

Mark Finnane (2002) *When Police Unionise; The Politics of Law and Order in Australia, Sydney Institute of Criminology Monograph Series No 15, ISBN 1864874643*

In labour history, police unions stand out as rather strange creatures. On the one hand, police are workers and can claim the right to organise. On the other hand, their right to strike is circumscribed; and unions, encountering police on picket lines, are likely to see them as representatives of employers or government. Robert Reiner, in his study of British police unionism, quoted policemen as saying that a Conservative government and bitter industrial disputation always improved their bargaining position, since governments relied heavily on police at such times.

Mark Finnane's history of Australian police unions is a little different. He gives a sound basic account of the development of police unions in each state and territory over the twentieth century. He discusses police strikes at the end of World War I — especially the Melbourne strike of 1923 which became the example to avoid in the future — and the consolidation of the unions, in most of the states, into fairly powerful bodies from the 1920s onwards.

Two major themes run through the book. One, which I found particularly interesting and informative, is the relation of police unions to the labour movement, both industrial and political. Finnane used the journals of the state associations to trace their objectives and campaigns; he shows a close association of the unions with Trades and Labour Councils and state branches of the Australian Labor Party. The Western Australian Police Union of Workers even voted to affiliate with the ALP; this was unusual — but common to virtually all states was a political alliance with state Labor politicians and governments to achieve desired improvements in pay and conditions. This seems to have been the norm in most states until the 1960s, when a decline in state Labor governments, plus a new culture of middle-class protest, helped to push the police unions to the conservative side politically.

A second major theme is the powers of the Police Commissioners in the various states. Since the 1920s, the unions have fought to reduce the substantial powers of summary dismissal held by Commissioners, and to gain rights of appeal. Commissioners have always resisted this as outside the area of legitimate union concern, interfering with discipline and running of the force. Here the old para-military model of police forces subject to military-style discipline, cherished by earlier ex-military officer Commissioners, confronts the model of police as workers or 'professionals'. Finnane shows that, although some unions made substantial gains in this area, they could always be reversed, especially by reforming Commissioners from the 1970s onwards insisting on such powers of dismissal to deal with corruption.

The book shows that Australian state governments are very vulnerable to political pressure from police unions, which may owe their relative strength to their ability to exploit our federal system. I would have liked to see Finnane develop this point with some comparison with the unions in Britain and the USA. Overall, the book's argument is not very sophisticated, and some of the prose needs a good editor. And it is not hard to see that Mark Finnane comes from New South Wales and now lives in Queensland — though he deals with all Australian states, those two states get the lion's share of his attention.

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REFERENCES

Reiner, R (1978) *The Blue-Coated Worker. A Sociological Study of Police Unionism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.