Unions and Resource Peripheries

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Unions and regions

Thinking about unions and economic restructuring – and about the role of unions in specific regions ...

- Are the state’s ‘formal capacities’ limited?
- What engagement is there on the part of other social actors?
- What capacity is there for ‘place-based leadership’?
- For this paper, the more specific questions are about unions’ roles in (often) physically isolated but globally constructed resource sites.
- Where much of the focus generally is on labour’s power and agency, the argument here is more about reactive, limited, marginalised roles for unions.
I answer these questions by thinking geographically about a one-industry site, the Pilbara, across 50 years of iron ore export mining.

Research since 2001 through media, company, union, judicial documents, over 100 interviews, focus groups, participant-observation.

The approach is explicitly geographical, around a decade or so of labour geography, GPNs, and older scholarship on mining and the peculiarities of the Australian space economy.

Rethinking the Pilbara as a ‘geohistory’:

- Socio-spatial relationships in
  - ... affluent-dependent economies
  - ... and mining’s importance
  - ... in ‘resource peripheries’ (following Hayter et al 2007).
Where is the local leadership?
Mapping the Pilbara
The town of Pannawonica today
Wickham today – Cape Lambert in background
Cape Lambert: Robe River’s port
The state and also mining capital have set out to limit the scope for labour’s intervention while – in the name of the free market – intervening in this space to reconfigure local social, class, gender and industrial relations.

From the beginning, the geography of mining presented problems to the companies: the history of the industry is in large part the history of the ‘fixes’ that the companies produced to try to resolve those problems.
These interventions arose because labour has been active – has asserted a local power and shaped these regions.

Governments and employers sought to undo local union power in workplaces and in local ‘communities’.

The centrality of these resource peripheries to the national economy and their interweaving with the global scale speaks to the geographical complexities of mining ...

and also to the disproportionate importance of mining.

At more than one critical juncture these ‘remote’ sites have been central to the remaking of national industrial relations.
The local result of these struggles is a heavily circumscribed union capacity for intervention in the making of a region.

The social structures around – and the reproduction of – this particular resource industry markedly replicate those of their 19th century ‘settler society’ origins.

Nonetheless, this is an account of local specificity: it is not to say that all other mining spaces, past and present, are alike ... or that local leaders have not emerged in other places and industries to press their claims.
Key Sources


*The arguments in this presentation are fleshed out in:*
