

Barracker's Corner

The Industrial Relations of Super League: A Response to Brett Hutchins

Andrew Moore
Department of Humanities
University of Western Sydney, Macarthur

In the Sydney *Morning Herald* on 16 December 1996 Ken Arthurson of the Australian Rugby League accused the Murdoch press of 'historical revisionism' concerning the origins of Super League. It seems that Brett Hutchins (*Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 1, Nov. 1996, pp. 153-4) suffers from the same malaise.

In the course of reviewing Mike Colman's recent book on the subject of the Super League, Hutchins argues that much of the 'political leverage' for assailing the Australian Rugby League came from the players who 'felt underpaid, saw administrators giving them little say in the management of their sport(s), and provided few industrial relations and workplace benefits, particularly superannuation and post-career employment opportunity'.

To justify this claim Hutchins sites Braham Dabscheck's important 1993 article in the *Journal of Industrial Relations*.

It seems that Hutchins has an imperfect acquaintance with this article, as well as with the industrial relations issues that affected the 1995-6 split in rugby league. Or, rather he invents some where none existed, a problem he shares with the Murdoch press.

As Dabscheck points out the two most pressing issues that had confronted rugby league players in the contemporary period revolved around the players' draft, and the attempts to obtain an agreed minimum payment of \$20 000 for all first grade rugby league players.

Throughout 1991 the Association of Rugby League Professionals, the players' union, contested and successfully beat the draft whereby players coming off contract could be conscripted to the playing strength of the weaker clubs. With some justice this was celebrated as an historic victory over Phillip Street. Yet Super League threatens to undo this

victory. While some Super League players have specific contracts tied to particular clubs, many do not. In order to equalise and raise the performance of some of the weak clubs involved in the Super League competition (that is, all of them except for Canberra, Brisbane and Canterbury) the players' draft will need to return with even more disruptive implications. (Clearly it is a more significant matter to uproot a family and move them to Perth or Adelaide than across the metropolis of Sydney).

The story about the battle to obtain the \$20 000 minimum wage is equally damaging to anyone trying to depict the advent of Murdoch League as an industrial relations triumph. After a great deal of negotiation the New South Wales Rugby League hierarchy (that is the much maligned Arthurson and Quayle) were forced to concede. What stopped the move was a combined meeting of the club chief executives. This group — including the subsequently Super League apparatchiks John Ribot and Peter Moore — cried poor mouth, arguing that paying all rugby league players even this pittance would send their clubs bankrupt.

Since Super League, these same people have transformed themselves into friends of the workers. Humming 'The Internationale' contentedly, they duly sing the praises of the newly-expanded capital base which allows them to pay the players 'properly', as 'we always wanted to'. The balance sheets of many clubs were such that in the early 1990s the \$20 000 minimum payment was possible.

Paying the players 'properly', attending to their superannuation and subsequent career opportunities had precious little to do with the advent of Super League, as indeed Hutchins would allow. Some clubs had participated in superannuation schemes since the 1970s. A goodly number of former players have ended up being employed in the rugby league world. When post-football training schemes have been offered by clubs — careers in licensed club management for instance — they rarely proved popular with the players.

Since the start of rugby league in New South Wales in 1908, most players have received a pittance, a galling situation considering the high moral tone adopted by rugby union aficionados against 'professionalism'. The first significant change in this situation came after 1983 with the palace revolution which placed rugby league in the hands of the Quayle-Arthurson duumvirate. Under their guidance the game grew in popularity and produced a rare event in the capitalist labour market — a trickle down effect that saw a significant increase in the payment to elite players,

together with less spectacular increases across the board.

The advent of Super League generated much propaganda about poorly-done players rebelling for their rights. This has nothing to do with the reality but with the fax machines provided to players by Super League. Spewing out News Limited propaganda, they assisted the players to duly parrot the boss's line. One of the great events in televised sport in 1996 was an interview with the 'Brick with Eyes', the aptly-named Glen Lazarus, explaining his new found commitment to free trade and 'freedom of contract' in the wake of the Burchett decision.

At best legitimate industrial relations issues have been exaggerated out of all proportion. For instance, it seems true that players were inadequately remunerated for participation in the lucrative State of Origin series. But Phillip Street's belated introduction of a \$100 000 minimum wage for a player who had played State of Origin offset this, all the more so because it was retrospective. Thus in 1995 one club, North Sydney, was caught in the invidious position of having to pay an aging player renown for his reserve grade performances and an inability to run straight at the defensive line the significant sum of \$100 000 — all because he had played one State of Origin series ten years earlier. The complaint that the players flew economy to Brisbane while the officials were accommodated in first class was asinine. Many of the officials were totally unpaid. Why should they not receive this small consideration?

Of course all first grade rugby league players are now much better paid and likely to remain so in the immediate future. But this has nothing whatsoever to do with the largesse of Super League. It is simply a product of the distortion in the labour market caused by two rival competitions squabbling over scarce resources. Super League players would do well to heed Tom Keneally's advice that the barbed wire of Wapping remains the best way to gauge Rupert Murdoch's commitment to harmonious industrial relations. The prospect of a 'Super League players' strike being put down by a Murdoch-owned security firm is a delicious one.

It is hardly surprising that the Murdoch press has resolved to tuck on various industrial grievances after the event. It is in their interests to do so. That sports historians like Brett Hutchins should swallow the Murdoch line is of much greater concern.

PS My own review of Mike Colman's book on Super League was not accepted for publication in *The Australian Review of Books*. I wonder why this might be?