy to what became Australia's six states. The constitutional devolvement of powers included industrial relations, with the States having jurisdiction over industrial relations issues which resided solely within one State. This led many unions to continue to organise in only one State, which meant that as late as the 1980s, there were over a hundred Australian unions, with less than 10,000 members, based in only one State.

The 10,000 members or less figure also affected many of Australia's smaller national unions, and it was a source of concern to many more, including the PKIU, which had memberships of just over this figure. (see Blissett, 2014; Costa and Hearn, 1997 Dabscheck, 1995; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffen and Scarcebrook, 1989). These unions had typically been the creation of mergers between craft or occupational unions from different states. They possessed structures which reflected these amalgamations, with considerable policy autonomy, and national decision-making influence, residing in large, State-based, branches.

The ACTU made it clear, during the late 1980s, that smaller national unions, owing to their size, devolved structures and concentration of membership in Australia's two most populous states, NSW and Victoria, were not capable of implementing their vision of modern trade unionism. Specifically, they argued that the smaller national unions were not broad enough in their membership profiles to represent workers across a whole sector of the economy and were therefore unable to eliminate demarcated bargaining and the representation of unionised workers by a plethora of unions. The ACTU also believed that in order to reinvigorate Australian trade unionism, unions needed to be large federally controlled organisations, which could institute nationally directed organising campaigns that drew on centrally controlled funds to target workers in areas of the economy, and the country, where union membership was weak (Costa and Hearn, 1997; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002).

As Australian writers from a wide range of ideological viewpoints agree, this intense ACTU and ALP pressure, in conjunction with the 1988 Industrial Relations Act, provoked a tsunami of amalgamations (Blissett,

2014; Bramble, 2008; Dabscheck, 1989; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 1994, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Tomkins, 1999). The scale of the merger wave can be appreciated by viewing Australia's union amalgamation statistics for the twentieth century. In the period 1905–1986 there were 94 union mergers; while from 1986–1996 a further 172 mergers occurred. The number of Australian unions fell from 316 in 1986 to 132 in 1996, with the number of small, State-based, unions shrinking dramatically (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996<sup>5</sup>). After the ALP lost the Federal election in 1996, and the Liberal/National Coalition Federal Government repealed Labor's legislation, in favour of their own industrial relations legislative programme, (which sought to undermine union influence in the workplace and attack the Australian 'award'<sup>6</sup> and arbitration system), the level of merger activity rapidly decreased. The level of decrease was almost equally dramatic as the previous increase, with only two federal union mergers occurring in the period 1996-2002 (Griffin, 2002)<sup>7</sup>. It was in the climate of intense political, institutional and economic pressure to amalgamate, that the PKIU FEC, unenthusiastically, took their decision to enter merger negotiations.

## Methodology

Having served as a senior officer in two British trade unions and having been a lay activist in a third<sup>8</sup> I understood the reticence of some PKIU activists and officers to admit to external third parties how micro-political influences, particularly personal enmities, affected their opinions on amalgamation. Personal experience had also taught me that union officers needed to feel comfortable that any comments they made, would not be disclosed. For this reason, a longitudinal study was selected,

<sup>5</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics formally stopped collecting data on Trade Unions after 1996.

<sup>6</sup> The Federal and State 'awards' systems were administered by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and their State counterparts. These were **quasi**-judicial bodies who could bindingly arbitrate on wages and conditions across all the various industrial sectors that made up the Australian economy. The Federal and State Commissions also had the power **to bindingly arbitrate** in industrial disputes.

<sup>7</sup> From 2002-2017 mergers between Australian Federal unions have remained at a low level, with the majority of amalgamation activity involving State-based unions merging into larger Federal unions.

<sup>8</sup> I worked as a National Officer for the Banking Insurance and Finance Union from 1989-1994.

Subsequently I was employed as an Organising Officer, Senior Organiser, London Regional Secretary and a National Officer of the GMB Union from 1997-2009. Between 1985-1989 I had been a Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) Branch Secretary and Regional Trade Group delegate. I was also a member of the TGWU *Broad Left* faction. After starting work at the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU) I became a Branch Secretary and London Regional Council member of Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX), which merged in 1989 with the GMB Union.

involving multiple interviews with senior officers, spaced over several years.

I was also aware that many union officers became very circumspect when they were being tape-recorded. There were two main reasons for this caution. First, they feared that their anonymity could be breached and that their interviews could be relayed to external, or internal, third parties. Second, if an interview was tape recorded, a participant would be aware that simply refuting that they had made a specific statement, would be unsustainable. It was for these reasons that a careful short-hand note was made of all interviews, with note-taking ceasing when the nature of the discussions became sensitive. While this method of recording did not guarantee a verbatim record of each interview, it did get extremely close to doing so, whilst avoiding interviewee reticence, that can come with tape-recoding.

In what follows, the factors that shaped PKIU officers' attitudes towards amalgamation and the choice of a merger partner, are examined. What, if any, role micro-political factors played in shaping these decisions, is also considered. Finally, this paper's findings are juxtaposed with other authors' explanations for the PKIU's amalgamation policies.

### **The PKIU's debate over the choice of an amalgamation partner**

Prior to the PKIU's decision in 1987 to seek an amalgamation, there had been an internal debate for many years as to whether such a merger was necessary. From the early 1980s the union's largest and industrially most powerful branch, NSW, had stated that the PKIU needed to merge. They argued that such an amalgamation should be with a large, financially stable, union, whose political and industrial views were aligned with the PKIU's. NSW were also adamant that any merger partner needed to possess centralised financial and policy making structures. This last point, NSW's senior officers felt, was crucial. They believed the PKIU's smaller branches had proved to be ineffective in recruiting new members, acted as a constraint on essential policy alterations, while also acting as a severe drain on the union's finances.

NSW asserted that the only union that would meet these requirements was the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union (AMWU)<sup>9</sup>. The AMWU was then one of the largest unions in Australia and possessed a structure which contained centralised finances and strong national divisional policy making bodies (see Blissett, 2014; Reeves and Dettmer, 2013; Sheridan, 1975). In common with the PKIU NSW branch, the AMWU were also affiliated, at the NSW State branch level, to the ALP 'Socialist Left' faction.

In addition to these attractive institutional and political characteristics, the then State Secretary of the NSW branch, Gordon Cooke, and his Assistant State Secretary, John McCarthy, enjoyed a close personal friendship with senior Federal and State AMWU officers that went beyond a straightforward political and industrial alliance. Reflecting on the importance of this friendship numerous interviewees considered it was central to NSW's leaders absolute determination to merge with the AMWU. As one interviewee declared:

Look they were mates. They all got on well and it was always clear to me that they trusted each other. Forget the politics, that's the reason Cookie and John Mac wouldn't have a bar of anyone other than the Metals.

