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‘Liam Byrne, No Power Greater: The History of Union Action in Australia’

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Liam Byrne, *No Power Greater: A History of Union Action in Australia* (Melbourne University Press, 2025), 312pp. Paperback. A\$34.99. ISBN: 978-0-5228-7929-2.

At their peak in the 1950s, around 60% of Australian workers were members of a trade union. While that number has dropped to under 15% in recent years, unions remain Australia's largest representative institutions with significant political influence. From the Dickensian factories of the nineteenth century to the gig economy of the twenty-first, generations of Australians have turned to the union movement to improve their lives at home and for protection at work.

Labour history is well-studied in Australia and biographies of unions and unionists abound. A history of the whole union movement from its origins to the present is a daunting task for the sheer volume of material involved. Over a century and a half, Australian unions have included millions of members with countless leaders, strikes and struggles. The difficulty is not what to include but what to exclude.

Liam Byrne is a talented historian and compelling storyteller. His first book, *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin* (MUP, 2020), showcased his ability to find significance in the small details other biographers might miss. Turning his attention from these early Labor Party prime ministers to the union movement seems a natural progression for a scholar interested in power and collective action.

Byrne is employed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions but states in the introduction that the work is entirely his own. His position has provided him with important contacts and access to sources that might otherwise be denied. Formally trained as an academic historian, he insists that his disdain for hagiography remains intact. Some critics may conclude that the book does lionise unionism but for this reader, Byrne largely stays true to his word.

While the author clearly sees the union movement as a force for good, he readily acknowledges that exclusion based on race, gender, and sexuality was present in the unions, as it was in broader Australian society. To his credit, he also includes the corruption scandal that blighted the CFMEU at the time of publication.

No Power Greater argues that the central motivation of the union movement, in all its various forms, is a humanising mission. For Byrne, this is why unions have been important for so long and why they will always be needed. He identifies an ideological debate: are workers simply a commodity to be used – and paid – as the market dictates, or human beings entitled to an inherent dignity whatever the economic outlook?

The stories in this book vary dramatically from Victorian tailoresses in 1883, to Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Pilbara in 1946, to stevedores in the 1998 waterfront dispute. What remains consistent is the union message that workers are not machines. For Byrne, union agitation in the twentieth century was aimed at preserving the spirit of Justice Higgin's 1907 Harvester Judgement, which deemed that employers must ensure that their workers are paid enough to live with dignity.

The second argument in *No Power Greater* is more innovative. Byrne suggests that unions are best understood through the lens of emotional communities. Appropriating the work of Barbara Rosenwein, he suggests that unions are not simply a lobbying mechanism for better pay or conditions, but a community built on shared values and held together by heart-felt mission.

The concept of an emotional community helps explain why Zelda D'Aprano was willing to face ridicule as she chained herself alone to the doors of the

Commonwealth Building in the fight for gender pay equality, or why Tommy Ewe was hospitalised after a 13-day hunger strike fighting for workers on Christmas Island.

Despite some noble exceptions Byrne reports frankly that most unionists were as culpable and ignorant of the devastating effects of colonisation, as the broader community. Equally, he repeats that unionism was a (white) male-dominated sphere in the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth. As the book progresses, however, he is keen to highlight the way unionism married itself to issues of social justice.

The case studies in *No Power Greater* have been chosen with care. While most industrial action has had a reasonably narrow economic outcome in mind, Byrne demonstrates the variety of social causes that have been pursued. He highlights the ways union activism has been used to support gender equality, justice for First Nations, gay rights, and environmentalism.

This book will be of obvious interest to unionists and labour historians, but it is written in an engaging and accessible way. It should also find an audience with those who study Australian politics more generally. Its stories and characters serve as a reminder that political change in Australia does not always come from political parties and wealthy lobby groups. Everyday people coming together in common cause, has profoundly shaped the nation.

The book concludes that, despite the drop in membership, the original mission of this emotional community makes unions as important today as ever. A young precariously employed delivery driver may not think they have much in common with a nineteenth century stonemason, but this book demonstrates that the ideological struggle remains the same. With inequality rising in a post-covid world, Byrne presents a compelling case that there is *No Power Greater* than collective action.

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