Shifting Class Identity and Industrial Practice: 
The Case of Victorian Secondary Teachers  
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Introduction
The Trades Hall council gave Victorian teachers unparalleled support in their recent industrial dispute with the ministry of Education. The teacher unions, the Federated Teachers' Union of Victoria and the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association, have welcomed the support from other unions involved in the education system such as the Public Service Association and the Miscellaneous Workers' Union. This paper argues that such support from other workers is a direct reflection of the changing class location of the teaching occupation. It documents how teachers' attitudes towards other workers altered as their perception of their own class position shifted.

For eleven weeks the state teacher unions were involved in a protracted battle with the state government over budget cuts and a failure by the government to honour an agreement it had signed concerning staffing. The teachers did not have media support in their battle. The Age reported it was 'a display of industrial pugilism conducted in an ethical void' (Age November 2, 1991, p.18). An Age editorial was quick to point out that, 'teachers cannot expect to be immune from budget cuts suffered by every other part of the public sector' (Age November 5, 1991, p.11). Compromises were reached and the dispute settled. The dispute demonstrated how teachers are now considering alliances with other workers more than ever before and this strengthened their industrial position. Most teachers no longer consider themselves to be middle class, they believe they have no social position to lose and support from other workers is actively considered. This is a major shift in teacher thinking and has implications for their future industrial practice.

The Meaning and Measurement of Class Location
An understanding of class that is truly historical needs to be
able to link past, present and future. Wright and Shin (1988) explain that class analysis needs to be both processual, that is, linking class to the past and structural, linking class to the future. The processual understanding views classes as constituted by the lived experiences of people. Classes emerge from the shared lived experiences of people. These experiences define people's lives and determine their class character.

People's class trajectories need to be considered. That is, the class they were born in, their parents were born in and their children were moving into, must have some influence on how people see the class structure. After conducting a comparative study of the effects of class trajectory and class structure on class consciousness in Sweden and the United States, Wright and Shin found that class identity is shaped by one's biography, but class locations were more important for shaping class interests. What this insight of Wright and Shin's means is that importance must be given to the teachers' class trajectories in understanding their behaviour. More specifically, their biography in class based communities shapes their class identity. These must be considered alongside the structural considerations of changing industrial organization and work practices.

Methodology
To increase our understanding of changing teacher behaviour, it is necessary to listen to them. One hundred semi-structured interviews with equal numbers of male and female people who had taught in state, catholic and private schools were carried out. Twenty-five began teaching after 1920 but before 1945, twenty-five began after 1946 but before 1960, twenty-five began after 1961 and before 1975 and the last twenty-five had all started after 1976. The interviews asked for a biographical sketch and then probed for the teachers' thoughts on their position in society, working conditions, unions and relations with other workers.

Teacher viewpoints on class and worker relations: 1920-1945
All of the men in this sample and most of the women described themselves as being in the middle strata of society or middle class. Their position was explained eloquently by Cliff White. Cliff, born in 1899, was working on his parents' farm before enlisting for World War 1. After being discharged, Cliff went to Melbourne University to study for his Master of Arts and Diploma of Education. He taught in state secondary schools at Hampton Higher Elementary school, Avoca and by 1925 was at Mildura High school:

In those days of course I suppose the prestige, particularly in the country, of high school teachers was right at it's zenith, you were very highly regarded indeed.

I mean the highest social circles such as they were, were available to you and I think speaking of the country at large it didn't just simply apply to the high school people, as their part in what was happening in the district. In
other words, if you moved anywhere throughout Victoria, wherever you went you would find a teacher, not necessarily a high school teacher, but in a rural area, a rural headmaster was very prominent in directing what was happening in the district. But I think the high school teachers possibly had a higher degree of regard socially, principally for reasons that nearly everybody was a university graduate. In other words of course in those days if you didn't have a degree, you couldn't get on to the high school staff at all, except as basically a cookware teacher and woodwork teacher.

Six of the twelve men interviewed were in favour of teacher unions and belonged to and supported the VTU and later the VSTA. Another three men spoke disapprovingly of the later teacher militancy during the sixties and seventies. Rex was typical of these:

In the beginning I was a strong union supporter because I think the government was giving teachers a pretty raw deal... I think they (VSTA) did become too militant.

