William Spence 1846-1926

Some major achievements

- Australia's first full-time trade union organiser
- Secretary of the Amalgamated Miners' Association, 1882-91
- Founder and President of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union, 1886-93
- Founder, Secretary and President of the Australian Workers' Union, 1894-1917

Memorials or monuments

- Spence, Canberra suburb
- Plaque on the site of his parents' house, Creswick Victoria

WG Spence, President of the Australian Workers Union, c. 1915
Courtesy National Library of Australia.

Background and experience

William Spence was born in Scotland and he spent his childhood on the goldfields near Creswick, Victoria. In November 1854, there was a day he would never forget. A miner came to Creswick from Ballarat, asking the diggers to support their mates in Ballarat who were protesting about the cost of miners' licences and bad treatment by police.

These protests led to the famous Eureka Stockade at Ballarat, where soldiers defeated the miners on 3 December 1854. Within five years, however, the Victorian Government had given in to most of the miners' demands and had granted them the right to vote.

Although there was no local school, Spence learned to read and write. By the time he was 14, he had his own miner's licence and was looking for gold. But he soon became interested in the needs of other miners and founded the Creswick Miners' Union.

Spence realised that all miners had similar needs, whether they were mining silver, gold or copper. They were all concerned about their pay and working conditions. So he founded the *Amalgamated* Miners' Association. His idea was that all miners could benefit from getting together to negotiate their pay and working conditions with mine owners.

Political life and times

Before the 1880s, most Australian workers had to work for long hours, in bad conditions, for little money. Any workers who complained could lose their jobs, because there were always other people ready to take their places. Although skilled craftspeople (such as furniture makers) had 'craft unions', other workers had no support or protection.

In the early 1880s, Australia's economy was growing. In the cities there was a building boom. In the country there were new mines, and more wool and wheat was being produced than ever before. Jobs were getting easier to find and workers were starting to ask for higher pay and better working conditions.

Workers were able to form trade unions to bargain with mine owners and *pastoralists.* The workers found that being in a union gave them 'strength in numbers' - they could get a better deal from their employers. They could even go on strike to put more pressure on their employers.

After his success in organising miners' unions, Spence began to work with shearers and other rural workers who were complaining about their pay and working and living conditions. He established the Australian Shearers' Union in 1886. Four years later, most shearers in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales were members of the union, and about 85 per cent of shearing sheds were *closed shops.*

Spence was a clever union organiser and negotiated skilfully with employers. He changed Australian trade unionism by creating large and powerful groups of workers.

- *Amalgamated* means united or combined.
- A *pastoralist* is a farmer who raises sheep and/or cattle.
- A *closed shop* is a workplace in which all workers must be members of the same union.

Beliefs and aims

The accommodation provided for the workers at shearing time was something awful. Mostly it was unfit to put human beings into, and consisted of long draughty buildings without windows ... The cooking was done in a huge fireplace at one end, with the oven at its side ... the smell of the burning fat filling the hut where the men had to dress and undress, eat and sleep, all in the one room. The bunks for sleeping in were made of rough boards, neither mattresses nor even straw being provided ...

Unionism came to the Australian bushman as a religion. It came bringing salvation from years of *tyranny.* It had in it that feeling of mateship which he understood already, and which always characterised the action of one 'white man' to another. Unionism extended the idea, so a man's character was gauged by whether he stood true to Union rules, or scabbed it on his fellows ... The lowest term of reproach is to call a man a *'scab'* ... Unionists have starved rather than accept work under other conditions.

Spence, WG 1909, *Australia's Awakening: Thirty years in the life of an Australian agitator,* The Worker Trustees, Sydney, pp 78 & 79.

- *Tyranny is the use of power in a cruel way.*
- *Scab is a slang term of abuse for a person who does a job while the workers who usually do the job are on strike.*

Challenges and responses

As a union leader, Spence was involved in organising major strikes which could involve thousands of workers and last for long periods. When this happened, it caused great problems for pastoralists and other employers.

In 1891, some pastoralists in Queensland had an agreement with the Shearers' Union to improve working conditions in the shearing sheds. When the pastoralists tried to change the agreement and cut shearers' pay, 8,000 shearers went on strike for six months.

The pastoralists employed non-union workers to shear the sheep. Eventually, with the help of the Queensland Government, the pastoralists defeated the shearers and their union. Some union officials were jailed for three years, and Shearers' Union members had to agree to work with men who had been 'scabs'.

A cartoonist's version of the situation in Queensland during the shearers' strike of 1891: soldiers protect a 'scab' worker against striking shearers, *Bulletin,* 21/2/1891

Courtesy National Library of Australia.

In the 1890s there was increasing unemployment and other strikes also failed. As a result, fewer people joined unions. Spence and other union leaders decided that workers would never win good working conditions and pay until they had a strong voice in parliament.

They decided that workers should have their own political party, and formed the Australian Labor Party. In 1901, Spence himself was elected to the Commonwealth Parliament as a member of the Australian Labor Party. He stayed in the Parliament until 1917.