

A Decade of Striking Figures

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Abstract

This article provides information concerning various aspects associated with industrial disputes or strikes in Australia in the years 1980 to 1990. Losses to production and output from other sources are compared to those that result from industrial disputation. Australia's strike record is compared to that of other OECD countries. An explanation is developed concerning Australia's propensity for a high proportion of short strikes, and disputes which end with a resumption of work without negotiations. The article also explores reasons for the decline in the level of industrial disputation which occurred in Australia during the decade of the 1980s.

1. Introduction

Industrial disputes, or strikes¹, have been an endless source of fascination for students of industrial relations. Strikes are believed to epitomise or provide dramatic and spectacular illustrations of the struggles or conflicts

1 Strikes and industrial disputes are used interchangeably in this article. Industrial disputes, however, can also result from lock-outs by employers (e.g., Robe River in 1985). Furthermore, parties can be involved in disputes which involve neither strikes nor lock-outs. That is a dispute exists between the parties which they are seeking to resolve via negotiations or by calling on the services of an industrial tribunal.

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that exist between the various individuals, groups and organisations involved or interested in industrial relations and the world of work. At one level, strikes are perceived as constituting a technique used by workers and unions to protect, defend and advance their employment rights and interests; and provide an indication of the power or militancy of unions. At another level, strikes can be interpreted as a reflection of the feelings of frustration and impotence experienced by workers who are forced to experience alienating and meaningless work to eke out an existence for themselves and their families. Alternatively, strikes are seen as impairing the productive performance and efficiency of firms or industries, resulting in losses to production and output. Industrial disputes may also be seen as providing an apparent measure of the degree of social cohesion that exists within workplaces, and/or across a nation's industrial relations system. In Australia industrial disputes have an added dimension. They provide a means of testing the effectiveness of industrial tribunals in preventing or settling industrial disputes compared to nations which make use of collective bargaining as a method of industrial relations regulation. Have industrial tribunals, to draw on a famous quote from Higgins, ushered in 'a new province for law and order'? (1915, p. 13).

The period 1980 to 1990 has witnessed a decline in the level of industrial disputation in Australia. Section Two of this article will provide an account of statistical information associated with industrial disputation during these years. It will compare losses from strikes to other sources of lost production, and compare Australia's strike record with that of other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. In addition it will examine Australia's propensity for a high proportion of short strikes, and the high percentage of disputes which involve a resumption of work without negotiations. Section Three will present reasons for the fall in the strike activity during this period. A summary and conclusion is provided in Section Four.

2. Industrial Disputation in Australia: 1980 to 1990

Information concerning industrial disputation in Australia for the period 1980 to 1990 is presented in Table 1. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines an industrial dispute as:

a withdrawal from work by a group of employees, or a refusal by an employer or a number of employers to permit some or all of their employees to work, each withdrawal or refusal being made in order to enforce a demand, or to express a grievance (Cat. No. 6321.0).

Table 1 shows that there has been a reduction in the number of disputes during this period. In the years 1980 to 1982 the number of disputes exceeded 2000 - with more than 2900 in 1981 - falling to between 1200 to 1500 by the end of the this period.

Table 1: Industrial Disputes in Australia, 1980 to 1990

Year	Number of Disputes	Workers Involved Directly and Indirectly ('000)	Working Days Lost Employee ('000)	Working Days Lost Per Employee
1980	2429	1172.6	3319.7	0.649
1981	2915	1247.2	4189.3	0.797
1982	2060	706.1	1980.4	0.358
1983	1787	470.2	1641.4	0.249
1984	1965	560.3	1370.4	0.248
1985	1895	570.5	1256.2	0.228
1986	1754	691.7	1390.7	0.242
1987	1517	608.8	1311.9	0.223
1988	1508	894.4	1641.4	0.269
1989	1402	709.8	1202.4	0.190
1990	1177	726.2	1366.9	0.216

Source: ABS, *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0

This decline in the number of industrial disputes can be contrasted with changes in the workload of the (then) Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. In the twelve months to August 1980, 4728 matters were lodged with the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission². Of these, 1854 were notifications of a dispute as per Section 25 of the (now defunct) *Conciliation and Arbitration Act* 1904 (It is now Section 99 under the *Industrial Relations Act* 1988). Parties do not have to be engaged in a strike or lock-out to be involved in a dispute for the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to have become active under Section 25 of the old Act. In the twelve months to August 1988 the number of matters lodged had increased to 8188, with the number of Section 25 notifications more

2 The Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission was abolished in March 1989 following the proclamation of the 1988 *Industrial Relations Act*, and was replaced by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

than doubling to 4178 (Annual Reports, 1980, 1988). In interpreting this data it should also be noted that as of May 1985 32.6 per cent of the workforce was covered by federal awards, 49.8 per cent by state awards, with 15.0 per cent award free (ABS, Cat. No. 6315.0). While the workload of the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, in terms of matters lodged and Section 25 notifications, approximately doubled between 1980 and 1988, there was a marked fall in the number of disputes recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Notwithstanding the limitations of only presenting data concerning the workload of the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, it may not be unreasonable to conclude that the personnel of the various industrial tribunals, which operate in both Commonwealth and state jurisdictions, have played some part in the reduction of stoppages that has occurred during the 1980s.