Many PKIU and AMWU senior officers also expressed the view that this personal friendship between the senior officers of the NSW PKIU branch and the leaders of the AMWU, was important in securing the PKIU's favourable amalgamation terms.

However, NSW's wish to amalgamate with the AMWU was opposed by two factions within the PKIU. The first group was led by the Federal Secretary, John Cahill, and was supported by several of the smaller State

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<sup>9</sup> In 1991 the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union (AMWU) changed its title to the Metals & Engineering Workers' Union (MEWU) after merging with the Association of Drafting, Supervisory & Technical Employees (ADSTE). Then it became the Automotive Metals & Engineering Union (AMEU) following an amalgamation with the Vehicle Builders Employees Federation of Australia (VBEF) in 1993, before changing its name again to the Australian Food Manufacturing and Engineering Union (AFMEU) following a merger in 1993 with the Confectionery Workers & Food Preservers Union of Australia (CWFPFU). The union is now known as the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union but is still often referred to by its members and officers as, 'The Metals'.

branches. From the mid-1980s onwards they acknowledged the need to merge, but favoured an amalgamation with a smaller union, where they believed the PKIU would retain greater autonomy and more political and industrial influence. At the top of their list of potential merger partners was the Australian Journalists Association (AJA). The second grouping, led by Victoria, opposed a merger with any other unions save for two small, Victoria based, printing unions, the Victorian Print Operatives Union (VPOU), and the Federated Photo-Engravers, Photo-Lithographers and Photogravure Employees Association of Australia (FPA). By the mid-1980s these were the only Australian printing unions which remained outside the PKIU.

As Victoria was, by a considerable margin, the second largest PKIU branch, they were able to effectively block the merger ambitions of the other two factions. However, their adamant opposition to amalgamation seemed to subtly wane after the Victorian State Secretary, Frank Nelson, retired in 1986. He was replaced by Ian Wenham, who belonged to the 'Victorian Left' political faction, rather than Nelson's, 'Centre Unity'. Encouraged by this lessening in hostility, Gordon Cooke, sought to forge a good working understanding with Wenham, as opposed to the antagonistic relationship that had existed between himself and Nelson.

Nelson's antipathy towards Cooke and the NSW branch, related, in part, to political and industrial differences. However, as interviewees close to both parties agreed, personal antipathy played a far greater role in creating their mutual animosity. This hostility stemmed, in large part, from Cooke's role in the PKIU's Federal investigation into Nelson's dismissal of a staff member, which had led to a strike by Victorian branch staff. The fact that the PKIU State Secretaries, who made up the majority of the Federal Executive, backed the investigation and the critical findings of the investigatory panel, infuriated both Nelson and his Centre Unity supporters. As an interviewee, very close to Nelson, stated:

Frank was spewing over the Fed's decision about the dismissal, and the way they set up the inquiry. He blamed Cookie personally and never forgave him. His blues with NSW were not over politics or

union policies, they were all because he was spewing at Cookie. So, if Gordon said white, Frank would say black.

Following the Federal inquiry's unfavourable conclusions, Nelson's health deteriorated, leading to a period of sick leave and then ill health retirement in 1986.

Cooke's continuing efforts to build bridges with Victoria, saw him assist Ian Wenham in obtaining an amalgamation with the FPA. They had resisted merging, even though they were in financial difficulties, owing to the internal conflict in the Victorian branch. Securing the FPA merger assisted Wenham in his ambition to persuade the other small Victorian based printing union, the VPOU, to amalgamate with the PKIU. He was again aided in his efforts by officers of the NSW branch, who spoke to the VPOU and assured them that they now enjoyed a more harmonious relationship with the Victorian PKIU. This was important to the VPOU, as by the mid-1980s they were frequently negotiating alongside the NSW branch, owing to the ownership of many Victorian newspapers now residing in the hands of companies whose Australian base was in NSW. With NSW's support the VPOU were persuaded to enter, lengthy, merger talks that finally resulted in an amalgamation in 1992.

Cooke's desire to form a durable industrial, political and personal alliance with Victoria, became stronger after the election of John Cahill, as Federal Secretary, in 1986. The NSW leadership, who had not supported John Cahill for Federal Secretary, believed he would actively oppose not only the AMWU merger but also their proposals to centralise finances and impose greater fiscal and industrial discipline on the State branches. Cooke therefore wished to strengthen the relationship with Victoria, in order to break the impasse on the Federal Executive over an amalgamation, and to drive through these policy changes.

After his election as Federal Secretary, Cahill's relationship with NSW, and many other States, deteriorated quickly. A former PKIU Executive member attempted to explain the difficulties that arose:

The problem with John was that he was an awful communicator. I don't believe that he set out to deliberately upset the State Secretaries, but by not consulting them and taking decisions behind their backs, that's what happened. NSW were always spewing over what they saw as a lack of consultation. (Blissett, 2014:224)

These disagreements led NSW to redouble their efforts to build an alliance with the Victorians. By the latter half of 1988 the two branches relationship had improved enormously, to the point where they were acting in unison over many industrial and political issues. This created a considerable alteration in the PKIU's internal dynamics, as combined, NSW and Victoria represented a majority of the union's membership. This in turn meant they could effectively drive forward their own policy agenda, so long as they stayed united.

However, there was still the one central issue over which NSW and Victoria disagreed profoundly; amalgamation with the AMWU. Ian Wenham was acutely aware that this disagreement was a barrier to building a cooperative working relationship with NSW. An alliance which he needed industrially and in order to help persuade the VPOU to merge. His solution was to suggest that he was not necessarily totally opposed to a merger, but that he and his branch remained to be convinced. This change of tack led the NSW branch into believing that there could possibly be Victorian support for an AMWU merger. It also though prompted the Federal Secretary, John Cahill, into thinking that he might persuade them to back an amalgamation with the AJA.

The further softening of Victoria's stance on the concept of an amalgamation, also led to the PKIU's decentralised State branches launching into their own amalgamation talks with other unions. This wide array of merger negotiations created considerable confusion, which led the PKIU Federal Executive to rule that only they should conduct formal negotiations with other unions. The FEC also agreed that they should negotiate with only two selected unions, and that all other merger discussions should cease. There was a broad unanimity over this proposal and it was agreed that a list of possible merger partners would be drawn up and a vote taken as to the two unions to be approached.

