

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Sydney Wharf Labourers Union, No. 2260

Date

1901

Primary Maker

Waterside Workers Federation

Medium

Metal: Nickel alloy

Name

Membership badge

History

Trade union badges played an important part in the life of waterside workers in the early 20th century. The badges were worn to show pride in the union and to create solidarity by identifying other union members. The badges were held in high regard by unionists, on one occasion there was a strike when an attempt was made to ban them from the workplace. Though some unions had metal badges in the 19th century most were issued at the turn of the 20th century when it became fashionable to sew them onto caps and the lapels of suits, or tie them to fob watches. They usually depicted the tools appropriate to the trade union or a symbolic emblem, in this case the clasped hands of friendship and solidarity. This badge signified that the bearer was a fully paid up member of the Sydney Wharf Labourers' Union, after his annual dues were paid the year was stamped onto the badge with the initials of the union's secretary. Without this badge he would not have been allowed on the wharf. The initials on the badge stand for William Morris Hughes (1862-1952) the secretary of the Sydney Wharf Labourers' Union 1899-1916 and Prime Minister of Australia 1915-1923. The Sydney Wharf Labourers' Union was formed in 1872 (wharf labourers' unions were formed in Port Adelaide and Port Melbourne in the same year) but by the 1890s it was in a state of virtual collapse due to that decade's economic depression and the subsequent industrial turmoil. The union turned to William Morris Hughes, a labour organiser and Labour politician, to rectify the situation. Appointed secretary in 1899 he successfully re-organised and re-energised the union and continued to hold the post till 1916. Australian federation spurred the various state wharf workers' unions to federate as the Waterside Workers Federation in 1902. Elected its first president Hughes obtained federal registration for it in 1907.