Table 1 also provides information on the number of workers directly and indirectly involved in industrial disputes. The number so involved exceeded one million in 1980 and 1981, declined to approximately half a million by the mid 1980s, and increased to between 700,000 to 900,000 by the end of the period (During this period the size of the Australian workforce increased from approximately 6.5 to 8 million). The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey conducted in late 1989/ early 1990 found that 12 per cent of workplaces had experienced industrial action in the previous year, 72 per cent of workplaces had never experienced any industrial action, and 10 per cent had not experienced any form of industrial action for two years or more (Callus *et al.*, 1991, p. 62).

Material is also presented in Table 1 concerning total working days lost from industrial disputes. In 1980 more than three million working days were lost, with in excess of four million in 1981. Since then the number of working days lost has fallen dramatically, with not one year since 1981 exceeding two million working days lost.

Table 1 also provides statistics on working days lost per employee. There has not been one year in this period where Australian workers, on average, spent more than one day per year on strike (1974 is the only year since World War II that this phenomenon occurred). Consistent with other information contained in Table 1, 1980 and 1981, are the years for which average time lost per employee was highest. Since 1983 each Australian employee has spent approximately a quarter of one day per year in industrial disputes. For the years 1980 to 1990, on average, each Australian employee was involved in industrial disputes for 0.334 of a day per year. Assuming that the length of the working year in this period was equal to 226 days (Steinke, 1983), on average, each Australian worker lost 0.148 per cent of the total time available for work in industrial disputes.

Losses to production from industrial disputes are relatively low when compared to other sources of lost production. For the latter part of the 1970's Crawford and Volard estimated that 5.5 per cent of total work absence was due to industrial disputes. This compared with other sources of lost time from industrial accidents which was equal to 6.3 per cent, other accidents 12.2 per cent, alcohol and drug abuse 17.8 per cent, 'the sickie' 18.9 per cent, and other sickness and diseases 39.3 per cent (1981, p. 53). A study based on 1988 data estimated that the annual costs to the economy resulting from problems associated with alcohol and drug abuse exceeded \$14.3 billion. These estimates, moreover, ignored the costs of absenteeism and reduced productivity resulting from such abuse (Staples, 1991).

An examination of coroner certified deaths in Australia between 1982 and 1984 found that 1,544 work related deaths occurred in the civilian labour force - an average of more than 500 deaths per year (Harrison, *et. al.*, 1989). Australia's rate of fatal injuries at work compares unfavourably with that of other countries. An International Labour Office study found that the rate of workplace deaths in Australia was 77 per million workers, compared with 37 per million in the United States of America, 24 in the United Kingdom, 22 in Sweden and 20 in Japan. In addition, it is estimated that 'each week over 3000 workers experience a compensable occupational injury resulting in a period off work of one week (5 working days) or more'. It has also been estimated, in 1989/1990 prices, that the total cost to the Australian community of occupational injuries and diseases is equal to \$9.6 billion, and in 1986/1987 that losses to work 'as a result of occupational injury, was at least ten times greater than time lost through industrial disputation' (Report, 1990, p. 7-18)³.

The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey also provides additional data concerning sources of lost time from work. Both dismissals and voluntary labour turnover are seen as an indicator of poor worker-employer relationships and impose costs on firms (and individuals) in terms of losses which have been expended in recruitment and training (what economists refer to as the fixed costs of employment). The Workplace Survey found an average dismissal rate of 4.5 per cent, and a voluntary turnover rate of 19 per cent. Absenteeism can have detrimental effects on enterprises in increasing labour costs and lowering overall productivity and efficiency. The Workplace Survey reported an average absenteeism rate per week of 4.5 per cent (Callus *et. al.*, 1991, p. 53-61).

3 For further discussion of issues surrounding occupational health and safety in Australia see Quinlan and Bohle (1991).

Table 2: *Industrial Disputes: Comparisons of Coverage and Methodology (1987)*

	Minimum criteria for inclusion in statistics	Are political stoppages included?	Are indirectly affected workers included?	Sources and notes
Australia	Ten or more days lost	Yes	Yes	Information gathered from arbitrators, employers, and unions
Austria	No restrictions on size	Yes	No	Trade unions provide information
Belgium	More than one working day's duration	Yes	No	Local police reports sent to National Conciliation Service.
Canada	Ten or more days lost or of more than a half day's duration	Yes	No	Follow-up questionnaires sent from National Statistical Institute
Denmark	100 or more days lost	Yes	Yes	Reports from Canada Manpower Centres, also Press and Provincial Labour Depts
Finland	More than four hours' duration unless 100 or more working days lost	Yes	Yes	Voluntary reports from employers' organisation sent annually to Statistical Office
France	No restrictions on size. However, public sector and agricultural employees are excluded from statistics	No	No	Returns from mail questionnaires to employers and Labour inspectors' reports
Germany (West)	More than ten workers involved and more than one day's duration unless 100 or more working days lost	Yes	No	Compulsory notification by employers to Labour Office
Ireland	Ten or more days lost or of more than one day's duration	Yes	Yes	Reports from local employment offices
Italy	No restrictions on size	Yes	No	Local police reports sent to Central Institute of Statistics
Japan	More than half a day's duration	No	No	Interviews by Prefectorial Labour Policy section or local Labour Policy Office of employers and employees
Netherlands	No restrictions on size	Yes	Yes	District Employment Office inform Central Bureau of Statistics. Public servants are forbidden to strike

