



## Trade Union Banners Collection Guide

### *Introduction*

The Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery owns two trade union banners, both from the late 19th century and each reflects its time and place.

### *Significance/collection rationale*

Each of the Museum's trade union banners is significant in its own right.

The Railway Workers banner is the historic icon *par excellence* of the Launceston Railway Workshops site, since 2001 a major new exhibition space for the Museum. It was unusual for industrial workers to be recorded in such minute detail during the late nineteenth century, and it is this detail which makes the Railway Workers banner so special.

On the other hand, the banner of the Federated Tanners, Curriers, Fellmongers and Fancy Leather Dressers Union is impressive for its sheer dramatic presence. Made from a single bullock hide and thought to be the largest remaining banner of this type in the world, the leather banner's survival is intricately linked to the material from which it is made.

### *Discussion*

Both banners are relics of a pivotal period in Tasmania's trade union movement, the Eight Hour Day campaign. Their motto of '8 Hours Work, 8 Hours Recreation, 8 Hours Rest' is prominently displayed on the face of the Railway Workers banner. Likewise, the words 'Labour' and 'Rest' surround the missing sections of the leather banner, and include part of the uniquely Australian entwined triple-8 symbol, which appeared on the majority of union banners painted in Australia between 1880 and World War 1.

In January 1892, the *Tasmanian* noted that the Eight Hours movement had begun only a few months before, and fully endorsed the annual celebration being held on 26 January, 'the anniversary day of the colonies'. Trade unions created their banners especially for these annual parades, which dwindled in popularity after the First World War as workers found other things to do on their public holidays. Gradually the banners were forgotten, hidden in the back of storerooms and workshops, until a resurgence of interest in the early 1980s.



## Significant items in this collection:



### Banner of the Launceston Railway Workshops' Railway Employees

#### Associated Information:

Rescued from the soot and grime of the Railway's Blacksmith Shop, and presented to the Museum in 1982, the Railway Workers banner was lucky to survive. It is painted on silk, and as well as being filthy, was dry and brittle with age. It required hours of painstaking work by the Museum's Conservation Department to return it to some semblance of its former glory. Banner makers eventually discovered that silk did not suit Australian conditions, and later banners were made from cotton and linen fabrics.

The Railway Workers banner provides us with a wonderful record of the work undertaken at the Inveresk site, as we can see from the front

... five accurately painted scenes taken from photos, the principal one being that of an engine on the line with a driver (who is an old identity, and will be readily recognised) with his hand on the starting lever, waiting the signal to go on, and the whole 'tout ensemble' of the monstrous steam house is excellent. In the left-hand top corner is a view of the fitters' shop, with a glimpse of the intricate and expensive machinery used there. On the opposite or right-hand corner is shown the shop where the jolly smiths make the air resound with their jovial musical sounds. The picture on the lower left-hand corner of the painting shop, where several men are engaged decorating the exterior of some carriages, is excellent. In the right-hand lower corner is a view of the carriage builders' shop, with carriages in process of being put together, and various parts of same lying about in seeming disorder. *Examiner*, 26.1.1893.

The back of the banner is equally as detailed, with paintings of a night train emerging from a tunnel, and the long platforms of a large modern railway station. The back also contains the intriguing words, 'Railway Employés' in large letters. While open to speculation, it simply appears that the artist ran out of room to include the extra 'e'. The train shown on both sides of the banner is LWR No.5, which was converted to a 4-2-2 tender loco [Class A1] in 1888.

Not only do the painted scenes show us the Railway's earliest buildings, but also the men at work inside. Comparing the 1909 Blacksmiths Shop to the 'Smiths' painting, allows us to see that in all essentials the work remained the same. Each blacksmith and his offsider, known as a 'striker', operated their own workstation, which included a forge and an anvil, with a hammer to one side for heavy forging work. What did change was the clothing, especially the wearing of hats. As these scenes show, in the late nineteenth century hats were virtually a uniform, a way of distinguishing one trade from another. By the time the Blacksmith Shop closed in July 1994, clothing was much more casual. One of the last blacksmiths, Michael Donovan says, 'You never wore overalls in the summer time, all we wore was a pair of trousers and a blue singlet and probably a leather apron and sweat used to absolutely pour off you, every fire would be going. Used to be a filthy place to work.' The Blacksmith Shop remains as it was when the last workers left, and is part of the Museum's Inveresk displays.



