Resistance on the Line
A History of Australian Telephonists and their Trade Unions, 1880-1988

Jeffrey Rickertt

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at The University of Queensland in January 2006
School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics
To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except as acknowledged in the text. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Jeffrey Rickertt
Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my appreciation to many people who have provided assistance and support to me during the years spent researching and writing this thesis. The University of Queensland financially assisted by granting me an Australian Postgraduate Award and a Research Travel Award, without which it would have been extremely difficult for me to undertake a project of this scope and duration. I am grateful, too, to the office staff of the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics for their unerring efficiency and friendly assistance with all manner of administrative matters over the past four years. Two members of the School’s academic staff deserve special thanks. As an undergraduate at the university in the mid 1980s I was fortunate to become a student of Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans. Their pioneering scholarship on race, gender and social conflict in Australian history and their skills as teachers and communicators were a revelation. Over the past four or so years I have been fortunate to have them supervise this thesis and I want to thank them both for their guidance and encouragement.

Many librarians, library assistants and archivists have assisted the project. In particular I wish to thank the staff of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre in Canberra, and the staff of the National Archives of Australia, especially Cheryl and Margaret in the Brisbane office who provided a level of service well beyond expectations. Access to the ATPOA’s records was made possible by the cooperation of the Telecommunications Branch of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union. A special thanks to Ian McLean, Steve Mason, David Irons and Doreen McDonald for granting access to records and providing in-kind support. Thanks also to the staff of the CEPU’s Queensland, Victorian and National offices for accommodating my intrusion into their workplaces.

The ATPOA’s former members and officials are the heart and soul of this study. Jean Bowden, sadly now deceased, provided the initial inspiration for the project with her accounts of ATPOA campaigns in the 1970s and 80s. Many other telephonists and union activists have also generously given of their time and passed on their stories and insights. I wish to thank all of them for their contribution and I express the hope that this study accurately captures the salient facts of their history and the spirit of their efforts and achievements.
Throughout the project I have been sustained by the support, love and kindness of friends and family. I wish to acknowledge five family members in particular. I am indebted to my father Mick, also now deceased, and my mother Jean for teaching me the value of education and instilling in me the habits of perseverance and organisation required to complete a project of this scale. My grandchildren Riley and Linnea have also been an inspiration. Their open minds, boundless creativity and intuitive sense of kindness remind me daily that each new generation carries the potential for creating something infinitely better than the world we currently inhabit. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to my partner Carina for the love, wisdom and generosity of spirit she has shown me over many years and especially during the research and writing of this dissertation. It is impossible to imagine how it would have been completed without the support she has given in so many ways.
Abstract

This dissertation takes as its subject the women and men who operated and supervised Australia’s telephone exchanges from 1880 to 1988. It is a study of their situation as workers and as trade unionists, and develops an analysis that their trade union organising, ideology and strategy were inexorably linked to their work experience. It shows that telephony in Australia, while state controlled for most of its history, was a capitalist enterprise characterised by unfree labour, workforce segmentation and a hierarchical regime of control focussed on maximum productivity and service coverage at minimum cost. The state as employer deployed a range of structural and ideological measures to maintain control, while workers engaged in a range of resisting practices, from individual insubordination to collective industrial action.

While the political economy of the industry and broader society differentiated the objective interests of telephony’s antagonists along class lines, the class experience and indeed class struggle occurred under the aegis of gender and race categories. This study recognises gender in particular as a conscious element of management efforts to control and exploit its workforce and, conversely, of workers’ struggles to secure material improvements and human dignity. Gender here is not so much an external context imposing itself on class struggle, as a dynamic process engaging individuals from both sides as they pursued their interests or perceived interests as classed actors.

The salience of gender as a dimension of class struggle is germane to this study’s focus on identity as an enabling and limiting factor in labour resistance. The dissertation shows how and why particular collective workplace identities predispose workers to act in certain ways, ranging from acquiescence to total non-cooperation. It develops this hypothesis to demonstrate that class struggle invariably manifests in the subjective sphere as a struggle over identity, or more precisely a struggle between ideologies from which identities are interpellated. Ideologies from within and without the workplace vie as paradigms for workers to interpret and then react to their predicament as wage labourers. Workers themselves are active in this process, creating new workplace ideologies from a synthesis of personal observation, external influences and assessments of what has come before. These ideologies form the basis for workplace identities that
embody a particular understanding of objective interests and the possibilities for change.

The dissertation shows how the concepts of sweated labour, career service and producerism defined distinct and historically specific ideologies in the history of Australian telephony. It outlines how each of these ideologies in its own way impelled workers’ resistance in certain directions, encouraging particular issues and courses of action over others. By emphasising both the enabling and limiting characteristics of work ideologies, the dissertation reaffirms the importance of workers’ own agency while recognising the constraints on agency as historically specific and therefore mutable.