	Minimum criteria for inclusion in statistics	Are political stoppages included?	Are indirectly affected workers included?	Sources and notes
New Zealand	More than ten working days duration. Statistics exclude public sector strikes	No	Yes	Information gathered by district offices of Dept of Labour
Norway	More than one day's duration	Yes	No	Questions to employees' and employers' organisations
Portugal	Up to 1985; no restrictions on size 1986 and onwards: excludes firms with fewer than five employees. However, statistics excluded disputes which involve more than one company	Not known	No	1986 and onwards: figures exclude Madeira and the Azores
Spain	No restrictions on size	Yes	No	Returns by local province delegates of Ministry of Labour and Social Security, and by some autonomous Communities. Up to 1985: figures exclude Catalonia. 1986 and onwards: figures exclude Basque country
Sweden	More than one hour's duration	Yes	No	Press reports compiled by State Conciliation Service are checked by employers' organisations and sent to Central Statistical Office
Switzerland	More than one day's duration	Yes	Yes	Federal Office for Industry, crafts, occupations and employment, collects press reports and checks with trade unions and employers
United Kingdom	More than ten workers involved and of more than one day's duration unless 100 or more working days lost	No	Yes	Local unemployment benefit offices make reports to Department of Employment HQ, which also checks press, unions and large employers
United States	More than one day's or shift's duration and more than 1,000 workers involved	No	Yes	Reports from press, employers, unions and agencies, followed up by questionnaires

Source: United Kingdom, *Employment Gazette*, June 1989

Note: Details for Greece not available

Before presenting additional and more detailed statistics concerning industrial disputes in Australia it might be useful to compare Australian experience with that of other OECD countries during the decade of the 1980s. A problem associated with international comparisons of strike statistics is that different countries make use of different definitions of strikes. Further, different methodologies or approaches are used in collecting strike data. This is demonstrated in Table 2 which provides details concerning the different ways in which OECD countries collect data on industrial disputes. The Table reveals that data collection methods vary in the following four ways:

1. The minimum size or duration of disputes before they qualify for inclusion as a dispute (or data). Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America have more stringent definitions than other OECD countries - and Australia.
2. The inclusion of political stoppages. France, Japan, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the United States of America do not include such stoppages in their statistics.
3. The inclusion of workers indirectly affected by industrial disputes. Such workers are not included in Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.
4. Some countries have voluntary notification systems.

Australia, with its definition of industrial disputes constituting ten or more working days lost, plus the inclusion of political stoppages and workers indirectly affected by disputes, provides more comprehensive and complete data than most other OECD countries. Beggs and Chapman have observed that:

collection and inclusion criteria are such as to exaggerate industrial disputation in this country compared with most other countries. To put the point differently, some component of identified relative Australian strike activity is a reflection of measurement and collection stringency and is not attributable simply to the nature of the industrial relations system (1987b, p. 139).

Table 3 provides information on working days lost in twenty-one OECD countries for the period 1980 to 1989; with the data being further sub-divided into two sub-periods 1980 to 1984 and 1985 to 1989. Most of the material contained in Table 3 is based on international comparisons of industrial disputes to 1987, contained in the United Kingdom's *Employment Gazette* of June 1989. This information was updated by data contained in

the International Labour Office's *Year Book of Labour Statistics*. In several cases such information was not available for 1988 or 1989. The data contained in Table 3 for Austria, Switzerland, Portugal and Denmark is based on the years 1980 to 1987, with the second sub-period covering 1985 to 1987, not 1985 to 1989. For Japan, West Germany, Ireland, Finland, New Zealand, Spain and Greece Table 3 covers 1980 to 1988, with the second sub-period 1985 to 1988 not 1985 to 1989. The United Kingdom *Employment Gazette* points out that 'considerable care' needs to be taken when making international comparisons of strike statistics, and 'should not be seen as providing a precise comparison between countries; but ... are useful in indicating in particular, recent trends' (1989, p. 309-310)⁴.

Table 3 has been presented in the form of a 'league ladder' with nations which have recorded low levels of lost time in industrial disputes per thousand employees being placed at the top, with those which have reported more lost time being placed progressively lower down the Table. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the table. First, except for Greece in the years 1985 to 1988, no country experienced a situation where its workforce spent, on average, more than one day per year in industrial disputes. This would seem to indicate that, for OECD countries as a whole, industrial disputes constitute a relatively minor source of lost production. Second, different OECD countries have experienced different levels of industrial disputation. Seven countries - Austria, Switzerland, Japan, Netherlands, West Germany, France and Norway - lost less than one hundred days per thousand employees; while Canada, Italy, Spain and Greece lost more than five hundred days per thousand employees.

Third, Australia finished in thirteenth position in Table 3. This Table is unable, then to resolve the issue of whether collective bargaining systems are more likely to be associated with lower levels of industrial disputation than nations which make use of industrial tribunals, such as Australia. The major problem with resolving this issue is the variability of the performance of nations which employ collective bargaining as a method of industrial relations regulation.

Fourth, by comparing the two sub-periods 1980 to 1984 and 1985 to 1989⁵

4 For example, in the case of Australia there are slight differences between Table 3 and the years 1980 to 1989 contained in Table 1. Table 3 reports that 348 working days were lost per thousand employees from 1980 to 1989, compared to 345 in Table 1; for 1980 to 1984 Table 3 reports 466 compared to Table 1's 460; and for 1985 to 1989 both Tables report a figure of 230.

5 It should be again noted that for several countries the information for this second sub-period is from 1985 to 1987, or 1985 to 1988, and not 1985 to 1989.