At the next FEC the vote over possible amalgamation partners was held. To the surprise of all present, the AMWU was not selected. Instead, the AJA and the Australian Telecommunication Engineering Association/ Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union (ATEA/APTU) were the chosen unions. Explaining this shock result a senior PKIU officer commented:

We were all completely amazed at the time. Looking back, what happened was that there were so many runners and riders that the AMWU failed to get enough first preferences, this allowed the Journos and the ATEA to come up on the rails, even though they were not the first choice of most States.

If the majority of PKIU Federal Executive members were amazed, Gordon Cooke and the NSW branch were simply furious. Before leaving the FEC they made it clear that NSW refused to be bound by this verdict and would continue to negotiate with the AMWU. While this position was unconstitutional, the importance of the NSW branch to the financial and industrial health of the PKIU meant that no member of the FEC attempted to press for sanctions over this breach of rules.

Immediately after the PKIU FEC decision to pursue a possible merger with either the ATEA/APTU or the AJA, the Federal Secretary, John Cahill, enthusiastically tried to secure a deal with the AJA. His motives were, according to several senior PKIU officers, as much personal as industrial and political. As one retired Federal PKIU officer commented:

Look, Cahill knew that if we merged with the Metals, then he was as good as finished. John knew that Gordon [Cooke] and John Mac [John McCarthy] were mates with the Metals leadership and that none of them had any time for him. I believe that John thought that his future was much better served by a merger with a smaller union like the Journos. He had a better relationship with them and he felt he could be Federal Secretary of a merged union.

In attempting to broker a deal with the AJA John Cahill ran into implacable opposition from the NSW branch. Whilst they were antagonistic to any prospective amalgamation partner, save with the AMWU, they were deeply hostile to an amalgamation with the AJA.

There were many reasons for NSW opposition to the AJA, which, as with other elements of the PKIU's merger negotiations, encompassed a rich mixture of the political, industrial and micro-political. As NSW interviewees candidly admitted the most important reason was the NSW branch officers' decades old antipathy towards several AJA senior officials. This animosity had been inflamed by AJA Journalists crossing PKIU picket lines in the 1976 Fairfax dispute. During the dispute the PKIU felt, very strongly, that the AJA had done little to convince their members to respect their picket lines (see Blissett, 2014; Cryle, 2006). In the years that followed their anger had morphed into a deep, and very personal, detestation. An antagonism which continued long after the Fairfax PKIU and AJA chapels had, largely, settled many of their disagreements.

In explaining publicly their hostility to an AJA merger, senior officers of the NSW branch preferred to focus on their contention that a merger with the journalists would not solve the PKIU's need to totally reconstitute the union's policy-making and financial structures. They also stated, to other State Secretaries, that they feared that an AJA merger could establish John Cahill as Federal Secretary of a larger union, a position that the NSW branch leadership viewed as totally unacceptable.

To ensure an amalgamation with the AJA could not go ahead, and that their strong desire to merge with the AMWU was realisable, the NSW branch made a major effort to elicit the support of the Victorian branch. This they did in the knowledge that, with Victorian support, they would almost certainly have a majority at the FEC for an AMWU amalgamation, and they would have a majority at the PKIU's supreme governing body, the Federal Council, where voting delegate numbers reflected States membership levels.

However, the Victorians were still not enamoured with the prospect of a merger with the AMWU. A Victorian PKIU officer of the time recalled the debate that took place inside the branch over such an amalgamation:

Look, you have to remember that our branch was dominated by Comps. At that stage the VPOU had not joined with us and our traditions were very much of the old PIEUA<sup>10</sup>. We wanted to remain an independent craft union. Merging with a union like the Metals was not something that the branch wanted to contemplate. Added to that, our members thought the Victorian Metals branch were led by a bunch of hoons (Blissett, 2014:228).

These types of derogatory remarks about the Victorian AMWU branch leadership were repeated, not only by other PKIU officers, but also by many AMWU interviewees. As a Federal AMWU officer of the time observed:

Yeah, the Vic's were a bunch of galahs. You had these different factions running around in the branch, all of them bashing the shit out of each other. Mate I'll tell you, half the bastards were as mad as cut snakes, whilst the other half were a bunch of biker hoons (Blissett, 2014:228).

These less than complimentary views about the Victorian AMWU were widely held across the Australian union movement. The AMWU Victorian State branch was broadly viewed as, at best, poorly administered and politically unstable.

Yet the Victorian PKIU branch leadership were acutely aware that they needed NSW's support, in dealing with several inter-State employers, and in their ambition to secure the VPOU amalgamation. To square this circle Ian Wenham and his senior officers then decided to play what one former PKIU Federal Officer described as, "a very dangerous game". Wenham intimated to the NSW branch that they could be persuaded to support an AMWU merger, whilst informing those who opposed the Metals

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<sup>10</sup> Printing Industries Employees Union of Australia. One of the craft union fore-runners of the PKIU.

amalgamation that they would never agree to such a proposal. Asked about this policy, a former senior Victorian officer was candid:

At the time we didn't want an amalgamation with anyone but the VPOU. If we had to have one, then we certainly didn't want to merge with those dills from the Victorian AMWU. We valued our working relationship with NSW, and therefore we didn't want to put them offside, but allowing them to bulldoze through a merger with the Metals was a step too far. We had a lot of trouble brewing in the branch, so we decided to behave tactically... (Blissett, 2014: 229)

In the short term this tactic worked. Ian Wenham continued to cultivate his personal friendship with Gordon Cooke, as well as building an industrial and political alliance with NSW. In return Cooke and his branch remained supportive of the Victorian efforts to persuade the VPOU to merge. By 1989 the VPOU membership had started to fall dramatically and they were facing great difficulties in surviving as a viable organisation, which led the union's leadership to look more favourably on a merger with the PKIU.

At the same time as the VPOU amalgamation was being finalised, the PKIU's formal national merger negotiations were running into difficulties. The ATEA/APTU, which were engaged in complex structural negotiations, after their own amalgamation, were also in merger talks with the Electrical Trades (ETU) and the Plumbing and Gasfitters Employees Union of Australia (PGEUA). They told the PKIU that, given these negotiations, they did not wish to engage in discussions with the PKIU. The AJA talks were also proving problematic, with the AJA expressing concerns about the PKIU's federated structure, which they did not wish to see replicated in a merged organisation. The obstacles to an AJA amalgamation were further increased by the Journalists also being in parallel merger negotiations with the Actors Equity of Australia (AEA), the Musicians Union of Australia (MUA) and the Australian Commercial and Industrial Artists Association (ACIAA). All these unions were seeking amalgamations, owing to ACTU pressure and the Federal Government's legislation (see Blissett, 2014; Bramble, 2008; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Dabscheck 1989; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and

Scaresbrook, 1989; Tomkins, 1999.) As these three small unions were also federally organised, they too were worried by the devolved structure of the PKIU.

