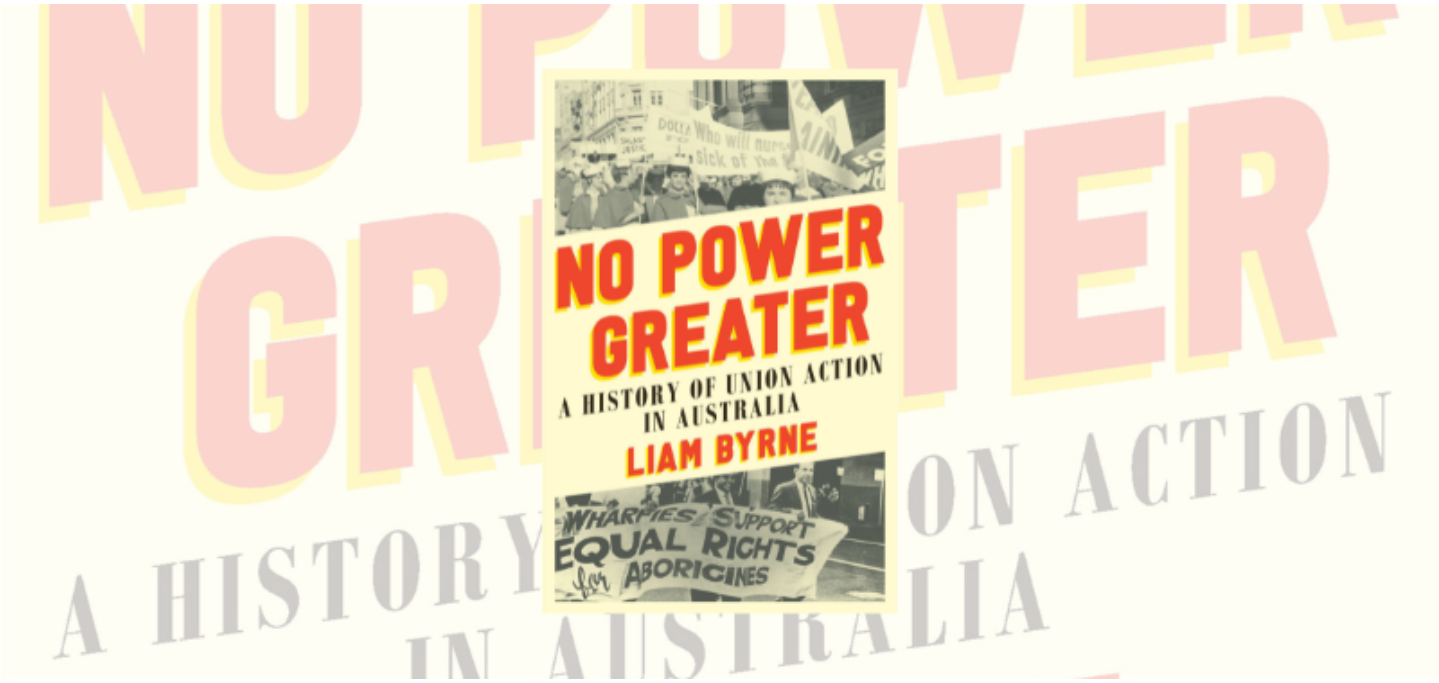
New ways to understand union history

Western Teacher volume 54.4 July 2025



A few years ago, a local library reached out to me and asked if I would accept a donation of books from their collection.

They had a number of union histories that they wanted to find a good home for.

I was delighted, of course I will take them! But then I asked why they needed a new home.

“Nobody has borrowed them for quite a few years”, I was told by a despondent librarian.

As an historian of Australia’s union movement, this is a depressingly familiar story. So much of the union contribution to Australia seems (especially to younger people) like ancient history.

So how to tell the union story in a way that is relatable, exciting and genuinely informative as to all the different ways unions have shaped modern Australia?

My desire to answer these questions drove me as I wrote a new history of Australian unionism, *No Power Greater: A History of Union Action in Australia*, released by Melbourne University Publishing this year.

I wanted to write a book that would get to the essence of unionism: what does it actually mean for someone to join a union; why have so many people dedicated their lives to these collective organisations; why do organisations formed in the middle of the 19th century continue to exist?