Table 3: Working Days Lost in OECD Countries Per Thousand Employees 1980-89, 1980-84 and 1988-89

	1980-89	1980-84	1985-89	Change Between Sub-Periods (%)
Austria ¹	-	-	-	
Switzerland ¹	-	-	-	
Japan ²	11	14	8	-43
Netherlands	16	22	10	-55
West Germany ²	31	55	-	-91
France	63	88	38	-57
Norway	97	63	122	+94
United States of America	121	160	82	-49
Portugal ¹	158	198	93	-53
Sweden	179	244	114	-53
Denmark ¹	215	112	387	+246
United Kingdom	326	484	168	-65
AUSTRALIA	348	466	230	-51
Ireland ²	409	464	340	-27
Finland ²	439	478	390	-18
New Zealand ²	443	348	563	+62
Canada	508	656	360	-45
Italy	609	948	270	-72
Spain ²	619	650	580	-11
Greece ²	869	740	1030	+39
Belgium	N/A	N/A	N/A	

- Less than five days lost per thousand N/A = Not available

¹ Data for 1980-87 and 1985-87 respectively

² Data for 1980-88 and 1985-88 respectively

Source: United Kingdom, *Employment Gazette*, International Labour Office, *Year Book of Labour Statistics*; and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Industrial Disputes, Australia*, (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0

Table 3 reveals that, with the exception of Denmark, Norway, New Zealand and Greece, there was a decline in the level of industrial disputation in the second half of the 1980s. Australia is one of eight nations - the others being West Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden - which experienced declines of 50 per cent or more in the level of industrial disputation (the United States of America recorded a fall of 49

per cent). In terms of the 'league ladder' analogy Australia improved its position from fourteenth in the first half of the decade, to twelfth in the second half.

Information concerning the causes of industrial disputes in Australia between 1980 and 1990 is presented in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 reveals that managerial policy was the major cause of industrial disputes in this period (with an approximate average of 40 per cent), followed by physical working conditions (20 per cent), wages (16 per cent), trade unionism (13 per cent), other (5 per cent), leave, pensions and compensation (4 per cent), and hours of work (3 per cent).

Table 5 presents information on the causes of disputes in terms of the percentage of working days lost. A comparison of Tables 4 and 5 reveals that disputes over wages last longer than disputes over managerial policy, physical working conditions and trade unionism. The decline in the percentage of working days lost, with respect to wages, which occurs after 1983 would appear to be associated with the reintroduction of a centralised system of wage determination, following the negotiation of the Accord between the Australia Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (see Section 3 below).

Table 4: Industrial Disputes in Australia by Cited Cause 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	Wages	Hours of Work	Leave Pensions, Compensation	Managerial Policy	Physical Working Conditions	Trade Unionism	Other
1980	21.5	4.5	1.8	39.7	19.6	10.0	3.0
1981	31.6	3.6	1.2	35.5	17.3	7.1	3.6
1982	17.6	5.7	N/A	40.4	20.8	9.5	6.0
1983	11.5	5.1	N/A	40.8	20.9	15.4	6.3
1984	10.5	3.8	N/A	39.1	23.6	15.8	7.2
1985	12.3	3.1	N/A	37.2	21.9	17.5	8.0
1986	14.0	1.6	N/A	41.7	20.7	12.2	9.8
1987	20.6	1.7	6.7	36.4	18.7	12.5	3.3
1988	18.4	1.5	4.5	38.6	21.9	12.3	2.9
1989	12.1	1.7	5.0	43.9	18.0	16.3	3.0
1990	8.8	1.5	3.6	50.0	18.3	14.6	3.2

N/A = Not Available

Source: ABS *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0

Table 5: Working Days Lost in Australia by Cited Cause 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	Wages	Hours of Work	Leave, Pensions, Compensation	Managerial Policy	Physical Working Conditions	Trade Unionism	Other
1980	36.0	7.5	15.1	22.9	5.5	3.4	9.6
1981	46.7	24.8	6.3	15.5	4.0	2.0	0.7
1982	44.3	22.3	1.2	18.1	7.6	3.8	2.7
1983	12.3	5.0	4.0	43.4	31.5	3.3	0.6
1984	24.6	5.9	8.4	32.5	16.3	8.7	3.6
1985	23.1	3.8	3.2	24.8	14.9	16.5	13.7
1986	40.0	1.0	10.8	35.6	6.9	3.3	2.4
1987	43.0	1.7	16.1	27.4	7.3	3.0	1.5
1988	29.6	1.8	2.9	52.4	9.2	2.0	2.0
1989	14.7	0.5	7.3	54.0	6.5	6.2	10.7
1990	10.7	0.3	1.5	75.0	7.0	3.7	1.7

Source: ABS *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

The increase in the figures for hours of work in 1981 and 1982 resulted from a shorter hours campaign which ultimately witnessed the introduction of a 38 hour standard working week. Increases in the percentage of working days lost due to leave, pensions and compensation occurred in 1980, and again in 1986 and 1987. The increase in 1980 resulted from a campaign in the mining industry for improved leave entitlements, and the increase in 1986 and 1987 was due to a general push by unions for improved superannuation benefits. The increase in the percentage of working days lost due to trade unionism, which occurred in 1985, appears to be associated with a series of 'New Right' disputes, where a number of companies, and the Bjelke-Petersen Queensland Government, became involved in bitter campaigns which, amongst other things, involved issues associated with union recognition.