The remaining three did not feel involved. Cliff believed the VTU was for primary people:' There were meetings in the district but secondary people seldom went to them.' Three of the thirteen women teachers were not in favour of teacher unions. Sister P. was shocked: 'I can remember feeling rather horrified when I heard that some of the Catholic teachers and lay teachers were forming a union.' Joyce didn't even, 'like that word, 'union'.

Five women said that when they were teaching before World War 2 they had never heard of teacher unions. Another two said that they liked the idea of a teacher union but deplored the militancy that emerged amongst state teachers in the 1940's. Another three were positive about teacher unions but two of these resented the male domination of the teacher unions and spoke about the ill feeling that occurred when the VSMPA was formed in 1948. No women admitted. Gwen thought the VSMPA 'was arrogant to the extreme!' While Nina couldn't see why she was, 'being paid two thirds their wage and doing in many cases more work, and then they didn't want us in their union!'

Most of the retired men were not interested in or convinced of the need for an alliance or co-operation with other workers. Rex explains this:

No, I felt they become too much like a trades union when they did that. They have got like that now ...they should act more professionally than as a trade union dropping your tools and all out.

Three teachers felt that teacher unions should have established
closer links with other workers and their unions. Basil was insistent that:

The department was really a very bad employer then... at the end of my Dip.Ed. year, the chief inspector, a fellow called Charlie Scarf, housing was the problem then of course, and I was appointed to Wonthaggi and I was having great difficulty in getting a house and Charlie Scarf said to me in his office, 'I don't care if you sleep under a barb wire fence'... but you know that was unnecessary, an offensive way of dealing with an employee. I feel, so that I am very firm of the opinion that employees always should have had a union, because you really do need some way of strengthening themselves against the employers.

The women teachers were even less positive about links between teacher unions and other workers. None thought it was desirable or useful and three of the thirteen explained how links were undesirable: Dimity said that unions were for trades. Sister P. said she was, 'really horrified when I heard about state teachers on strike that sort of thing, that was the sort of thing that teachers didn't do.'

The other ten women explained how the constraints of their work situation did not allow for speculation, such as Nina:

I didn't think about it. I was so busy teaching things for which I had no ability, keeping up with all the correction I had to do, managing to live on my low salary and saving enough to get away on holiday.

Teacher Viewpoints 1946-1960

Only three of the sample described themselves as middle class. Laurie was one:

And then you have the sort of upper middle class of people who were educated. Coming from a middle class group of teachers and so on. People like myself, I suppose, who gained their education through their abilities.

Some, such as Verna, believed their position was declining:

In the thirties to be a teacher was pretty good stuff. I mean we looked up to teachers but somewhere round about the fifties that went. That went partly because they took in people like me who were untrained... See when I was a little girl the teachers obviously came from middle classes - they dressed well, respectable, they spoke well, they didn't finish a sentence with a preposition. But the teachers in the fifties or sixties, half of them can't even speak properly and this is because they were taking people from lower socioeconomic groups whose parents didn't speak well and they weren't the best students anyway.

Fourteen of the sample saw themselves in the middle 'strata',
operating as 'professionals' or even 'missionaries'. Graham was one who saw his occupation as a profession:

They stood high in a sort of professional way and there were many who looked up at these people. Teachers were, I believe, middle range positions where the ordinary man in the street thought well, he has a fixed salary, he is well taught and he is teaching my children, that is terribly important.

Joan was one of the teachers who saw teachers carrying out a 'missionary' role:

I think teachers were expected to be the moral guardians as I think they have been all along. Even though they may have disappointed people and expected to do the right thing all the time.

The remaining seven teachers described themselves as not fitting in anywhere.
Half of the sample believed they were treated with respect. Marge felt this was no longer so:

People generally had a respect for teachers which is now gone and to just be a teacher gained you a certain amount of respect in the community. That's quite different today.

But the feeling of not fitting in, of not really feeling comfortable in that strata or class was also true for many:

We never fitted into Clunes really... we had friends, but we never really made any close friendships. I think the people treated us as professionals.

Hugh (Teachers) were very handy to have and had some sort of standing, but in some sense it was separate from the people in the community, they were useful foreigners almost.

Con Teachers were expected to be different, not because of their social position but because of the standards of behaviour and expectations that the rest of the community would hold of them.

Gil. I suppose they (teachers) really belonged in the upper middle class and yet my background wasn't. I suppose I stepped out of my class...Perhaps I wasn't happy because I was out of my class.

