# No Power Greater: Interview with Dr Liam Byrne

Keith Harvey for JWI

**Abstract**

*What is the purpose of unions and are they still relevant today? This wide-ranging interview with historian and author Dr Liam Byrne explores the central themes of his book,* No Power Greater, A History of Union Action in Australia*. At a time when union membership is at an historical low point in Australia, the conversation addresses the persistent commodification of labour and examines how, across 175 years, workers have asserted their dignity and humanity in the face of market forces that tend to reduce them to mere inputs in economic systems. Dr Byrne traces how campaigns such as the eight-hour day, equal pay, and the fight for social protections reflect a long-standing resistance to dehumanisation through collective struggle.*

*In the book, Byrne explores the historical boundaries of the labour movement and its entanglement with colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. Rather than chronicalling organisations and leaders, Byrne foregrounds the human experience of collective action, and frames unions as emotional communities – spaces where shared values and a common sense of purpose forge solidarity among workers. Ultimately,* No Power Greater *calls for a renewed appreciation of unions, not only as instruments of economic negotiation, but as under-recognised, deeply human collectives struggling for justice, recognition, and dignity at work against the continued forces of commodification.*

**Key words**

*Unionism, Collective action, Union membership, Labour history, Australian workers, Emotional communities, Workers' rights, Industrial relations, Human dignity, Commodification of labour*

 

## Introduction

What is the purpose of unionism? Is it still relevant in 2025? Union membership density has been in steady decline in Australia over recent decades. From a time when more than 50% of all employees were union members, the latest ABS figures show that now just over 13% of all employees are unionists. In the private sector, the proportion is even lower.

Australia's industrial relations system was based on the existence of representative organisations of employees (and employers). Now, individualism rather than collectivism seems to predominate. In these circumstances, are the motivations than drove workers to form and join unions still relevant and present?

Recently, The *Journal of Work and Ideas* had the opportunity to discuss these issues with Dr Liam Byrne in the context of their new book No Power Greater – a history of union action in Australia. Liam Byrne is an historian and has also published an earlier book on two ALP Prime Ministers, John Curtin and James Scullin. Liam brings both an historian's and an activist's perspective to bear on these key issues. The discussion with the Journal's co-editor Keith Harvey was conducted by email.

**JWI:** Liam, thanks for the opportunity to discuss the ideas in your latest book, *No Power Greater: A History of Union Action in Australia*. Firstly, congratulations on its publication. It covers a broad sweep of Australia's industrial relations history – some 175 years of it – comprehensively covering a broad range of issues confronting Australia's workers. The book is informative, authoritative and accessible to every reader. It's a great achievement and timely.

***LB**: Thanks Keith, it is lovely to be able to talk about the book and with the journal's readers – that might be the nicest review it has received yet!*

 

**JWI:** Is it fair to say that this is not an account of unionism in Australia as such, but an account of actions taken by workers themselves (often or usually in conjunction with unions)? That is to say, it is not about organisations as such, their leaders or the legislative framework under which they operated, but on many different worker issues and the campaigns conducted around them. If this is a fair characterisation, what was your reason for framing this history in this way?

***LB****: That's a really interesting question Keith. One of the things I wanted to do with this book was show the human experience of unionism. The book seeks to understand what has inspired successive generations of working people to build, maintain, and pass on their own collective organisations through the generations – even amid all the extraordinary changes that have taken place in the workforce and the economy since unions were first formed.*

*I certainly mean no disrespect to the incredible scholarship that has gone before to note that in some accounts of unionism there can be a focus on institutions and systems of industrial relations that doesn't make much space for these human experiences. I didn't want to provide a listing of strikes, or arbitrated awards, or industrial legislation – I wanted to delve into how workers have taken their own action and made their own history.*

*Which gets to the essence of what a union is. At its heart, a union is an organisation of working people who have come together in common cause, from the fundamental recognition that they have more power together than they have alone. That is the history I wanted to tell.*

**JWI:** You refer to two major themes in the book. The first is perhaps more readily recognisable and well established: the desire of working people that their labour should not be treated as a commodity nor subject to the inhuman 'unseen hand' of the market or the so-called 'laws' of supply and demand. In your research for this book were you surprised how explicitly this demand of workers was expressed in

 

their claims and industrial disputes from the very earliest days, for example in the eight hours day campaign by building workers in 1855-56 but also up to very recent times?