Material on the duration of industrial disputes in Australia between 1980 and 1990 is presented in Table 6. The most interesting point to emerge from this Table is the short duration of most Australian disputes. In the years 1980 to 1990 between 43.9 and 68.5 per cent of disputes did not last longer than one day; between 60.8 and 80.1 per cent did not last longer than two days; and between 78.3 and 89.0 per cent were resolved within five days. Only a small percentage lasted five days or more, ranging from 11.0 per cent in 1989 to 21.6 per cent in 1981.

Table 6: Industrial Disputes in Australia by Duration 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	Over 1 and					
	Up to and Including 1 day	Up to and Including 2 days	Over 2 and Less than 5 days	5 and Less than 10 days	10 and Less than 20 days	20 days and Over
1980	44.8	20.9	16.4	9.8	5.5	2.6
1981	43.9	16.9	17.5	12.5	6.4	2.7
1982	49.3	20.1	15.6	9.3	4.0	1.7
1983	47.4	19.1	16.2	9.3	5.4	2.5
1984	48.6	20.5	16.4	8.9	4.2	1.5
1985	50.1	19.4	16.6	8.5	4.1	1.3
1986	53.0	19.5	15.6	7.9	2.8	1.3
1987	64.5	10.9	10.5	8.9	4.2	1.1
1988	62.7	12.8	10.7	9.7	3.3	0.8
1989	68.5	11.6	8.9	6.2	3.7	1.1
1990	67.1	14.9	9.3	6.0	1.8	0.9

Source: ABS, *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

Table 7 provides details concerning the method of settling industrial disputes in Australia from 1980 to 1990. The Table shows that approximately 20 per cent of disputes are resolved by the parties themselves through negotiations (unaided by the intervention of industrial tribunals). Between 12 and 20 per cent are resolved by industrial tribunals under the auspices of either state or federal legislation. This may suggest that industrial tribunals play a limited role in resolving industrial disputes in Australia. The information contained in Table 7, however, provides an inadequate representation of the workload and role of industrial tribunals. As was pointed out above a strike or lock-out does not need to occur for a tribunal to make available its services to help the parties resolve disagreements. It was also pointed out above that the workload of the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission had increased considerably between 1980 and 1988, in terms of both matters lodged and Section 25 notifications. The most interesting point to emerge from Table 7, however, is the high percentage of disputes - in the order of 60 per cent plus - which are 'resolved' by a resumption or return to work without negotiations.

Why is it that Australia has such a high proportion of short disputes, and why is it that approximately 60 per cent of Australian disputes end with a resumption of work without negotiations? The answer to these questions lies in two parts, each of which is related to, or connected with, the exist-

Table 7: Method of Settling Industrial Disputes in Australia 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	Negotiation	Federal and		Resumption	
		State Legislation	Joint Federal - State Legislation	Without Negotiations	Other Methods
1980	21.4	5.4	7.5	64.9	0.8
1981	22.3	7.4	7.5	61.7	1.1
1982	22.8	5.9	6.2	64.7	0.4
1983	22.8	7.4	5.7	63.1	1.1
1984	21.1	6.8	5.9	65.0	1.2
1985	17.8	6.2	10.1	64.0	1.9
1986	19.2	7.6	10.0	62.4	0.8
1987	19.8	7.4	13.6	57.5	1.6
1988	19.7	9.6	12.8	56.1	1.8
1989	15.1	8.2	13.0	62.6	1.1
1990	15.2	9.0	11.4	62.9	1.4

Source: ABS, *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

ence of industrial tribunals. First, industrial tribunals are charged with the responsibility of settling and preventing industrial disputes. Before initiating a particularly important case before a tribunal, a union may call out its members for a short strike of a defined time period - such as 24 hours - to demonstrate to both employers and the tribunal concerned the seriousness with which the union regards the issue(s) it is pursuing. In this sense, short disputes are part of the ritual associated with operating a tribunal system. In addition, and continuing this point, a short stoppage may help the union(s) concerned to speed up the process for the hearing of its claim before a tribunal. Industrial tribunals can be viewed as agencies which dispense services to parties in helping them to prevent and settle industrial disputes. The different groups of parties involved in industrial relations notionally form a queue before a tribunal awaiting to have their respective needs resolved. A short sharp strike can be used by a union (or unions) to advance its (their) position in the queue, and/or increase the likelihood that an industrial tribunals will attend to its (their) needs.

Second, industrial tribunals have played a role in helping to shape the tactics of unions (and employers) which increases the likelihood that short strikes will occur. Unions (and employers) will adopt strategies and organizational forms which they believe are most likely to help them realise the achievement of their goals and objectives. Australian unions have histori-

cally made use of industrial tribunals, and their connections with the Australian Labor Party (especially when Labor is in power), to obtain concessions for members. While unions have also sought to win concessions from direct negotiations with employers, they have tended not to devote resources, nor develop organizationally, at the grass roots or shop floor level. Compared to other nations Australian unions have tended to ignore and/or downplay shop floor organization, and have defined a narrow and limited role for shop stewards or union delegates. As a result, procedures, until possibly recently, were not developed at the workplace to handle and process the grievances of rank and file members. In other words, many industrial disputes in Australia are expressions of protest by workers, which have resulted from the limited development of machinery at the workplace to process and attend to such grievances. Writing in 1955 Kuhn explained Australia's propensity for short disputes in terms of:

the unattended grievances of the rank and file, and the spontaneous outbursts that are the workers' reactions against tensions and frustrations on the job ... trade unions can contribute little to the alleviation of industrial unrest at the lower levels since they give little attention to their members' shop interests and poor treatment to worker problems ... minor disputes often lead to industrial unrest and strikes simply because the workers have no other way of calling attention to their complaints (1955, p. 173-176).