During 1989 the AEA, AJA, and ACIAA amalgamation talks made considerable progress and the three unions moved towards concluding an amalgamation agreement. As a former senior AJA officer admitted, their commitment to discussions with the PKIU also started to wane:

Look, we got a bit sick of dealing with the PKIU at that time. Any agreement we thought we had reached with their negotiators was overturned within five minutes. In the end we focused on getting the MEAA<sup>11</sup> off the ground as the discussions with the PKIU became a total waste of time (Blissett, 2014:230).

This lack of progress was largely owing to the implacable opposition of NSW, which continued to make it clear that they believed the only way forward was a merger with the AMWU. Their campaign was greatly assisted by what one senior AMWU officer described as a “charm offensive” that his union embarked upon at the Federal and State level. PKIU State Secretaries were feted and assured of a central role in any merged union’s State branch structure. Nationally, efforts were also made to reassure the PKIU Federal Officers that their positions were secure, and that as a centrally funded union with sound finances that they would have an important role in overseeing the new printing division, which the AMWU would create. The promise of a new printing division, the incorporation of the PKIU’s name into that of a new merged union, and the protection of the PKIU’s structures and their officers’ positions, all played a role in convincing several branches to change their mind and support an AMWU merger.

By 1990 the majority of PKIU branches had been persuaded, thanks to this ‘charm offensive’, to support an amalgamation with the AMWU. There was however one very notable exception; Victoria. This was the case even though the State Secretary, Ian Wenham, was now telling fellow State

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<sup>11</sup> Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance

Secretaries, including those who opposed the AMWU amalgamation, that he was warming to the idea of an AMWU merger. Aside from the fact that his pro-AMWU statements may well have been part of the tactical 'game' he was engaged in, he was also now facing growing internal opposition from groups hostile to a merger.

Although Ian Wenham's Victorian Left faction had consolidated its control of the branch after he was elected State Secretary in 1986, they had failed to dislodge Assistant Secretary, Ed Snell, from his position. Snell was a member of the Centre Unity faction and had been a strong supporter of Frank Nelson. After Snell was re-elected, thanks to strong support from his home chapel, he had been marginalised inside the branch. However, in the early 1990s this position started to alter after the election of a new Organiser, Michael Brown. Brown had been supported by the Victorian Left in his election campaign, but after his election he fell out with Wenham and then realigned himself with the Victorian 'Pledge Left' group, which were predominantly made up of Trotskyists and Maoists. Brown also started to forge, after he departed from the Left faction, an unlikely personal friendship with the marginalised Snell.

Even Brown's harshest critics (and there are many in the former PKIU) admit that he had tremendous ability as a factional organiser. Remarkably, in the context of Victorian union factional politics, the Pledge Left and Centre Unity factions started to field joint candidates in PKIU Victorian branch executive and organiser elections. Although from a craft background himself, Brown recognised that the non-craft membership in the carton and cardboard printing sector were a growing group, which received little attention from branch officers. He decided to seek candidates from this area and to canvass extensively there for support for his and Snell's candidates. This proved to be a successful strategy and the Pledge Left/Centre Unity joint candidates started to win branch positions from the Victorian Left, whose power base was centred foursquarely in the newspaper chapels. Relations, in the early 1990s, between the two factional groupings deteriorated rapidly as smear campaigns were entered into by both groups, often involving the use of hostile anonymous leaflets, known colloquially as 'shit sheets'. These defamatory, highly personal, publications led to the antipathy that existed

between the leaders of the Victorian branch factions, turning into a strong and palpable hatred. In these circumstances Wenham and his supporters were not prepared, as one of his supporters recalled, to “gamble” on persuading their supporters to back the AMWU merger.

As internal problems in the Victorian branch worsened, NSW were successful in their efforts to persuade the federal PKIU to engage solely in amalgamation discussions with the AMWU. The only dissenting voice at the FEC was now Victoria, which remained adamantly opposed. The negotiations with the AMWU, with the NSW senior officers very much to the fore, were successful and a draft amalgamation document was agreed in 1992. Again, the only opposing voice on the PKIU FEC, when the merger document was discussed, was that of Ian Wenham. The amalgamation document was overwhelmingly approved by a re-convened Federal Council in July 1992 and preparations began for a ballot of all PKIU members in early 1993.

The remarkable pact that was formed in the early 1990s, between members of the Victorian Centre Unity and Pledge Left factions, who, in other unions Victorian branches were aggressive opponents, illustrates how strong ideological differences can, sometimes, be eclipsed by personal coalitions and mutual hostilities. These types of micro-political alliances, driven by personal friendships and enmities, rather than ideological beliefs, are noticeably absent from the literature that evaluates the role of political factions and ideologies in determining the policy choices of trade unions (Bramble 2008; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Daniels and McIlroy, 2009; Frenkel and Coolican, 1984; McIlroy et al, 2007).

### **The first AMWU amalgamation ballot**

At the start of the PKIU’s 1993 amalgamation campaign those supporting the AMWU merger were confident that they would win the vote comfortably. Organised opposition to the amalgamation was thought to be non-existent outside of Victoria. Interviewees admitted that they had naively believed that the Victorians would not seek to influence the vote outside of their State. Such assessments fundamentally underestimated the hostility towards the merger of the Victorian leadership. Specifically, they misjudged how determined Ian Wenham was to stop the merger. His

anti-amalgamation sentiments had hardened since the success in Victorian branch elections, of Centre Unity/Pledge Left candidates. Wenham now feared that he could lose control of the branch and that a merger would greatly assist the ambitions of Michael Brown to replace him as State Sectional Secretary in a merged union. His fears were added to by the Pledge Left faction gaining electoral ground within the AMWU Victorian branch.

The PKIU Victorian branch decided to conduct a state-wide plebiscite, over the possibility of a merger with the AMWU. Following an energetic No campaign, there was a large majority against amalgamating with the AMWU. Subsequently, following the FEC's announcement of the 1993 merger ballot date the PKIU Victorian branch senior officers and other Victorian Left faction members met to discuss their response. They took the decision to campaign against the merger, not only in Victoria, but also across all the other State and Territory branches. Senior Victorian branch officers, including Ian Wenham, realised that in taking such a decision that they would not only be acting unconstitutionally<sup>12</sup>, but that they would also anger other PKIU branches, which were supporting the merger. To place distance between the Victorian branch and the No campaign, the PKIU Victorian Left set up an organisation which it named the 'Combined Chapels Committee'. Its sole aim was to convince PKIU members to reject the merger. Controversially the group was funded not only by various chapels, but also, unconstitutionally, by the Victorian branch.