***LB:*** *You've really captured the important essence of the book's argument there. I argue in the book that unions have remained relevant to workers because unions are driven by a fundamental humanising mission. By a drive to assert the fundamental right of working people to be treated as human beings: not as machines, or as numbers in a computing system.*

*The earliest unions were industrial organisations formed in the 19th century by skilled, white, male workers, who sought to assert their fundamental humanity against the dehumanisation and the commodification of the untrammelled labour market.*

*It is important to remember this was an era without substantial social protections and with little to no industrial regulation. The primary mechanism for workers to win rights that asserted their fundamental humanity was collective industrial action.*

*These workers frequently complained of being treated as machines, or beasts of burden, or slaves. I was really struck by the way that unionists articulated these points so consistently throughout this period. You are right, the example of the Stonemasons campaigning for the eight-hour day really struck me. One of the leaders of the campaign in Melbourne, James Galloway, gave voice to his fellow masons (who were predominantly British migrants) in saying of their movement: 'We have come 16,000 miles to better our condition, and not to act the mere part of machinery.'* Not to act the mere part of machinery.

*In making such claims, labour was asserting a fundamental humanity against an industrial system that denied it, by valuing workers not as human beings, but as factors of production. It is important to note that this was, in its time, a radical departure from the established industrial and*

 

*economic orthodoxy: that wages and conditions of work should be determined by "supply and demand" on the labour market alone.*

*It was also, as Marilyn Lake has discussed in her work on progressive liberal ideology in the late 19th century, in direct opposition to the widespread hyper-exploitation of unfree labour – a common practice in the British Empire including on the continent of Australia.*

*Unfortunately, I think the sense of working people being undervalued, their humanity not being recognised, being made to feel like a machine, or a robot, remains far too common an experience even in 2025.*

**JWI:** The issue of commodification of work comes up so often in the book, that we can wonder whether it has ever been fully and successfully addressed in the current economic system. In your view, based on your reading of industrial history, what are the key policy or other measures necessary to avoid labour being treated as a commodity?

***LB:*** *Unionism itself is a way to resist being treated as a commodity. The earliest unions used their collective bargaining power to insist that fundamental rights and conditions at work be respected. These were humanising claims. The Stonemasons did not just fight for the eight-hour day, they fought for the right to have a life outside of work.*

*The Tailoresses who created their own union in their strike of 1882-1883 were not just fighting for an increase in pay, but against the sexist stereotypes and treatments that degraded their fundamental humanity. On and on we see that unions have campaigned for respect and dignity at work, and for humanity to be recognised in pay and conditions.*

*Unions have also played an integral role in campaigning for legislated social protections and reforms that reflect that fundamental humanity. I tell the stories in the book of how unions influenced the debates in the 1890s in Victoria that led to the world's first compulsory legal minimum wage.*

 

*More recently, readers may not be aware that Medicare's introduction was in large part because of the union movement as part of the 'Accord' agreement between the Hawke Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions. There were strikes and industrial disputes and serious campaigning by workers to win universal health insurance for all Australians. This is a really important part of our national story that is seldom told.*

*All of these measures asserted the humanity of the working person and pushed back against the commodification of their lives and labour.*

**JWI:** The second major theme in the book is notion of the "emotional community of unionism". Can you explain for our readers the origin of this term, what you mean by it and why it is important in understanding the history of worker and union action?

***LB:*** *This was a concept I took from Barbara H Rosenwein's work on emotions in the middle ages. She defined emotional communities as "groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions". Members of an emotional community "have a common stake, interests, values, and goals". I found this really useful for getting to the human experience of unionism – communities bound by common identity and experience and defined through struggle.*

*I argue that unions are not just institutions, but can best be understood as emotional communities in which a large number of working people come together to find individual benefit in collective strength. Levels of commitment and connection to this emotional community vary. But the movement has always been sustained at its core by highly committed members with a strong emotional attachment to the mission and values of unionism.*

 

*These emotional communities have created and sustained organisations in pursuit of their common goals. The form and structure of these organisations have changed across time and place, but the emotional communities underpinning them have endured.*

**JWI:** It seems clear that the boundaries of the 'emotional community of unionism' have varied over the past 175 years. As you point out, early Australian unionism was explicitly male, initially skilled blue collar and 'white'. The chapters in the book which deal with racial issues are among the most powerful and disturbing. Explicit racism was built into both unionism and Australia's national identity. The community of unionism then did not extend beyond this perspective.

How were these boundaries breached and expanded to include Australia's indigenous workers, women workers, outworkers and those from migrant and other diverse communities? Can you identify from history what the drivers of change were?