Additional support for this second explanation of why Australia has a high proportion of short strikes is provided by information gathered by the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey. The Survey found that 53 per cent of workplaces had union delegates, with 66 per cent of unionised workplaces having delegates. Union delegates were relatively inexperienced with 50 per cent having been a delegate at their current workplace for less than two years. Some had previous experience as a delegate; however, only 34 per cent had been a delegate for a total of four years. In addition to this, the role and functions of delegates in workplaces were relatively limited with 82 per cent spending fewer than three hours per week on union affairs (Callus *et. al.*, 1991, p. 102-108). Furthermore, the Workplace Survey found that management had similar high levels of inexperience; 49 per cent of specialist industrial relations managers had been in their job for two years or less, with 77 per cent having less than five years experience. Finally, the Workplace Survey found that workplace negotiations took up relatively little time of such managers (Callus *et. al.*, 1991, p. 84-89).

The 1985 Committee of Review into Australian Industrial Relations Law and Systems (the Hancock Report) found that the incidence of grievance

procedures in awards and agreements was increasing (1985, p. 566). The Hancock Report viewed 'grievance procedures [as] an essential part of the total processes, both formal and informal, which go to an effective industrial relations system', and recommended that legislation should be enacted to provide for their inclusion in awards and collective agreements (1985, p. 571-572). Section 91 of the 1988 *Industrial Relations Act* enables the Australian Industrial Relations Commission 'where it appears practicable and appropriate' to encourage the parties to develop grievance procedures for preventing and settling industrial disputes. The (Commonwealth) Department of Industrial Relations, in a report on workplace reform which occurred under the auspices of the restructuring and efficiency principle, reported that 241 agreements had been concluded which incorporated the use of grievance procedures (1990, p. 21).

The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey found that 49 per cent of workplaces, covering 67 per cent of employees had instituted grievance procedures (Callus *et. al.*, 1991, p. 130). Notwithstanding this, however, grievance procedures were rarely used. When managers were asked how often such procedures were used to handle or resolve grievances:

Forty per cent said rarely or never. Of the 63 per cent of workplaces that indicated the procedure was used, 37 per cent indicated it had not been used in the previous year. This is despite the fact that grievances occurred at most workplaces. Only 16 per cent of workplaces claimed that the procedure was used for grievance handling all the time. This low level of regular use suggests that grievances may be dealt with effectively through more informal methods (1991, p. 132).

It might be interesting to enquire into why it is, despite the spread of their coverage, that grievance procedures are used so infrequently? This, in turn, poses another question concerning the reason, or reasons, for the apparent lack of effort associated with preventing short strikes? The answer to these questions may be provided in four inter-related parts. First, as was pointed out in the discussion surrounding Table 1, industrial disputes involve a relatively small percentage of lost time. Second, and following on from this, disputes associated with workplace frustrations and the lack, or usage of, grievance procedures, must necessarily also account for a limited amount of lost time, and hence output and production. Third, the resources necessary to maintain a grievance procedure, which is readily available to avoid or 'put out' short strikes, may be relatively costly in terms of time, personnel and resources. Fourth, the cost of maintaining a grievance procedure may

be higher than the benefits that would result from a reduction in the level of short strikes. Hence, employers, companies and unions have decided on the basis of an intuitive cost-benefit analysis to eschew the usage of grievance procedures despite their increasing inclusion in awards and agreements.

Data concerning the distribution of industrial disputes in Australia by industry is provided in Tables 8 and 9. Table 8 presents data concerning the percentage of working days lost in industry during the years 1980 to 1990, and Table 9 data with respect to working days lost per employee by industry. In examining both of these Tables it should be remembered that the period has been one which witnessed a decline in the level of stoppages.

Table 8 reveals that there have been fluctuations in the percentage of lost time across industries during this period. In interpreting this data it should be realised that *approximately* 1 to 2 per cent of workers are employed in mining, 16 to 18 per cent in manufacturing, 6 per cent in construction, and 6 per cent in transport and storage, and communication⁶. Table 9, with its

Table 8: Working Days Lost In Industrial Disputes In Australia By Industry 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	Manufacturing						
	Mining		Metal Products, Machinery and Equipment		Construction	Transport & Storage, Communication	Other Industries
	Coal	Other		Other			
1980	21.4	6.0	18.6	21.9	6.6	6.5	19.1
1981	7.6	7.3	29.1	15.6	10.5	11.1	18.7
1982	24.4	7.3	11.2	15.4	10.7	13.7	17.3
1983	7.5	11.9	9.6	7.4	20.5	13.0	30.1
1984	10.0	14.8	11.1	19.1	8.9	11.5	24.6
1985	18.6	8.5	8.5	15.1	14.0	14.4	21.0
1986	26.0	12.9	13.5	14.8	8.5	4.1	20.2
1987	22.2	4.2	15.2	14.9	14.8	7.1	21.5
1988	28.7	5.9	18.9	7.2	12.7	4.6	22.1
1989	13.7	2.8	16.7	15.5	9.7	5.9	35.6
1990	10.5	6.3	39.2	9.7	4.5	9.5	20.3

Source: ABS, *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0

⁶ With shifts in the structure of Australian industry these figures will vary during the period under review.