Jean

Nine of the thirteen men interviewed were in favour of teacher unions and belonged to the VTU and later the VSTA. But four of these men spoke disapprovingly of it's militancy during the sixties and seventies. Jack was vehement:
I credit the union, and this is as one who was badly battered by them, shockingly battered by them, and saw his pride and joy decimated by them, yet you have got to credit them with achieving a great deal for teachers. Their balance sheet with children, I believe, is so far on the wrong side that it doesn't matter.

The remaining four did not feel involved. This was because of their remoteness, or they felt their interests had not been catered for. Pat was concerned about corruption: 'No, I never held any position in the teachers' union, perhaps I should have pursued that further but I became very, very disillusioned with the trade union movement.' George was concerned about appropriate conduct for teachers: 'You got the feeling that it was unprofessional to strike.'

Six of the twelve women teachers were uninvolved with teacher unions. Joan states: 'I didn't know schools had union branches. We didn't have a branch at Ballarat Girls' Secondary School, we weren't worried about things like that.'

The remaining six women were union members. Two of these later became disenchanted with VSTA militancy and Lucy worked assiduously to establish the Victorian Association of Teachers, VAT. Another two pro union teachers were not prepared to adopt militant strategies to improve their conditions.

Although teachers did not have unity with teachers in other divisions or systems, did they think closer links with other workers would be useful? Ten of the thirteen retired men did not think so. Lindsay was opposed to such links because: 'in those days, we were trying to establish teaching as a profession. Professionalism and unionism didn't gel.' Con states this tension another way:

The teacher union people at the time saw themselves as a professional group, rather than as a union, as a matter of fact there has always been some tension there I suppose, even the VSTA in its early days chose the term, association.

Jack, much as he deplored the VSTA, thought teacher unions should establish closer links with other workers because: 'I'm sure that unions should listen to other unions, they do need a collegial situation.'

The women teachers felt similarly. Only one thought it was a valuable idea and nine of the twelve said links were not seen as desirable. Joan, Lucy and Lois explain how they felt:

I think the problem there is the teachers' union regarded themselves as professionals and more in the line of a professional association rather than a trade union...
think it meant that we thought that Trade Unions were really unions of blue collar workers whereas the teachers were striving to establish themselves as professionals and women in particular were striving to establish themselves as professionals in the same sense as the men saw themselves... as professionals we didn't feel ourselves tied to conditions at that stage because as professionals we worked our hearts out and so we didn't like the idea of working to the clock. You might remember the first campaign of the VSTA was to get rid of the time book. (Joan)

I didn't think much about other unions in those days, teachers were I suppose, considered themselves, a set apart. (Lucy)

The teacher is not exactly like other worker unions, because it's not - it's a work place, perhaps, but it's not exactly a shop floor, is it?...Well, it's not just a matter of producing. You're not working with materials, you're working with people. I mean, I know in a factory, people are inter-relating with people, but they're not sort of working on people to the extent that teachers are. I don't think it's a - it's not a comparable situation. I mean, hang it all, you've got to be not only a teacher, you've got to be first aid assistant, nurse-maid, counsellor, and goodness knows what else, you know. I don't think it's the sort of thing that compares with many of the things that an average union is on about. (Lois)

Two other women really hadn't given it sufficient thought to have an opinion. Sister Christine was the exception. She felt that in principle, teachers should have had closer links with other workers because, 'The working man should support the working man.'

Teacher Viewpoints 1961-1975
The women displayed a range of opinions, in fact, confusion about where they fitted into society. Mil felt isolated:

On the fringe. I suppose our own families are bad examples with marrying teachers and they tend to live in their own little world and seem to talk teacher.'

There were three other strands of opinion, those who felt they were middle class (five of the teachers), and people with some importance (two women). But there were two who felt they were workers of declining importance. Of the fifteen male teachers, two described teachers as 'middle class', and one as 'professionals'. Ten felt that teachers simply occupied a low status position. Edwin illustrated this feeling:

'Somewhere below the TV repair man and real estate agents
I think, and people who fix the air conditioning in the saab. I mean, have you ever coached?

(DI No.)

* I have, and you get something less than the call visit as the dishwasher man who would charge you $50 to come out. I charge $30 to come out...but he does something and I think there's this view that teachers do the sort of things that you could do yourself if you really wanted to. So you don't make the picture appear, you don't make the dishwasher go round, do something invisible, and I think those people like to see something for their money. So I think we are in the grouping, the poor trades person.