The other PKIU branches soon became aware that the Victorian branch was actively campaigning via a 'front' organisation against the merger. There was wide-spread annoyance amongst many State Secretaries at the Victorian branch's action. In NSW there was not just annoyance but real anger at the Victorians' actions. The fragile alliance between the NSW and the Victorian branch was effectively destroyed. As one officer close to NSW Branch Secretary, Gordon Cooke, observed:

Gordon had put so much time and energy into improving relations with the Vic's, and this is how they repaid him. He

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<sup>12</sup> The PKIU Federal Council had passed a motion supporting the amalgamation and prohibiting campaigning against the amalgamation by union employees.

was real dirty with them, and he had every right to be.  
(Blissett, 2014: 232).

The anger that many states felt with Victoria, and the simmering rage of NSW, reached boiling point when, with a day to go to the ballot, the 'Combined Chapels Committee' sent out leaflets urging a No vote, to all members of the PKIU. The leaflet stated that PKIU members would be "swamped" inside the larger AMWU with which PKIU members had "nothing in common" (PKIU Combined Chapels Committee leaflet, 1993).

To the dismay of the NSW branch, they received reports from other branches that the leaflet was resonating with many members. Part of the reason was that many of these State branches, which were geographically vast but numerically small, had not campaigned vigorously for a Yes vote. The high cost of sending officers out into the interior of these States, along with the anticipated lack of opposition, had led to a low-key Yes campaign being waged. As one senior officer from a physically large State, with a small PKIU membership, recalled:

In the months preceding the ballot, there was no real hostility to the Metals merger. So, when it came to the campaign period we never made any real effort to go into the bush to drum up support.

The result, when it was declared on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1993, showed the injudiciousness of this policy. Nationally, PKIU members had voted by 5770 votes to 4952 to reject the merger. Across the branches there had been large disparities in the results; Queensland and South Australia returned narrow No majorities, whilst Victoria returned figures of 2332 votes to 422, against the merger. It was equally as important, for the overall result, that the Yes votes in other branches were not as large as expected, with NSW only voting 2500 to 1600 in favour. NSW officers and activists put this small margin down to the confusion caused amongst their own members by the highly professional Combined Chapels Committee propaganda. As one NSW branch officer recollected:

After they had voted lots of my FoCs rang me up to ask why the union had changed its mind and recommended a No vote? They said their members had followed the leaflets advice and voted No. Quite simply they were conned (Blissett, 2014: 232).

There was considerable shock across the PKIU and the AMWU at the ballot result. Few, if any senior officers and activists in either union had expected a No vote. The strong assumption had been, including in Victoria, that with the Federal PKIU and six out of the seven State and Territory branches supporting a merger that there would be a comfortable majority in favour. Across the PKIU there was now great uncertainty over how the union should respond to the membership's rejection of the AMWU amalgamation.

### **The second AMWU amalgamation ballot**

When the PKIU FEC met for the first time after the No vote they were deeply divided over how to move forward. The Western Australian branch called upon the Federal Secretary to launch an investigation into balloting irregularities within the Victorian branch, whilst the South Australian, State Secretary, Ian Janz, moved that the No campaign had broken the union's rules and the result should therefore be declared null and void. Both these motions were deemed unconstitutional by Federal Secretary, John Cahill, who stated that, under PKIU rules, the FEC did not have the power to declare the election null and void, nor to launch such an enquiry. His interpretation of the rulebook incensed many FEC members, causing the rift between him and a number of State Secretaries to grow wider.

In NSW, the rejection of the merger was a deep personal disappointment to Gordon Cooke, who had spent years tirelessly working for the amalgamation. As those close to him stated, he had devoted huge amounts of time and energy to building a good relationship with Ian Wenham, over a raft of industrial and political issues. He also believed he had formed a strong personal friendship with Wenham and he now felt betrayed by the Victorian's actions.

Shortly after the result, Gordon Cooke, announced that he would take early retirement. Officers from the NSW branch believed that this was a direct result of his deep disappointment at the ballot result and his disillusionment at the behaviour of Wenham and Cahill. Cooke was well-liked and respected by the overwhelming majority of NSW officers and activists. They had been incensed at the way in which he had been treated by Ian Wenham and the Victoria branch, whilst they were also angry at the Federal Secretary's actions post the amalgamation ballot. This anger turned into what one NSW officer described as, "a cold hard fury", when Gordon Cooke retired.

Following Cooke's early retirement, the subsequent election saw his close friend, the Assistant State Secretary, John McCarthy, elected. As an interviewee stated, McCarthy was, "spewing", at the actions of Wenham and Cahill, whom he viewed as wholly duplicitous. He was also infuriated that their behaviour had had such a deleterious effect on his good friend, Gordon Cooke. He remained implacable in his determination to resurrect the merger with the 'Metals', which many in the PKIU and the AMWU now saw as impossible.

To try and revive the AMWU amalgamation McCarthy first met with senior officers of the AMWU. As interviewees from the AMWU confirmed the National Secretary, George Campbell, and NSW State Secretary, Dave Goodyer, were less than enthusiastic about a second attempt at a merger with the PKIU. As a source close to the AMWU's leadership stated:

Look, we weren't keen on the idea of another ballot, after the Printers dropped the bundle. We could not understand what the hell was going on with them and the consensus was to give the merger the flick.

By the end of a series of meetings McCarthy was able to persuade them to change their minds and make another amalgamation offer to the PKIU. Reflecting on these meetings a senior NSW AMWU figure observed:

The only reason we did not walk away was John Mac. He was able to persuade George [Campbell] and Dave [Goodyer] that

they should stick with trying to get the Printers to merge. There is no doubt in my mind they would not have stuck with it, if it had not been John Mac. He was their mate. So, when he told them he would get the vote up – whatever it took – they believed him.

Having secured the agreement of the AMWU to support a second merger ballot, John McCarthy, called a meeting of his officers and the branch executive. At the meeting he received their full backing in his quest for a second AMWU amalgamation ballot.

Armed with the support of his branch and the AMWU, McCarthy attended the PKIU FEC. Here he insisted there should be a second amalgamation ballot with the AMWU. He further declared that NSW would not tolerate any unconstitutional opposition during the campaign leading up to a second ballot. McCarthy then announced that if this policy was not adopted and strictly adhered to, then the NSW branch would consider seceding from the Federal union, prior to merging with the AMWU.

