

# The new 'information rich' of the labour movement

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The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) has a long history of achievement in improving conditions for workers. The union has had many name changes since its beginnings in 1852, when twenty-six members of the British Amalgamated Society of Engineers arrived in Sydney to form Australia's first metal union. During the next 150 years, over sixty workers' organisations united to form what is now known as the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), representing many different industries, including metals, vehicles, food processing and printing, to name just a few (our full name is the Automotive, Food, Metals, Engineering, Printing and Kindred Industries Union). The union's membership exceeds 160 000 members, making it one of the largest and most powerful workers' voices in Australia.

Many of the achievements of the AMWU and its predecessors have become landmarks in industrial legal history. An early milestone was the *Harvester Judgment* in 1907, when four of our metal union ancestors won a decision that established the basic wage, based on an estimate of the minimum wage required to support a family. Almost one hundred years later, the AMWU achieved another milestone in industrial legal history, when the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, on 29 December 2000, decided that casual workers in the metal industries must be made permanent after six months [Automotive, Food, Metals, Engineering, Printing and Kindred Industries Union — re application for variation of award — casual employees — T4991 — 29 December 2000, AIRC — Munro J, Polites SDP, Lawson C]. Many employers in Australia have retained staff on a casual basis in order to save costs such as sick leave, annual and long service leave, and other benefits that most workers take for granted. In some cases, workers were being employed as casuals for many years. This decision by the Industrial Relations Commission could establish a precedent that will flow on to many other industries, as the ACTU is currently planning a test case challenging long-term use of casual labour.

Such historic cases are based in solid research. The AMWU's National Research Centre has its own prestigious history of over thirty years of contributions to labour

research and a key component has always been its library. The National Research Centre Library has an extensive collection of 30 000 monographs, 100 journal titles, a comprehensive collection of statistics, industrial awards, agreements and committee minutes. While it is important to maintain this centralised collection, the AMWU has offices in every state and many country regions — with the priority to make resources available to officials, officers and staff nation-wide. A practical means of doing this is to establish an effective intranet site and develop the information literacy skills of AMWU employees.

In July 2000, the library began to develop an intranet site. The cornerstone of this site is an electronic version of the union's *Research Manual*. This paper-based manual was substantially redeveloped in HTML format, listing the AMWU's electronic information sources for business research, steps involved in researching private and public companies, and other material, all presented in an easy-to-use format.

The information literacy requirements of AMWU employees have been addressed by courses run by the library. The first of these was held for research officers in a Sydney computer laboratory in August 2000 and proved to be very successful, judging from the feedback generated by participants. In late 2000, the library began in-house training in Sydney, which in turn has generated requests for further courses in other states for union officials and delegates.

Training of union employees starts with basic internet browsing skills, using search engines, and the general reference sources of the *Research Manual*, finding industrial and legal information and finally developing business research skills.

A good deal of the reference work performed by library staff involves company research. One of the central issues in the relationship between manufacturing employers and employees is the financial assets of the manufacturer. This is important when the employer insists that the company cannot possibly afford a pay rise for workers or when the employer suddenly announces insolvency. Recent media coverage of insolvent manufacturers who

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claim they cannot pay employee entitlements, such as annual leave and long service leave, has highlighted such cases. The library has the business research resources to start a paper chase of insolvent factory owners' assets. When a union official has a conference with the insolvent employer, that official can be fully armed with a record of the employer's assets, both nationally and overseas. It is particularly important that employees of the union develop the skills to find this information for themselves, which is the aim of the training provided by the library.

Another research skill provided by the library to union employees is the ability to find relevant awards and agreements, which set out the basic conditions and rates of pay in an industry or workplace. Relevant sources of information include the OSIRIS database [<http://www.osiris.gov.au>, maintained by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations & Small Business, <http://www.dewrsb.gov.au>], the Australian Industrial Relations Commission website [<http://www.airc.gov.au>] and the Australasian Legal Information Institute [<http://www.austlii.edu.au>]. Other sources of information, such as state industrial relations commissions, awards and agreements, are also presented electronically.

While the library aims to provide union employees with basic reference skills, more specialised reference work is performed by library staff. The library assists research officers in finding relevant information for submissions to parliamentary committee inquiries, union position papers, average weekly earnings, executive salaries and other forms of social research.

Future projects will include research training of officials in each state, special courses for delegates or shop stewards and further development of the intranet to facilitate communication and the sharing of research across the union. The library's catalogue and other databases will be searchable across the intranet, with the acquisition of software including INMAGIC DB/Textworks and WebPublisher. While printed material continues to play an important part in the AMWU's library, the development of an intranet site accessible to all the union's employees across Australia means that resources and skills can be shared equitably. In the near future, organisers and shop stewards will be 'information-rich' in the battle to protect workers' rights.

<http://www.amwu.asn.au> ■

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# ALIA Annual General Meeting

The 13th Annual General Meeting of the Australian Library and Information Association will be held at 5:30pm on Thursday 10 May 2001 at a venue to be confirmed.

## AGENDA

- 1 Notice of convening meeting
- 2 Apologies
- 3 Minutes of the 2000 AGM
- 4 Presentation of the 2000 Annual report and balance sheet, and income and expenditure account
- 5 Presentation of supplementary balance sheet and supplementary income and expenditure account to 30 April 2001
- 6 Election of Directors
- 7 Fixing of Auditors' fees
- 8 Reports
- 9 General business

## RULES OF MEETING

1. Motions for discussion at the AGM are to be forwarded in writing to the ALIA executive director, ALIA, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2604 by **19 March 2001**. Motions should be signed by the movers either individually or on behalf of a division of the Association. All such motions received will be published in the AGM agenda notice in the April issue of *inCite* and on ALIANet.
  2. All motions to be put to the AGM must appear in this published agenda.
  3. The only items that may be raised under general business are those of an informal nature, or those that are within the scope of the business already laid down. Motions of a substantial nature relating to items not covered in the notice of the meeting will not be allowed.
  4. If any item of urgency arises which is not within the business of the meeting, the chairperson has the power to accept it without notice or rule that due notice must be given.
  5. All motions additional to those on the printed agenda and in accordance with rule 4, and amendments, shall be in writing, signed by the movers (forms will be provided), and delivered to the chair.
  6. When addressing the chair, the person desiring recognition will properly identify themselves, giving his or her name and affiliation. Only ALIA members may speak.
  7. Debate shall be limited to three minutes for each speaker, no speaker may have the floor twice on the same question until all who wish to speak have spoken.
  8. Proxies. To be valid, proxies must be in the form set out in the *Constitution* — item 8.2 and be in the hands of the ALIA executive director, ALIA, PO Box E441, Kingston ACT 2604, e-mail address: [enquiry@alia.org.au](mailto:enquiry@alia.org.au), by **5pm on 8 May 2001**. Proxy forms must not specify how the holder of the proxy is to vote on specific areas. A form is available from ALIA National Office or on ALIANet at <http://www.alia.org.au/governance/meetings/agm/2001.proxy.html>
  9. By general consent, if there be no objection, or by a two-thirds vote, any rule governing the debate may be suspended.
  10. The chairperson's rulings on procedural matters may not be debated. The reference for rules and their interpretation by the parliamentarian will be Joske's *The law and procedure at meetings in Australia*, 8th ed, 1994. A parliamentarian will be appointed to advise the chairperson on procedures and to assist in determining the results of a poll of members present if necessary.
- <http://www.alia.org.au/governance/meetings/>