And I wanted to write a book that would explore these important questions in deeply human terms. I have read and been inspired by so many wonderful works of union history written in previous decades. But there is often a certain coldness about them, an emphasis on institutional events: this happened after that.

Where are the real human beings in such stories?

So I decided to do something different. No Power Greater is not about abstract institutions, but real people. It follows the life stories and biographies of individual unionists from all levels of the movement to capture the dynamics of how unionism has been lived and experienced through time.

Like the story of Jennie George, born in a refugee camp in Europe after the Second World War, who joined her union after becoming a public school teacher in NSW and spent her career challenging sexism within the workplace and within the union movement, becoming the first woman elected as ACTU President in 1995.

Like the story of Bob Hawke, who before he was Prime Minister was the ACTU advocate, presenting cases on behalf of the union movement arguing for a pay rise for working people to the Arbitration Commission. Through this role he came to national prominence, setting the scene for his election as ACTU President, a springboard for his career in politics.

Like the story of Joe McGuinness, a proud Indigenous activist and Waterside Workers' Federation member who was elected as president of FCAATSI, the major national First Nations advocacy organisation of his time, and played a leading role in the 1967 referendum.

Union history is the story of individual workers coming together and finding a collective power they lacked alone. With this power they campaigned for, and won, fundamental rights that changed the course of our nation's history, shaped the quality of life for millions of workers and expanded the bounds of our democracy.

No Power Greater is intended to be a resource for those who want to learn this history – and for those who teach it.

Teachers of modern history will have already encountered the difficulty of finding relevant historical teaching resources that can communicate the history of the workers' movement in Australia in a relatable and engaging way.

How can we make the Arbitration Court's 1907 Sunshine Harvester decision, in which the "basic wage" was instituted by Justice Henry Bournes Higgins, seem like an exciting event of contemporary relevance?

Well, the story begins much earlier than 1907.

In 1882 women tailoresses at Beath, Schiess, and Co complained at their dehumanising treatment. They complained that they weren't being treated as human beings, but like machines, or even "slaves".

In December that year, the company told their women workers that they would receive another pay cut. In colonial society women were expected to be docile. These tailoresses defied sexist stereotypes, formed their own union, took strike action and won.

Their strike challenged sexism, won its immediate demands and enflamed a major debate as to the conditions of work in factories and other workplaces. This initiated a chain reaction of debate over workers rights that were given a harder edge in the 1890s as the international depression hit Australia.

In Victoria in 1895, progressive liberals planned a new experiment, something that would defy the orthodoxy that government had no role in industrial relations. These liberals proposed a board in certain industries to set wages for women, girls and boys.

Unions had suffered industrial defeat after industrial defeat during the depression. So at Trades Hall in Melbourne its council determined to instruct the members of Parliament it had supported in office to pass an amendment to this law, which they proceeded to do in Parliament.

This amendment (which was ultimately successful) gave the new boards in four different industries the power to set wages for all workers. Against the opposition of free-market conservatives and large employer organisations, this created the world's first compulsory legal minimum wage, something Professor Marilyn Lake has pointed out.

This was a union accomplishment.

One of the Victorian members of Parliament who voted for this union amendment was particularly notable. His name was Henry Bournes Higgins and just over a decade later he brought the philosophy behind the creation of the first minimum wage into the national wage fixation system in his Harvester decision.

The tailoresses strike initiated a chain reaction of debate, advocacy and change making that directly informed the Harvester decision, which in turn sat at the heart of wage fixation in Australia for decades to come, and continues to inform debates on the minimum wage today.

This is a completely different way to understand and engage with what is otherwise a familiar tale, and it is based on an alternative frame to unionism that focuses on the human factor, and bringing the contributions of those previously largely excluded from the union story back to the centre of the picture.

This is my intention with *No Power Greater*, to tell the union story in a way that is relatable and inspiring for a new generation, to make the history as real and as human as possible: a resource for students of history and for those who teach it.

Hopefully, I won't receive any calls from librarians offering to make a donation any time soon.

Liam Byrne (pictured above right) is a biographer and political historian, and has written on Australian politics and history for the *Guardian, The Age, the Sydney Morning Herald, the South China Morning Post, The Conversation* and others. Byrne's first book, *Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: the Making of the Modern Labor Party*, was published by Melbourne University Press in 2020. *No Power Greater* is available at bookstores and online retailers.



By Liam Byrne

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026