

**A History of the Electrical Trades Union  
in Western Australia and Its Place in the  
Labour Movement from 1905 to 1979**

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## **Declaration**

**I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is the first scholarly study of the organisation representing electrical trades workers in Western Australia, from its inception in 1905 to 1979. It examines how a small craft union was created, how it won and maintained its independence and fostered the singular skill base of its members, and how it developed and strengthened its power. The thesis argues that the union fought to create and maintain a separate trade union identity based on specific trade skills within the electrical trades in the face of opposition from already-established metal trade unions.

In 1905 the Metropolitan Electrical Trades Union (METU) was established. This was the first union to represent electrical workers in Western Australia. In 1914 the METU amalgamated with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) / Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). Many electrical workers were unhappy with this amalgamation and in 1926, with the assistance of the national body of the Electrical Trades Union of Australia, a union known as the Electrical Trades Union of Australia (Western Australian Branch) (ETUWA) was established. From 1927 until 1949 the ETUWA was embroiled in a long bitter struggle to regain its independence. The ETUWA's main opposition to independence came from the engineering unions, the ASE/AEU and Australasian Society of Engineers. Even after re-registration in 1949 the ETUWA remained a small ineffectual union.

However, from the late 1960s onwards immigrants from the British Isles and from the eastern states of Australia began to expand a grass roots activism that promoted and strengthened the ETUWA. Electrical installers working in the electrical contracting industry flocked to WA to work in the State's expanding industrial complexes on the Kwinana Industrial Strip and the iron ore projects in the Pilbara. And, from 1970 onwards, these newcomers aided in the development of a stronger more militant union, eventually succeeding in creating an independent award for the electrical contracting industry, thus breaking the nexus between the electrical trades and the engineering trades. This thesis has added to the history of industrial development in Western Australia, from the early twentieth century by examining, from a labour history perspective, the growth of unionisation in the electrical industry.

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## List Abbreviations

AEEFEU (WA)	Australian Electrical, Electronics, Foundry and Engineering Union (WA)
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ASE/AEU/AMWU	Amalgamated Society of Engineers/Amalgamated Engineering Union/Amalgamated Metals Workers' Union
ASEMU (WA)	Australasian Society of Engineers, Moulders & Foundry Workers Union (WA)
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
BEEI (WA)	Board of Examiners for Electrical Installers (WA)
CDRHUWU	Coastal, Docks, Rivers and Harbour Workers' Union
CEPU	Communications, Electrical, Plumbing Union
ECA (WA)	Electrical Contractors' Association of WA
ECB (WA)	Electrical Contractors' Board (WA)
<i>ETJ</i>	<i>Electrical Trades Journal</i>
ETU	Electrical Trades Union of Australia
ETUWA	Electrical Trades Union of Australia (Western Australian Branch)
EWB (WA)	Electrical Workers' Board (WA)
FMTELB	Fremantle Municipal Tramways and Electric Lighting Board
FMWU	Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union
FTEU	Fremantle Tramway Employees' Union
GEWU/GETU	Goldfields Electrical Workers Union/ Goldfields Electrical Trades Union
METU	Metropolitan Electrical Trades Union
PGU	Plumbers' and Gasfitters' Union
SEC	State Electricity Commission
<i>WAA Act</i>	<i>Western Australian Arbitration Act</i>
WAAC	Western Australian Arbitration Court/Commission
WA ALP	Western Australian Branch of the Australian Labor Party
WAASRE	Western Australian Amalgamated Society of Railway Employees
WACAB	Western Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Board
<i>WAGG</i>	<i>Western Australian Government Gazette</i>
WAGRC	Western Australian Government Railway Commission
<i>WAIG</i>	<i>Western Australian Industrial Gazette</i>
<i>WAPD</i>	<i>Western Australian Parliamentary Debates</i>
<i>WARDA</i>	<i>Western Australian Register of Disputes and Awards</i>
<i>WARP</i>	<i>Western Australian Reports of Proceedings before the Boards of Conciliation and the Court of Arbitration</i>
WASL	Western Australian State Library
WASRO	Western Australian State Records Office
WATLC	Western Australian Trades and Labor Council
WATUIC	Western Australian Trades Union Industrial Council
WAVP	<i>Votes and Proceedings of the Parliament of Western Australia</i>