Table 9: Working Days Lost Per Employee By Industry, Australia, 1980-1990

Year	Manufacturing						Other Industries
	Mining		Metal Products, Machinery and Equipment		Construction	Transport & Storage, Communication	
	Coal	Other	Equipment	Other			
1980	23.533	3.915	1.181	1.094	0.681	2.556 ¹	0.202
1981	10.011	5.141	2.285	0.989	1.423	1.104	0.239
1982	14.483	2.691	0.487	0.512	0.782	0.670	0.085
1983	3.223	3.375	0.353	0.186	1.269	0.485	0.042
1984	3.543	3.286	0.327	0.387	0.427	0.346	0.094
1985	6.892	1.928	0.256	0.312	0.666	0.430	0.071
1986	10.741	3.328	0.445	0.328	0.458	0.135	0.072
1987	8.920	1.072	0.479	0.305	0.743	0.217	0.070
1988	15.548	1.777	0.750	0.183	0.725	0.177	0.085
1989	5.505	0.642	0.473	0.283	0.374	0.160	0.097
1990	4.660	1.643	1.287	0.210	0.203	0.300	0.062

¹ Data based on Stevedoring Services only

Source: ABS *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

focus on working days lost per employee, provides a more accurate reflection of the level of industrial disputation between 1980 and 1990. In reviewing the Table it should be remembered that each Australian employee, on average, was involved in industrial disputes for 0.334 of a day per year (see above, especially Table 1).

The Table shows that mining, and particularly coal mining, experiences a large number of working days lost per employee. For example, employees in coal mining on average lost more than 23 days in 1980, and more than 15 in 1988. Lee attributes the high level of industrial disputation in the coal industry to two factors. The first is the 'historically antagonistic' nature of industrial relations resulting from the 'dangerous and unnatural conditions which persist' in the industry. The second is:

The democratic decision making process in the coal industry unions ... In coal, the practice of holding report back aggregate meetings and abiding by the decision of those meetings means that the decisions are in fact the decisions of the rank and file. These meetings require 24 hours cessation of work to enable all shifts to attend. This democratic process accounts for a large number of shifts lost in the

industry - probably about four shifts per employee per year. These shifts are counted as time lost due to industrial disputes although strikes in the normal sense have not taken place (1988, p. 13 & 14).

For 1980 and 1981, the years which recorded the highest level of industrial disputation during the period under review, several industries (other than mining) experienced stoppage levels in excess of 1 working day per employee. Since then, only construction in 1983 and metal products, machinery and equipment in 1990, have lost more than 1 working day per year in industrial disputes.

Information concerning the distribution of industrial disputes across the states and territories of Australia for the period 1980 to 1990 is provided in Tables 10 and 11. Table 10 provides information on the percentage of working days lost, while Table 11 presents information on working days lost per employee. Somewhat unsurprisingly Table 10 reveals that the most populous states of New South Wales and Victoria are responsible, generally speaking, for the greatest proportion of working days lost in stoppages. In saying this it should be noted that the coal industry is mainly located in New South Wales. Queensland, in 1982 and 1985, was responsible for more than 25 per cent of industrial disputes. The less populated states of South Australia and Tasmania, and the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory have recorded a relatively low proportion of lost time from industrial disputes.

Table 10: Working Days Lost In Industrial Disputes In Australia By Area 1980-1990 (Percentages)

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
1980	36.4	33.6	18.6	1.8	5.8	2.8	0.8	0.3
1981	45.7	29.5	11.1	3.8	5.8	1.5	1.5	1.0
1982	39.6	18.6	25.7	3.4	8.2	3.1	0.7	0.7
1983	48.8	15.7	8.2	5.3	16.5	4.1	1.2	0.1
1984	50.5	14.3	18.1	2.0	9.1	3.9	1.4	0.7
1985	31.7	28.3	26.7	1.8	7.4	1.6	0.9	1.4
1986	43.1	27.5	12.5	3.3	10.3	2.1	0.8	0.5
1987	56.8	21.4	5.6	3.4	8.8	2.1	0.5	1.3
1988	44.5	22.1	18.2	2.9	9.8	1.1	0.5	0.9
1989	49.0	28.9	8.4	2.9	8.5	0.9	0.6	0.8
1990	45.1	28.5	7.9	9.1	7.9	0.8	0.1	0.6

Source: ABS Industrial Disputes Australia (annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

Table 11: Working Days Lost Per Employee In Australia By Area, 1980-1990

Year	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
1980	0.657	0.792	0.863	0.132	0.446	0.668		
1981	1.023	0.863	0.620	0.320	0.548	0.461		
1982	0.381	0.258	0.660	0.101	0.348	0.431		
1983	0.287	0.163	0.176	0.115	0.577	0.478		
1984	0.357	0.132	0.302	0.055	0.256	0.350	0.381	0.088
1985	0.209	0.236	0.411	0.048	0.188	0.138	0.213	0.159
1986	0.304	0.240	0.207	0.095	0.272	0.190	0.199	0.055
1987	0.366	0.172	0.087	0.091	0.213	0.177	0.110	0.143
1988	0.341	0.214	0.336	0.093	0.299	0.118	0.158	0.112
1989	0.269	0.199	0.102	0.067	0.187	0.064	0.111	0.077
1990	0.280	0.225	0.112	0.234	0.200	0.067	0.026	0.062

Source: ABS *Industrial Disputes Australia* (Annual) Cat. No. 6322.0 and (Monthly) Cat. No. 6321.0.