The focus on workers as resisting subjects also provides a fresh approach to understanding trade unionism. The narrative represents the development of unionism within telephony as an expression of the workers’ will to resist, a will directed not only at the material deprivations and inequity of working in a telephone exchange but also the psychological and physiological damage of working as unfree producers. When this will contracted or was diverted by management or state initiated strategies of cooption, unionism also contracted, giving greater scope for conservatism to flourish. From this perspective unionism is more than merely a bargaining instrument; the union expressed, albeit in a limited fashion, the producers’ desire for and the possibility of sovereignty over working life.

The main body of the dissertation takes the form of a narrative. This is not merely a matter of convention. The intention is to engage with theoretical issues historically, ensuring that the real subject/s of the study never disappear behind theoretical categories, and that workers’ collective power to change themselves and the world, as revealed through time, is always before our gaze. While not a celebratory history of the telephonists and their union, it is a partisan history which seeks to acknowledge the contribution these workers made to social progress and reclaim the neglected history of their industrial achievements.
Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Abbreviations x

Introduction 1-9

Chapter One Labour Theorised: Workers, Unions and the Ideologies of Production 10-52

Chapter Two Creation, 1880-1900 53-91

Chapter Three Unionisation, 1901-1919 92-135

Chapter Four Incorporation, 1920-1938 136-184

Chapter Five War, Challenge & Containment, 1939-1949 185-220

Chapter Six Crisis, 1950-1968 221-260
Chapter Seven
Transformation, 1969-1975 261-292

Chapter Eight
Resurgence, 1976-1984 293-347

Chapter Nine
Eclipse, 1985-1988 348-377

Conclusion 378-388

Bibliography 389-406
## List of Illustrations

p. 68  Telephonists at work, 1890. (NAA: Image J2879, QTH666)

p. 78  Telephonists at Central Telephone Exchange, Brisbane GPO, 1890. (NAA: Image J2879, QTH29)

p. 90  First female telephonists in Queensland, after commencing at the Brisbane Central Exchange on 5 June 1899. (NAA: Image J2879, QTH159)

p. 100 Central Telephone Exchange, Brisbane, 1906. (NAA: Image J2879, QTH30)


p. 174  Telephonists in a country exchange, ca 1930s (NAA: Image J2879, QTH158)

p. 199  Phonogram room, Brisbane, 1944. (NAA: Image J2364, 691/5)


p. 228  Australian Postal Institute marching girls, 1961. (NAA: Image J2634, 3117/2)

p. 231  Southport’s winning Telephone Quiz Team, 1957 (NAA: Image J2364, 2579/22)


p. 257  CTPOA Christmas lunch, Criterion Hotel, 1967 (NAA: Image J2364, 4171/7)


p. 311  Central and Edison Exchanges, Brisbane, 1981. (NAA: Image J2364, 6669/21)

p. 341  ATPOA members rally outside Telecom House in Sydney, 9 June 1983. (*Telephone Echo*, July/August 1983)

p. 346  ATPOA members defending jobs and service, 1983. (*Telephone Echo*, July/August 1983)

p. 375  Joyce Williams and Jean Bowden, 1992. (Photograph courtesy Marie McFarlane)
Abbreviations

ACTU  Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP  Australian Labor Party
API  Australian Postal Institute
APO  Australian Post Office
APWU  Amalgamated Postal Workers’ Union
ATEA  Australian Telecommunications Employees’ Association
ATPOA  Australian Telephone and Phonogram Officers’ Association
CAGEO  Council of Australian Government Employees’ Organisations
CCPSO  Council of Commonwealth Public Service Organisations
CEEP  Commonwealth Employees (Employment Provisions) Act
CEPU  Communication, Electrical and Plumbing Union
CPA  Communist Party of Australia
CPSA  Commonwealth Public Service Association (Fourth Division Officers)
CPSCA  Commonwealth Public Service Clerical Association
CTOA  Commonwealth Telephone Officers’ Association
CWU  Communication Workers’ Union
EYL  Eureka Youth League
GPO  General Post Office
IWW  Industrial Workers of the World
MAC  Manual Assistance Centre
OBU  One Big Union
PMG  Postmaster-General’s Department
RSI  Repetitive Strain Injury
SEQEB  South East Queensland Electricity Board
STD  Subscriber Trunk Dialling
TDTPCU  Third Division Telegraphists’ and Postal Clerks’ Union
TTOA  Telecom Technical Officers’ Association
VLTA  Victorian Lady Teachers’ Association
VWPSA  Victorian Women Public Servants’ Association
VWPTA  Victorian Women’s Post and Telegraph Association
WEB  Women’s Employment Board
WPA  Women’s Political Association
WTTA  Women Telephone Attendants’ Association