

Libraries, unions and the LAA

THERE HAVE BEEN three registered trade unions specifically for library staff. The first, the Fisher Library Officers' Association (FLOA), formed in 1928 to cover staff at the University of Sydney, now also covers Macquarie and New England. The second, the Professional Librarians' Association, was registered in NSW in 1957 and disbanded in 1968 having never attempted to gain an award or agreement. The third is the federally registered University Library Officers' Association (ULOA – FLOA's federal arm). It, too, has not sought award coverage because its membership only extends to three NSW universities which are covered by state awards.

The LAA is not a union but has shown a continuing interest in industrial matters. This has been in response to pressure from at least a section of the membership for the professional body to act as a union, or to set up a separate union for library staff.

In 1947 the Institute of Librarians sought the advice of an industrial barrister (Sheldon) on the practicalities of establishing a union in either the NSW or commonwealth jurisdictions. One of the main problems in the Institute itself becoming a union was that a union could not include both employer and employee representatives.

The solution touched on by the then President of the Institute in a submission to Council was the possibility of establishing a separate though perhaps parallel body with similar conditions and membership'. This suggestion surfaced from time to time during the following years.

In May 1973 *AustLibJ* published a questionnaire which included questions on the industrial nature (or lack of it) of the Association. The results, tabulated from 1,000 replies showed 'Members also appear generally to favour the Association's involvement in industrial matters and there is support for a parallel but separate union'.

The response to this survey was the appointment of an Industrial Information Officer in 1974. It was intended to be a preliminary to forming a library union. This has never occurred, despite further encouragement in that direction by ex-Arbitrator, I.C. Winter at a seminar in 1974 entitled 'Industrial Relations and the Librarian'.

So who looks after the industrial interests of library staff today? Because they are mainly in public sector employment they are covered by a number of public service type unions under a variety of awards, agreements and determinations.

There is, however, still a group of employees in libraries not covered by any union. They work in the private sector. Because they are 'award free' they must negotiate the terms of their employment individually with their employer. Some employers use the recommended salary scales put out by the LAA as a guide, but on the whole private sector librarians are underpaid compared to their public sector colleagues. They are usually working in an overall non-library environment, with little opportunity to compare their positions with similarly qualified staff.

What can be done to give these employees an industrial voice? Clearly they need to be covered by a union but first a decision must be made as to whether it should be a state or federal union. In the federal sphere there is no possibility of a common rule award, ie, one applying to all employees in a particular classification. This means that since it is unlikely that the employers in question would belong to a particular employer organisation, all individual employers would need to be served with a log of claims for an award.

This would be very difficult since often their identity is unknown and new libraries

are constantly being formed. Also, for a federal award to be made the employees must be either working in an industry or engaged in an 'industrial' pursuit. Judging from previous narrow interpretations of these terms in the federal jurisdiction it is debatable whether or not they would preclude library staff. In the state jurisdiction it is possible to have common rule awards and 'industrial' has a far more liberal interpretation.

Having decided on the jurisdiction it would then be necessary to consider the alternatives of either approaching an existing union to extend its constitutional coverage to include library staff, or forming a new union to cover them. There are no unions already registered with an obvious or logical connection with library staff, except for FLOA and ULOA. These are run by honorary officials, loath to increase their already substantial workload without demonstrable benefits for their current members. A new union would therefore appear to be called for, with the possibility of future amalgamation.

Consideration would then have to be given to the LAA's role in setting up such a body. Already a substantial amount of LAA staff time is spent in servicing the industrial needs of these employees. It might be better spent helping them set up a proper industrial organisation to help themselves get award coverage since the LAA recommended salary scales have no standing in law.

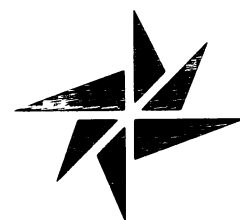
The next question is, what classifications of staff would the proposed union cover? I would suggest all library specific staff such as library assistants, library technicians and librarians. This is the case with FLOA and ULOA. Since library staff are now sometimes called information scientists or research officers, I suggest the proposed coverage should also encompass these classifications. It would need to be quite clear however that there was no intention to cover persons eligible to join already established unions, otherwise the proposed body would be beset with objections to its registration.

Are there enough people interested and prepared to form such a body? This article is an attempt to open up the issue. All interested persons are invited to contact me either by letter or phone at the LAA office.

Judith Hill
Industrial Officer

LAA 22

PRIORITIES IN HARD TIMES is the theme of the University and College Libraries Section special study at LAA 22. Allocation of resources, automation, microforms and co-operative ventures are among the timely issues to be considered and there will be ample opportunity for discussion. Watch future issues of *InCite* for more news of this and other items on the program for LAA 22.



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