*The railway banner carried in Launceston's 1916 Eight Hour Day parade. The Weekly Courier, 20.1.1916.*

**Description:**

Rectangular banner of silk laid on calico, strip lined on top and bottom edges, hand-painted with oils.

Front: Depicts Fitters' Shop, Blacksmiths' Shop, Painters' Shop and the Carriage Builders' Shop at each corner. Central panel with 'Launceston' and the Tasmanian coat-of-arms above the words 'Railway Workshops', and a central medallion with steam locomotive, and '8 Hours Work, 8 Hours Recreation, 8 Hours Rest' below the medallion.

Back: Depicts locomotive emerging from tunnel at night (top left), with 'Railway Employés' written diagonally across centre, and under-cover railway station (bottom right).

**Measurements:**

Banner (irregular): 2670 mm (h) x 3270 mm (w), with 200 mm fringe.

Support (hinged frame covered with coarse linen designed to fit inside the supporting rods): 3000 mm (h) x 3490 mm (w) x 45 mm (d).

Original carrying pole: 4250 mm (h) x 4360 mm (w); includes turned ends.

Creator: Designed and painted by Will Cumings at the *Launceston Examiner* offices, December 1892.

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**Banner of the Federated Tanners, Curriers, Fellmongers and Fancy Leather Dressers Union**



*front*



*reverse*

**Description:**

Leather banner comprising a bullocks hide, painted both sides.

Front: Depicts two female figures, robed in red and blue, holding tools of the trade. Above the central panel are unfurled ribbons containing the words 'United' and 'Tanners', with 'United We Stand' and 'Divided We Fall' on either side.

Back: Depicted on a background of green foliage, the kangaroo and emu, with 'Federated Tanners, Curriers' Fellmongers & Fancy Leather Dressers Union' above, and in the centre the coat-of-arms of Hobart and 'Sic Fortis Hobartia Crevit', with the words 'Labour' and 'Rest' still visible below.

**Measurements:**

Banner (irregular): c. 4500 mm x 3000 mm.

Said to have been 10 feet x 15 feet (when whole).

**Creator:** Painted by Harris & Watts, Sign Writers, 203 Elizabeth Street, Hobart, c. 1890.



**Associated Information:**

The Federated Tanners banner does not tell us a great deal about the work of its tanners, carriers, fellmongers and dressers, trades no longer familiar to us in the 21st century. Tanning is a lengthy and laborious process, transforming animal skins into flexible, waterproof, leather. Each trade played its part in preparing, steeping, scouring, drying, finishing and colouring the hides.

The leather banner instead, follows the style of the time, which included shields and slogans and allegorical figures. The two female figures painted on the front of this banner are quite roughly drawn, draped in red and blue robes, with a globe of the world and various leatherworking tools. During the mid-19th century unions were anxious to maintain a non-threatening image, and female figures were used to represent universal ideals such as freedom, industry and truth. This side of the banner also includes the words, 'United We Stand' and 'Divided We Fall'.

Although the natural bullock hide forms the shape of the map of Tasmania, it is the Hobart coat-of-arms on the back of the banner which identifies it as uniquely Tasmanian. The city's motto, 'Thus in Strength did Hobart Grow' (sic fortis Hobartia crevit) also reinforces the sentiments of trade unionism.

This Tasmanian banner must have been made after 1890, because in that year the Tanners' and Curriers' Society had to borrow a banner from their fellow unionists in Victoria for the Eight Hour Demonstration in Hobart. Certainly, any branch owning this impressive 4.5 x 3 metre banner, would never need to borrow from another state. The banner's makers, Harris and Watts, worked as sign writers in Elizabeth Street, Hobart, during the early 1890s, another reason for believing the banner was made then.

*Walch's Tasmanian Almanac* for 1893 records the Amalgamated Tanners and Curriers' Society meeting fortnightly at the Hobart Working Men's Club under their Secretary M. Barnett.

After the street parades ended, the United Tanners' banner hung in the Hobart Trades Hall. It was thrown out during a general office clean-up in the 1960s but miraculously escaped being burnt. It was saved simply because it was made of leather and leather could be recycled. Pieces were cut off the bottom to make rowlocks for a dinghy, before the banner was rediscovered and sold to the Museum in 2000.

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