All those present at the FEC realised that this was not an idle threat. Australia's federated industrial relations legislative structure, along with the autonomy of the PKIU's branches, meant that it was perfectly feasible for a branch to secede from one union and join another<sup>13</sup>. As all the other PKIU branches and the Federal Secretary were aware, secession by NSW would have devastated the PKIU, as it would have shorn the union of their strongest industrial and financial component. Such a loss would have made the union's survival, and any amalgamation negotiations, extremely problematic. In response the FEC agreed to decide on whether to seek a second AMWU amalgamation ballot prior to the end of 1993.

After the FEC, John Cahill, undaunted by NSW's threat, continued in his attempt to find an alternative amalgamation partner. To this end he sent out a list of six unions and asked the State and Territorial branches to rank them in order of preference. Cahill's actions incensed John McCarthy and his NSW branch. However, several State Secretaries, who were

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<sup>13</sup> One of the most notable examples occurred in 2011, when the Queensland branch of the Public Services Union (PSU) seceded from the Federal PSU and joined the Australian Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (ALHMU) later that year.

supportive of the AMWU merger, persuaded McCarthy that NSW should participate in the survey. They argued that the AMWU were now certain to come out at the top of any poll and this result would effectively stop the Federal Secretary's efforts to find an alternative merger partner.

The survey results saw the MEAA (of whom the AJA were now part) come last of the six suggested unions. The AMWU easily topped the poll, while the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) were the only other union which received any significant support. The hostility of the Western Australian and Queensland branches towards the CFMEU, meant that only the AMWU were now a serious amalgamation option.

Throughout the later part of 1993, while the NSW branch were working on persuading the AMWU and the rest of the PKIU to undertake a second amalgamation ballot, the Victorian branch's internal conflicts were worsening. By the early part of 1994 the Centre Unity/Pledge Left factional alliance had made considerable electoral progress. Brown had held off the challenge of the Left's Mike Duffy, for his Organiser position, whilst further gains were made by candidates endorsed by Brown and Snell in the branch lay and full-time officer elections.

At this stage New South Wales moved to ensure their desire for another ballot would not be adversely affected by the power struggle in Victoria. Talks were convened by the NSW branch leadership with all the Victorian branch's factional groups. As a former senior PKIU NSW Officer recalls:

At the meetings it was made clear to the Vic's that the rest of the union would not tolerate their factional spills any longer. If they had another shit fight over the State Secretary election we would move against them federally. We told them we knew their books were shonky and we could crucify them (Blissett, 2014:235).

After this round of meetings, an agreement was reached that instead of retiring, as he had planned, Ian Wenham would continue in office until shortly after the AMWU merger. In return it was agreed that the Victorian

Left would not oppose the Centre Unity/Pledge Left candidates for certain officer positions.

Although the Victorian factions agreed to the deal, the level of distrust between them was such that a State Secretary nomination form was completed in favour of Brown, in case the Victorian Left decided to put forward anyone aside from Ian Wenham. To cement the NSW brokered agreement Brown signed Wenham's nomination form. Shortly before the close of nominations, Brown rang the returning officer at the Victorian Electoral Commission, to check how many forms had been lodged. The Returning Officer confirmed that only one form had been submitted. Brown, believing this to be the form he had signed, did not lodge his nomination papers. However, when the winner was declared, having been elected unopposed, their name was not Ian Wenham.

It transpired that while collecting signatures for his own nomination paper Ian Wenham had also been collecting signatures for his, younger, factional colleague, Mike Duffy. Duffy's nomination paper, not Wenham's, was then handed into the Commission and he was elected unopposed. Unsurprisingly, the Brown/Snell group were incandescent with rage. In an act of retaliation, they defied Victorian branch conventions and nominated Brown, who was a full-time branch organiser, as their candidate for the office of Branch President. Previously the role of Branch President had always been occupied by a lay member, although this was not explicitly stipulated in the branch rules. Brown's election resulted in him chairing the Victorian branch's Executive Committee, which oversaw the State Secretary's administration of the branch, while in his job as a Branch Organiser he reported directly to the State Secretary.

This contradictory position led, unsurprisingly, to further conflict, in what had become a wholly dysfunctional branch. Outside of Victoria senior PKIU officers were also extremely angry at these events. As a senior New South Wales's officer reflected:

What Wenham and Duffy did was an act of total stupidity. None of us had anytime for Bad News [Brown], or his mates, but using shonky tactics like theirs, meant Brown's position in

the branch was made stronger, not weaker. This was all at a time when we needed some stability, so we could get the Metals merger up. That's why John Mac intervened directly (Blissett, 2014: 236).

Significantly, as indicated above, it was the NSW State Secretary, not the Federal Secretary, who stepped in to try and halt the Victorian branch spiralling down into ever deeper internal conflict. The reason, numerous senior Federal and State officers asserted, was that by this time, John Cahill, had far less internal authority than the NSW State Secretary.

At his meeting with Mike Duffy, McCarthy made it clear that although they were from sister 'Left' political factions, he and the other State Secretaries believed he had no right to hold office. According to those close to McCarthy he was very blunt:

John told Duffy that he had gained the State Secretaryship through a shonky deceit and that he had no legitimacy whatsoever. He also told him that NSW would refuse to work with him, unless he proved himself capable of taking the hard decision.

The "hard decision" referred to was supporting a merger with the AMWU. Shortly after seeing Mike Duffy, John McCarthy also spoke with Brown and Snell. At this meeting they reassured McCarthy that their opposition to the merger had only ever been tactical, and they were not in principle against the AMWU amalgamation. A senior Victorian official, who supported the Pledge Left/Centre Unity alliance, explained their initial opposition to the AMWU merger:

Look, Wenham had whipped a number of the key chapels into frenzy over the Metals merger. He made out that he was defending the existence and proud history of our union. If we had supported the Metals merger then we would have been crucified by the membership. The branch committee and officer elections were pending, and we could not afford to let

ourselves be portrayed as pro the AMWU amalgamation at that time (Blissett, 2014: 236).

Following his meeting with John McCarthy, Mike Duffy met with the Victorian branch's seriously weakened Left faction. Prior to doing so more personal pressure was applied to Duffy, by other State Secretaries, who echoed the line taken by NSW. Significantly, those State Secretaries who had previously been opponents of the AMWU merger, endorsed NSW's position.

