The Shearers' Hall

This iconic building takes us back to the great Shearers' Strike of 1891.

The hall was originally built in Blackall by the Queensland Shearers’ Union sometime after the formation there of the QSU in 1887.

It was the office and meeting hall of the Amalgamated Workers’ Union of Queensland formed by the merger of the QSU and Queensland Labourers’ Union in the year of the strike – 1891.

The Amalgamated Workers’ Union of Queensland then merged with the Australian Workers’ Union to form the largest trade union in Australia.

After the Shearers’ Strike of 1891, the hall was relocated some two hundred kilometres to Longreach by horse drawn transport where it served as the central headquarters for the AWU in the outback region.

In 2011, The Union Hall was donated and relocated by the AWU to the Australian Workers Heritage Centre’s site becoming the latest addition to the centre’s landscape and newly named the “AWU Shearers’ Hall”.

The building is recognised as Australia’s oldest office and union meeting hall.
The AWU National Executive at the historic union office at the Australian Workers Heritage Centre.

Barcaldine - a central Queensland town with impeccable working class credentials, this location was the ideal place to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the establishment of the AWU in 1886.
Shearers Hall arriving at the Workers Heritage Centre
The AWU Shearers’ Hall has been refurbished and transformed into quality exhibition space presenting and interpreting a highly valued and unique chapter of our working history. It illustrates how the building is part of this story….

The exhibition is a key reminder of the significant part that bush workers – AWU pioneers played in the formation of the first social democratic party in the world. The party they created made history again by becoming the first social democrats in the world to form a government, after the Queensland State Election in 1899. The display informs of the history of the 1891 Shearer’s Strike. It shows how the great Shearers’ Strike of 1891 led, not to the civil war that was feared, but to the rise of the Australian Workers’ Union (Australia’s oldest trade union), the Australian Labour Party, the active participation of working people in parliamentary democracy, Australia’s unique form of industrial arbitration and our modern system of politics.

The AWU Shearers’ Hall is dedicated to the honoured memory of the Labour men and women of the past and to the great cause they have handed down to us – the cause which we have the privilege of advancing.
A moderate influence on a big scale

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) emerged in the industrial unionism movement in the late 19th century. It was formed in 1906 by a group of workers who felt that their rights were not being adequately represented.

The AWU has a long history of standing up for workers' rights and has played a significant role in Australian industrial relations. It has been at the forefront of many important industrial disputes and has been involved in the development of workplace laws and regulations.

The AWU remains Australia's largest and oldest blue-collar union, with a more diverse membership than ever before. A decline in the union's traditional base in the pastoral and mining industries has led to a broadening of its membership.

Its 135,000 members are now drawn from sectors including manufacturing, steel, aluminium, glass, oil and gas, aviation, agriculture, construction, state public services, local government, health, plastics, hospitality, food, paper, resources, aquaculture, events and racing.

The union employs 200 officials in its 45 offices nationwide.
It's on again - 1894

The shearsers struck again in 1894. The 1894 strike was smaller, shorter and much more bitter than the one in 1891.

After 1891 the unions were unable to restrict hiring to unionists. Wages were not affected until 1894, when falling wool prices and economic decline led the pastoralists to change the terms of employment without reference to the union.

Shearsers' rates were cut from 20 shillings ($2.00) per hundred to 17 shillings ($1.70). Rouseabouts' wages were reduced from 20 shillings ($3.00) a week to 24 shillings ($2.40).

The shearsers struck.

The strike soon failed, but not before a party of strikers sank a riverboat, the Rodney, after forcing off its blackleg passengers.

A number of woolsheds were burnt and two strikers were shot. One, Billy McLean, eventually died.
Strikers in gaol

The currend events helped to expose the links between industrial strife and the power of the state. The strikes of the 1930s and 1940s saw workers banding together to demand better conditions and fair wages. Over 20,000 strikers were sent to prison, and many were sentenced to long terms in jail. The strikes of the 1930s and 1940s saw workers banding together to demand better conditions and fair wages.
A mighty struggle

The end of the strike

This section of the exhibition focuses on the events of the Great Strike of 1922, known as The Great Strike. The strike was a significant event in Australian history, marking a turning point in the labor movement and the political landscape of the time. The exhibition explores the causes, events, and outcomes of the strike, providing insights into the social and economic context of the period.

A key element of the exhibition is the detailed narrative on the strike, accompanied by artifacts and photographs that bring the story to life. The display includes a map and a timeline that illustrate the timeline of events, from the initial protests to the eventual resolution. The exhibition also features a multimedia presentation that allows visitors to experience the strike from different perspectives.

The exhibition aims to educate and inform visitors about the significance of The Great Strike, its impact on Australian society, and its enduring legacy.
Australian Workers Union Shearers Hall on completion date Aug 30th, 2013 - Signage / pathways / wheel chair access ramp / landscaped surrounds / flagpole / tear drop banner
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