Leo spoke of the teacher function:

Well teachers are basically workers. They're employees of the State, and they're fulfilling a number of roles. A social role which is not clearly defined and its one which probably in the past they have defined as creating beings in their own images.

Dave described teachers as suppliers of a debased product, another believed that teachers as a group couldn't be generalised. The most interesting feature of the sample is that only three of the men and seven women believe they have any claim to membership of the middle class or middle strata of society according to which ever view of society they held.

How have teacher unions affected teacher class consciousness? Four of the women were very positive about them. Bev was emphatic about the importance of teacher unions:

I became aware the only way these conditions for inner suburban working class schools were going to improve was through union pressure. Certainly wasn't going to come from Bolte's Liberal government.

Another three were members of their union but unhappy with it, such as Ruth:

Sold out by teacher unions. There are now a lot of people in the unions doing things just to keep their own jobs. They've won some good conditions but they're very, very quick to sell them out. Paid for extras? We don't get that any more. They've just, class sizes have just been increased. What else? Senior teacher class has just been abolished. A lot of teachers are discontented with the pay. They have no effective way of taking action.

And a further three women teachers were negative towards teacher unions. Mil was one of these:

The noisy ones in the union are disrupting and I don't think, even drawing up this recent agreement, they
haven't done their homework and I think this is causing a lot of unrest ... I don't like it at all, it's the ministry and the union and they make all the decisions and the people with educational know how, they are out in the cold...I belong to the library association and I have them as support and professional development. I don't need the teachers' union.

Six of the male teachers who were union members were also disenchanted with their union. Claude said, 'I've seen a lot of union people who have gone through the union and then become politicians or simply used it as a stepping stone for power.' Robert felt his interests were not being considered:

They were donating funds to political parties and all this sort of stuff. I was peed off with this sort of stuff when members weren't consulted about it. Because the union is supposed to represent the membership.

Another seven men were not members of their union for a variety of reasons. Leo believed that, 'All the best political minds in the union now all work for the Ministry.' Only two men were positive about their union. The teachers who were most negative about teacher unions were the least class conscious of the teachers interviewed. By that I mean they did not refer to the existence of social classes at any time during the interview. There was one exception. A Catholic teacher, politically active did not bother joining SACS because he believed it to be ineffective.

Four of the women teachers believed it would be useful to establish links with other workers. Interestingly, two of them felt that this would increase the respect for teachers in the community. Wendy explained this point of view:

Maybe that would improve the image of teachers because I don't think at the moment we have a good image. Nobody comes out and helps the teachers' union when they go on strike which you find that some of the other unions will have help. Society is very down on teachers when they strike...perhaps as a PR thing, if they were affiliated with other workers and maybe if other workers could come into schools and see what sort of day we have.

Another five women teachers did not believe closer links with other workers was a good thing. Such as Mil for example:

That's what they have been trying to do but its dragging them down from being a profession to counting minutes and hours and working on conditions that you have to have so much for lunch and so much for what ever. I'm there to do a job I haven't got time for that.

The remaining one didn't know. Eight of the fifteen men
interviewed in this sample did not think teachers should form closer links with other workers, largely because of a belief that schooling did not have much to do with outside industry. Rowan thought, 'They specifically should be interested in teacher issues and that's the way they should stay really.'

Only five of the men said that teachers should form closer links with other workers. They believed that this would help their industrial position. As Robert said, 'You need all the clout you've got and all the lobbying you can do. More effective in the long run.'

The remaining two men did not know whether teacher unions should form closer links with other workers' unions. Dave said, 'I've stayed out of unions for years and have no expertise on this.'

Teacher viewpoints 1976-1991
The teachers displayed quite a range of ideas about teachers' place in Australia society. Two felt isolated. Four felt they were middle class. But as Lyn exemplifies, this was not flattering: 'Very middle class - very conservative in their political values - boring.'

Two teachers, both working in private schools, saw their position as transitional and described the status envy those aspiring upwardly felt. Jennifer was one of them:

(Teachers) fit into a particular part of life that's not too far away from the lives of their students, they either ape those sorts of lives or they come from those themselves, particularly single women, they fit a life style that's very similar and have a similar sort of tastes and styles or interests such as they'd be there if they had a better income.

Jenny pointed out that it often took three generations for upward mobility to occur for teachers:

Teachers are between, upwardly mobile whose parents are working class and whose children, and it's so of my own, belong to the professions in their own right.

