

FLYING A REBEL FLAG TO ENSURE ALL ARE GIVEN A FAIR GO

A shearers' strike in a remote Queensland town gave birth to the union movement

PAUL HOWES

THE bulk of the Australian population now sits among the most highly urbanised on the globe, concentrated in booming and cosmopolitan cities along our coastlines. But even today, just as it did more than 100 years ago, our country still lives off the massive profits delivered by resource-rich industries scattered across the outback.

And even today, it's the Australian Workers Union's members who, just as they did in our early years, still work at the heart of these important regional communities. Back then, Australia lived off the sheep's back. Today, the average AWU member digs our wealth up out of the soil,

or pumps it up from the seabed.

On Thursday the AWU marked its 125th year of existence. Although life was first breathed into the union on June 16, 1886, at Fern's Hotel in Ballarat, Victoria, the heart and soul of the AWU has always been in Queensland, at the site of the great shearers' strike of 1891 in Barcaldine.

This week, the AWU leadership celebrated its long history — a history older than federation. The 22 members of our national executive paid their respects to the union's heroes at the Australian Workers' Heritage Centre in Barcaldine, taking the time to remember the values shearing pioneers created here in a remote part of

Australia few people visit. These are the values now widely accepted as being at the core of the Australian character: mateship and a fair go.

Barcaldine, on the other side of the Great Dividing Range, is an 11-hour drive from Brisbane. It takes the same time to drive from Brisbane to Sydney, where the AWU now has its national office. In 1891, it would have taken nearly two weeks to travel from Barcaldine to the union's then head office in Creswick, outside Ballarat in Victoria.

Tumbleweed blows down Barcaldine's main street, past six pubs servicing a population of fewer than 2000. But dominating the main street are the remains of the ghost gum, known as the Tree of Knowledge, the site where the 1891 strikers met to nut out their strategy.

The strike failed. The shearers were defeated after a near civil war, with soldiers and police

shooting up the strikers' camp site around the tree. Thirteen leaders of the union were put on trial in Rockhampton, found guilty of conspiracy and sent to break rocks on St Helena Island, a prison known as Australia's Alcatraz.

After the bitter defeat, the strikers met again under the Tree of Knowledge where they decided they needed a voice in parliament to change those abhorrent laws that jailed the workers for going on strike.

Here in Barcaldine, a long distance from the big cities of Australia, Europe or North America, this small group of shearers — AWU pioneers — triggered the formation of the first social democratic party in the world.

Less than a decade later, 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.

Back then, just as it does now,

the union movement invested hope and energy into a Labor Party created to deliver an often loud, rebellious, but always democratic voice in parliament; one to fashion the working man's hopes and dreams into law.

The rebellious spirit of those times is best evoked by Henry Lawson, who in the year of the Barcaldine strike penned *Freedom on the Wallaby*, first published in May 1891 in the AWU's journal, *The Worker*.

The spirit of the AWU pioneers and the spirit still driving our union forward can be heard in the last stanza:

*So we must fly a rebel flag
As others did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song,
And join a rebel chorus.
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting
O' those they would throttle.
They needn't say the fault was ours
If blood would stain the wattle.*

Our union remains cleaved to Labor, believing it is the only party that understands the needs of working families, whether they live in our capital cities or in our wealth-producing regions.

Yes, we are proud of the fact that the AWU is the oldest union in Australia. But we're also proud of our long and continuing story, unlike any other union in this country — outside the big capital cities, organising the majority of our members working in industries rooted in our regions.

The fact is our past, our present and our future is in the regions organising the resource sectors that deliver Australia's wealth. The visit of our national executive to Barcaldine this week shows we haven't forgotten our past; it will continue to be our guiding hand in years to come.

Paul Howes is the national secretary of the Australian Workers Union.