Table 11 with its presentation of information of working days lost per employee provides a more accurate indicator of the relative losses from industrial disputes across states and territories. The Table indicates, that except for 1981 when New South Wales experienced more than 1 working day lost per employee, that the stoppage records of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania are, generally speaking, not that dissimilar. In fact, in 1982 and 1983 Tasmanian workers lost more time in disputes per employee than occurred in either New South Wales or Victoria. Only South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and, to a lesser extent, the Northern Territory tend to experience consistently lower levels of working days lost per employee than the rest of Australia.

3. Explaining the Decline in Strike Activity

The 1970s witnessed an increase in the level of industrial disputation in Australia. For the years 1970 to 1979, on average, each Australian worker spent 0.670 of a day per year in industrial disputes; compared to 0.334 of a day per year for the period 1980 to 1990 (see above). Following pioneering work by Oxnam (1953, 1967, 1968, 1971a, 1971b) a series of studies linked strike activity to the trade cycle, and changes in such macroeconomic variables as employment/unemployment and inflation (Bentley and Hughes, 1970; Bentley and Hughes, 1971; Bentley, 1974; Phipps, 1977; Perry, 1979; Creigh and Makeham, 1982; Creigh 1986). Bentley (1974) also saw changes in the operation of Australia's institutional mechanisms

for resolving disputes - the decentralisation which occurred in the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s - and sociological changes which resulted in a rejection of authority as additional reasons explaining the increase in strike activity.

In a similar way several studies were conducted in an attempt to explain the decline in the level of disputation which occurred in the 1980s. Beggs and Chapman (1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1988) developed a model where they linked changes in strike activity to inflation, overtime, profits, vacancies (or unemployment) and inventories. Their method was to compare the predicted level of industrial disputation provided by their model with the actual level of disputation; to test whether changes, or rather the fall, in strike activity could be explained in terms of (their) macroeconomic variables, or was due to other causes. They concluded that 'strike activity fell markedly . . . in a way not explainable by macroeconomic conditions' (Beggs and Chapman, 1987a, p. 57). With passing time, or rather additional data, their macroeconomic model became less able to predict the level of industrial disputation (Beggs and Chapman, 1988; Chapman and Gruen, 1989). Beggs and Chapman have suggested that the 'unexplained' falls in the level of industrial disputation are associated with, if not due, to the Prices and Incomes Accord negotiated between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1983. This conclusion has received support from Lewis and Spiers (1990)⁷.

It might be useful to delve further into the way in which the Accord, or institutional arrangements, has helped reduce the level of industrial disputation. The 1983 Prices and Incomes Accord involved a bilateral agreement between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions to work co-operatively together as a means to help resolve the various economic, social and industrial relations problems confronting Australia at the beginning of the 1980s⁸. While much of the decline in the level of industrial disputation which has occurred since 1983 has been attributed to the Accord, other aspects of Australia's industrial relations institutional arrangements should also be noted.

During 1981 the metal industry experienced a series of disputes concerning reductions in the length of the standard working week. In eventually agreeing to introduce a 38 hour week, as well as increases to wages, the Metal Trades Industry Association obtained from the unions an undertaking

7 For critiques of Beggs and Chapman see Blandy (1988), and Moore (1989)

8 For more detailed examination of the origins and evolution of the Accord see Stillwell (1986), Dabscheck (1989), and Singleton (1990).

that there would be no extra claims during the life of the agreement (Decision, 18 December 1981, p. 16). Following the Accord and the election of the Hawke Labor government in early 1983, the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, in (re)establishing a centralised system of wage determination and industrial relations regulation⁹, linked the granting of wage increases to a commitment by *individual* unions not to pursue any extra claims which were not consistent with its principles of wage determination (NWC, September 1983). In the various changes which have been introduced to the principles governing wage determination during the life of the Accord, both the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, and its successor, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, have required unions to provide a no extra claims commitment if they are to receive wage increases, or any other benefits, which are available under their principles of wage determination (NWC, June 1986; March 1987; August 1988; August 1989).

The no extra claims commitment, initially negotiated in the metal industry, and adopted by Australia's major industrial relations tribunal, has been an important institutional reason, additional to the Accord, which helps to explain the decline in the level of industrial disputation which has occurred in the 1980s.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Strikes are an aspect of industrial relations which have, and, in all probability, will always be a source of intense interest. This article has been concerned with an examination of industrial disputation in the years 1980 to 1990; a period which has witnessed a significant decline in the level of disputation. Data was presented which showed that losses from industrial disputes were relatively small, and were less, if not substantially lower, than losses associated with labour turnover, absenteeism, industrial deaths and accidents, occupational health and safety, poor health, and alcohol and drug dependence. Australia's experience with industrial disputes was compared to that of other OECD countries. Australia was one of several nations which experienced a large decline in the level of disputation during the 1980s.

9 Between April 1975 and July 1981 the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission operated a centralised system of wage determination called wage indexation. From December 1982 to September 1983 a wages freeze was in operation. For a brief account of these see Dabscheck (1989, p. 26-41).

Additional material was presented concerning other aspects of industrial disputation in Australia. Of particular interest was Australia's propensity for a high proportion of short strikes, and disputes which involve a resumption of work without negotiations. These phenomena were related to Australia's usage of industrial tribunals, the strategic role of demonstration disputes and the lack of resources devoted to, and limited usage of, grievance procedures. The fall in the level of disputation which has occurred in the 1980s was related to changes in broad macroeconomic conditions, the Accord, and the no extra claims provision which has been used by the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, and its successor, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, as an accompaniment to the various systems of industrial relations regulation and wage determination which were developed during the 1980s.

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