***LB:*** *Yes that was absolutely fundamental to my book. These emotional communities have been defined by who they included – but also who they excluded.*

*The first unions were founded in a colonial context. Unions did not create the racism of British imperial dispossession and racial exclusion, nor the gendered stereotypes of the day. But unions did often perpetuate these exclusions, and redefined them on their terms.*

*This is a reality of union history that should not be ignored or excused. My book also tells the story of how excluded workers took their own action to challenge the perpetuation of discrimination and won their place within the movement.*

*This was really important – not to treat excluded workers simply as victims, but to explore their own agency and their own self-organisation and activism as they challenged exclusion in Australian society more broadly, and within the union movement.*

 

*The book brings unionists previously left out of so many historical accounts back to the centre of the union story – where they belong.*

*This includes moving and inspiring stories, such as that of the Chinese Cabinet Makers' Union, which spent more than two decades campaigning against racist legislation and for their own industrial rights against their employers.*

*Unionists such as Muriel Heagney, who was at the centre of the campaign for equal pay for six decades, challenging sexism in workplaces and within the movement.*

*Unionists such as Dexter Daniels, who as Aboriginal Organiser at the North Australian Workers' Union defied his own leadership to support the Gurindji in their walk off at Wave Hill.*

*Unionists such as the Lesbian and Gay activists who became central organisers of the first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 1978.*

*It is also the story of the many unionists who were not from excluded communities but who in the spirit of solidarity took practical action in support of their comrades, and there are so many of those stories to tell as well.*

**JWI:** At the end of the book you refer to the recently emerged phenomenon of the so-called 'gig' or platform worker. This form of work takes us right back to debates about 'freedom of contract'. Is the future a case of 'looking backwards' or is there a positive view of how the future might hold out the prospect of respectful, fulfilling and rewarding work for all – decent work for decent pay and conditions?

***LB:*** *The future is not predetermined, so that is very much up to us and what we choose to value as a society. My book tells the story of a remarkable union activist Nabin, who has been a gig worker for many years. Nabin was integral in the union campaign that recently won new fundamental rights for gig workers – a testament to him and his fellow members of the Transport Workers' Union.*

 

*Nabin's story is really powerful because it is one of a worker who was isolated and atomised quite deliberately by the business model of these platforms, but who understood the importance of solidarity and collective action, and through such action, has significantly contributed to winning world-leading rights in the sector.*

*You are right to identify the resonances between this type of work arrangement and the individualisation of 'freedom of contract' in the 1890s. Just as it was then, it remains the case now that collective organisation and collective action is the primary means to resist the dehumanising character of those work relationships.*

**JWI:** You mention in the book that the achievements of the labour movement in Australia have been little celebrated, outside of the token and often overshadowed Labour Day holidays in each State and Territory. There is a Workers Heritage Centre in Barcaldine in Queensland – the heart of the 1890s shearer's strike, but otherwise remote from most Australians. A proposal for a Museum of Labour in Canberra appears to have stalled. As a historian of the labour movement, what can be done to better celebrate the achievements of workers and their unions?

***LB:*** *Well, folks can buy my book. On a more serious note, I should say that while you are right in most places about Labour Day, it remains the case that every year Queensland unionists have a major celebration to mark the day up there – something it would be great to see happen all over Australia one day.*

*The union movement also does a pretty good job at capturing its own history. In Victoria, the Trades Hall Council have a worker museum at Trades Hall, and a massive heritage project underway. In Sydney, the peak council of unions have a wonderful collection of historical materials including banners and an historian there, Neale Towart, who does a great job. SA Unions have held some really*

 

*powerful commemorations in recent time – and that's before I even get to individual unions and all they do.*

*I think the biggest challenge ahead is to make sure those stories of struggle and being captured and presented in a way that is relevant and inspiring for younger people today who are not already unionists – after all they will be the future of the movement.*

*Younger generations have proven themselves to be engaged with the world they live in, cause-oriented, and often very willing to take collective action (just think of the climate strikes a little while ago). Hopefully they can connect with these remarkable union stories as a living heritage that they can continue.*

**JWI:** Thank you very much for your time and your thoughtful responses to our questions.

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**Further resources**

- Byrne, Liam. No Power Greater: A History of Union Action in Australia. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, May 14, 2025. ISBN 978 0522879292.
- Byrne, Liam. Becoming John Curtin and James Scullin: Their Early Political Careers and the Making of the Modern Labor Party. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, June 2, 2020. ISBN 978-0-522-87647-5
- Byrne, Liam. Fixing Inequality (blog). Substack. Accessed August 6, 2025. https://substack.com/@byrnel.

**Declaration of interests**

 

Nil.

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