By the start of 1994, following election defeats and the retirement of Ian Wenham, the Victorian Left were poorly placed to resist the pressure being placed upon them. Mike Duffy was also, personally, in a very difficult position. As a new State Secretary, the threatened lack of cooperation and assistance, particularly from the NSW branch, would place him in considerable difficulties when leading branch negotiations with large employers, who had a series of workplace agreements across Australia.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Victoria's close cooperation with NSW, had ensured that they reached settlements with many employers, that were in line with those achieved in NSW. Without such cooperation there was a strong possibility that employers would refuse to reach the same settlements in Victoria as in their larger NSW sites. This, potentially, could leave the Victorian branch industrially isolated, as they sought parity with other States, without the support of NSW. The manner of Mike Duffy's election also left him vulnerable to the charges, from within and outside the branch, that he had no legitimate right to lead the branch, because he only held office thanks to a deception. In addition to all these pressures there were mounting financial problems in the Victorian branch, which were only exacerbated by a continuing fall in membership.

While the leadership of the Victorian branch were deliberating over whether to bow to pressure to endorse a merger with the AMWU, the PKIU's Federal Secretary, John Cahill's, term of office was drawing to a close. Cahill made it clear he would be seeking re-election, a statement which received a very cool reception from several State Secretaries. They approached NSW State Secretary, John McCarthy, asking him to accept

a nomination for Federal Secretary. John McCarthy refused these requests, stating that he believed he could be more effective in delivering the AMWU merger as NSW State Secretary. Furthermore, as a senior officer close to McCarthy stated:

John Mac refused the nomination, even though he would have been a shoe in, because he viewed an election as a distraction to the main aim - the Metals merger. (Blissett, 2014: 238)

Consequently, John Cahill was re-elected unopposed as PKIU Federal Secretary. However, as many contributors pointed out his was very much 'office without power', as the Federal AMWU leadership continued to deal with John McCarthy, in the run up to the amalgamation ballot. As a former senior AMWU Officer confided:

As far as we were concerned McCarthy was the real leader of the Printers and we dealt with him, before, during and after the amalgamation. (Blissett, 2014: 238)

In April 1994, following further pressure from other State Secretaries, Mike Duffy finally decided to recommend a merger with the AMWU to his branch, even though he did not have the unequivocal backing of his faction. He did so at the April Branch Committee where, even though there was considerable dissent, he secured a narrow majority in favour. Ironically, this was only achieved with the support of many Pledge Left and Centre Unity supporters. At the subsequent PKIU Federal Executive, there was unanimous agreement that they should hold another AMWU merger vote.

The events surrounding the election of Mike Duffy, as Victoria's State Secretary, vividly demonstrates the powerful role that micro-political factors can play in a union's amalgamation policy. As those close to Ian Wenham admitted, soon after the controversial election of Mike Duffy, his judgement had been clouded by his visceral hatred for Mike Brown. An animosity which allowed him to embark on a course of action which, given his knowledge and experience of the PKIU, he should have known would

place his ally, Mike Duffy, in an untenable position and throw his beloved Victorian branch into chaos.

The second AMWU merger campaign proved to be very different from its predecessor. There was a total absence of an official, or unofficial, No campaign, and Yes canvassing was vigorously prosecuted. The result was that the amalgamation was endorsed by 9,171 votes to 1,453. Significantly, there was a majority in every State in favour of a merger, with the Victorian members endorsing the amalgamation by 2,023 to 397.

Amalgamation with the AMWU followed in February 1995, with the new union being entitled the, Australian Food, Manufacturing, Engineering, Printing and Kindred Industries Union, although it was still officially referred to as the AMWU. The former PKIU membership, along with AMWU members who worked in the printing and allied industries, were placed into the union's newly created printing section.

## **Aftermath**

Shortly following the amalgamation with the AMWU, significant pressure was placed on Michael Duffy to step down as the Victorian Branch's, Printing Divisional Secretary, to which he acceded. Efforts were also made to place the Printing Division's, National Secretary, John Cahill, in another post within the labour movement. This Cahill resisted and he remained in post, although he was effectively marginalised by his own division's officers and the AMWU leadership<sup>14</sup>.

The PKIU's State and Territory branches all amalgamated with their AMWU counterparts, except for the ACT branch<sup>15</sup>, which was integrated into the NSW branch. While the NSW PKIU branch fitted in comfortably

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<sup>14</sup> Cahill was to be defeated in a controversial election for the Federal Printing Divisional Secretary post in 1998, by the Victorian branch's Michael Brown. His defeat occurred after NSW and their allies had, again, chosen not to oppose Cahill for what would have been his last term in office, before retirement. Following Brown's election, Cahill successfully undertook legal action over a leaflet that made libellous allegations against him, and which was received by every Printing Division member on the day they received their ballot paper. Subsequently the AMWU Printing Division Executive and the Union's Federal Executive agreed to remove Brown from office, over this and other, alleged, election malpractices.

<sup>15</sup> The PKIU in addition to its six state branches also had a branch for members in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The ACT had been created to allow the nation's capital city, Canberra, to sit outside the State boundaries of NSW and Victoria.

with their long-term allies in the AMWU NSW branch, there were problems elsewhere, most notably in Victoria. Here factional and micro-political conflicts continued within the merged AMWU branch and in the Printing Division; struggles which continue 24 years later.

In the smaller branches there was also, what one State Secretary described as a “considerable culture shock”, for PKIU activists and officers. They were now part of the much larger AMWU State branches, whose internal organisations were typically characterised by considerable factional, micro-political and divisional conflicts. These types of clashes, at branch level, were alien to many PKIU officers and activists from the smaller States, where their branches had historically been very stable, with senior officers elected, and re-elected, for lengthy periods.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this article, whilst supporting the contention that factional and occupational disagreements contributed to the PKIU’s divisions, has clearly demonstrated the central importance of micro-political factors in the union’s deep merger fissures. Specifically, there were three key areas where micro-political factors played a crucial role in shaping the merger process.

Firstly, the close friendship of the PKIU NSW State Secretaries, Gordon Cooke and John McCarthy, with the AMWU National and NSW leaderships, played a critical role in ensuring there was, eventually, a PKIU/AMWU merger. As interviewees stated this relationship informed the NSW branch’s senior officers refusal to accept the binding decision of the PKIU FEC to only seek a merger with the AJA and the ATEA/APTU. It was also important in shaping NSW’s decision not to accept the members rejection of an AMWU merger in the first amalgamation ballot. Most significantly though, it was the strong personal friendship between John McCarthy and the AMWU national and NSW leaders that saw the reversal of the AMWU’s initial decision to “walk away”, after the unsuccessful merger ballot. Here, personal friendship was instrumental in reshaping the AMWU senior officers’ policy decision, which led eventually to the second, successful amalgamation ballot.