The rest felt they were workers of declining importance. Of the ten male teachers, only one described teachers as 'middle class'. One believed teachers simply did a good job. The rest felt that teachers simply occupied a very low status position. Brian explained this clearly:

I think they're tools for good and also for bad. At one stage they've been preserving the status quo. In one sense
in the private sense in the private schools...They can also encourage students to improve their minds and to pursue higher education which maybe an opening for people to improve their lot. But I don't know that that's so now. There's a large number of students who don't have a high regard for (teachers)...some of the students who disregard teachers don't see them as being powerful or don't see them as being successful.

This is an interesting feature of this sample. Only one man and three women believe they have any claim to membership of the middle class or strata of society according to whichever view of society they held. Fourteen of the fifteen women were members of a teachers' union. But those in the VSTA were not particularly appreciative of its work:

I feel sort of far away from it. You know, I'm not that involved. I suppose if I wanted to know who people are I should go to general meetings and such but I'm not that involved...Be nice to sort of have union people come out to your school and talk to you and get themselves known...Who these people were with all the high positions and call you to do all these things.

Agi

I joined the union when I first arrived here not really knowing very much about it. Everyone in my school was a member - I didn't want to be the one left out and I really believed and I suppose I still believe in a fairly half hearted way that the union is working for the members. I don't believe however that the issue, this new issue (career restructuring) that's been fought at the moment is being fought in the right way and I don't believe we've been given a lot of information that needs to be given.

Barbara

One other woman, teaching in a Catholic school, was negative because she felt she didn't receive sufficient support from them when she was struggling to gain recognition of her overseas experience and qualifications.

Nine of the male teachers were union members. Ten of the women believed it would be a good thing for teacher unions to form closer links with other unions. Interestingly, half of them felt that this would increase communication with the rest of the community. Another five women teachers did not believe closer links with other workers was a good thing. Eva was one of these teachers: 'You can be embroiled in all sorts of things that you may not really feel committed to at all.'

Four of the men, all teaching in Catholic schools, did not think teachers should form closer links with other workers. Brian expressed it succinctly:
'The model we have here is hopefully one of consultation and co-operation.'

Half of the men said that teachers should form closer links with other workers. They all believed that this would help their industrial position. The remaining one man did not know whether teacher unions should form closer links with other workers; unions or not.

Changing industrial structures

Victorian teachers have been militant at other times. In 1945 they threatened strike action and had electoral intervention campaigns. But Bessant (1967:257) explained that this was at a time of rare teacher unity and when public interest in education had been stimulated by the war. The next time Victorian teachers demonstrated interest in 'behaving like a trade union' was in the 1970's and the TTAV and VSTA affiliated with the Trades Hall Council. Spaull (1990) gives many reasons for this occurrence. Firstly, manifestation of the emergent teacher militancy. Second, influence of the New South Wales teacher union affiliation with the ACTU and overseas developments, such as American Federation of Teachers' Affiliation with the American labour movement. Also, the modernisation of the ACTU under R.J.Hawke. These are the structural explanations of why teacher industrial behaviour changed during this period. But it is also important to note that the VSTA and TTAV although they were responsive and active did not have the even basic support when nearly as many of their teachers were outside as were inside the union (Spaull 1990:24).

Public links with other workers were publicly reported in the 1970's. Technical teachers held an 'Education rally' in the City Square which included representatives of political, trade union and education groups. The Federal secretary of the Plumbers' Union (George Crawford) was quoted as saying that after eighteen years of office the Liberals were only now putting forward propositions for education reform (Age May 10, 1973). Another example of this kind of link occurred when the secretary of the Victorian branch of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union (John Halfpenny) and the General Secretary of the TTUV (Ron Dedman) had a joint news conference to attack the Australian government for cutting the grant for technical education (Age October 22, 1974). But there was not widespread support amongst teachers for closer links with other workers.

Conclusion

It has been well documented (by for example, Theobald 1983,1985; England, 1977; White, 1983) that teachers have not wished to adopt militant trade union tactics at various times this century because they feared it would diminish their chances of being considered middle class. This study has demonstrated that teachers no longer think this way. Most teachers no longer consider themselves middle class and feel they have less to lose than ever before. So in the 1990's, when teacher unemployment is
high, economic stringency extreme, public support negligible, teachers are fighting. They are taking action as workers to protect their conditions and agreement and actively looking to other workers for support. Wright and Shin's (1988) belief in using both a processural and structural understanding of class has increased our understanding of this recent teacher behaviour.

References