The second aspect of the PKIU amalgamation process, where micro-political factors played a decisive role, is closely linked to the first. It centres on the absolute refusal of the NSW branch to countenance a merger with the AJA. The publicly stated reasons for their antipathy surrounded the AJA's structure, politics and the 1976 Fairfax dispute. (see Blissett, 2014; Cryle, 2006). However, as interviewees from the NSW branch conceded, the AJA, in common with the AMWU, were financially sound, had centralised monetary and policy-making structures, while they were also members of the same, Socialist Left, faction. This meant that NSW's branch's structural and political objections to the AJA were somewhat less substantial than was publicly stated. As to the animosity emanating from the 1976 Fairfax strike, NSW officers conceded that by 1987 the tensions between the PKIU and AJA chapels at Fairfax had greatly diminished. This was owing, in part, to substantial redundancies that had removed the central protagonists (Blissett, 2014). When pressed, numerous NSW interviewees maintained that the real reason for the absolute aversion to an AJA amalgamation was the personal animosity that existed between senior PKIU NSW branch officers and the national leaders of the AJA. The genesis of this dislike went back far beyond the Fairfax dispute and was personal, rather than political, or occupational, in nature.

The final, and perhaps most telling piece of evidence that micro-political factors played a crucial part in shaping the PKIU's merger with the AMWU, can be found in Victoria. Here, as has been outlined above, there was ferocious conflict within the branch which clearly informed the Victorian Left faction's decision to organise their successful, unofficial, No campaign. Interviewees from all sides confirmed that the deep hatred that existed between the State Secretary, Ian Wenham and State Organiser, Michael Brown, prompted the improbable factional alliance between Brown's, Pledge Left, and the 'moderate' Centre Unity. Moreover, as sources very close to Ian Wenham admitted, his deep personal animosity for Brown so clouded his judgement, that he engaged in deceptions that eventually and inevitably led to a cleaving of relations with NSW, along with his faction losing effective control of the Victorian branch. A loss which left his successor so weakened and isolated, that he lost his job,

whilst the Victorian Left faction had to officially endorse a merger which they had so bitterly opposed.

In analysing the route that eventually led to the PKIU's amalgamation with the AMWU, this article has documented a rich, complex and often tortuous process. The original decision to merge in 1987 has been shown to have been driven by the PKIU facing a combination of political, economic, industrial and institutional circumstances that forced most of the union's leadership to concede that they had no choice but to amalgamate. These findings are in line with those scholars who have charted how numerous small and medium sized Australian unions were driven to amalgamate by political, economic and industrial circumstances, in the period 1984-1996 (Bramble 2008, Costa and Hearn, 1997; Dabscheck, 1989; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 1994, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Tomkins, 1999).

Where the evidence revealed by this article differs from much of the literature is in the analysis of those factors that inform a union's decisions over amalgamations. Scholars, in discussing merger decisions by Australian and other unions, have focused on their desire to augment their industrial strength, while seeking political compatibility and financial stability (Bramble, 2008; Chaison, 1996; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Undy, 1999, 2008; Waddington, 1988, 1995; Waddington et al, 2005). Those authors who then go on to examine the reasons for internal disagreements over the choice of an amalgamation partner often stress the occupational, geographical and factional dichotomies that exist amongst senior union officers (Bramble, 2008; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Davis, 1990; Davis, 1999; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989; Undy, 2008; Waddington, 1988, 1995; Waddington et al, 2005). Undy (2008) also describes how disagreements over an amalgamation partner can be informed by promises of job security, promotion and enhanced terms and conditions, made to union officers, by prospective merger partners. It has also been posited, by authors examining Australian union amalgamations, that it is conflicting ideological and factional positions, which typically lead to internal disagreements over a potential merger partner (Bramble, 2008; Costa and Hearn, 1997; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Scaresbrook, 1989).

What none of these authors document is the important role that micro-political factors, particularly personal friendships and enmities, can play in shaping union merger policies. The remarkable story of the PKIU's long and tortuous seven-year road to amalgamation with the AMWU, offers a vivid example of how a trade union's merger policy can be largely shaped by these micro-political factors. That the PKIU is not alone in having its amalgamation policies strongly influenced by micro-political factors is borne out by my previous research into other Australian and British trade union mergers (see Blissett, 2014). All of these findings are further reinforced by my experience of undertaking merger negotiations as a senior officer of the British GMB union, in the 2000s<sup>16</sup>. During these discussions, the role played by friendships and animosities between senior officers of the relevant unions was critical to the various mergers' success or failure. All of this additional evidence supports the hypothesis that micro-political factors play a considerable role in shaping union amalgamation policy. This is not to say that institutional, occupational, geographical and ideological factors play no part in influencing merger policy: they clearly do. However, as this article has clearly shown, past and future authors who consciously, or inadvertently, overlook the powerful influence of micro-political factors in shaping trade unions amalgamation choices are missing an essential component of the merger process.

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<sup>16</sup> As GMB London Regional Secretary I was part of the group of senior officers which negotiated with Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) over a potential three-way merger to create a new 'super' union in 2006. The GMB eventually did not join the merger between the TGWU and Amicus to create Unite the Union in 2007 (see Undy 2018). I also played a similar role in negotiations with Unison in 2007 which proved unsuccessful and a smaller part in the successful amalgamation of the General Union of Loom Overlookers into the GMB in 2007 and the unsuccessful merger negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers in 2007-2008.

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### **Printing unions journals and reports**

AMWU Journal	1995 - 1997
PKIU Journal	1974 - 1995
NSW PKIU Branch Journal	1967 – 1995
AMWU Biennial National Conference Report	1996
PKIU Federal Council Reports	1971 - 1995

### **Glossary**

Blue: argument, fight or strike action.

Bar, wouldn't have a: would not countenance an alternative

Dill: idiot or fool.

Dirty: angry.

Dropped the bundle: failed to grasp an opportunity.

Flick, give the: get rid of something.

Galah: fool, silly person. This derogatory term refers to the Galah bird whose antics and squawking is commonly perceived as foolish.

Hoon: derogatory term used to describe someone engaged in loutish behaviour.

Retrenchment: redundancy.

Serve: verbal attack.

Shonkey: dubious or underhand.

Shoe in: certain to succeeded

Spat the dummy: lost their temper.

Spew/Spewing: vomit, or intense anger.

Spill: argument or electoral contest