

A Brief History of the Australian Bank Employees Union

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The following is a brief history of the Australian Bank Employees Union (ABEU) State Bank of Victoria Division and some of the campaigns to improve the wages and conditions of employees of the State Savings Bank of Victoria/State Bank of Victoria (SSBV/SBV) until the Division was finally wound up on 31 March 1992 following the sale of the SBV to the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA). Much of the information was obtained from a book entitled "An Open Account" by Kate White. Kate's book provides a comprehensive record of 72 years of unionism in the State Bank of Victoria.

The Association's origins can be traced back to early 1920 when a group of employees met and formed the State Savings Bank of Victoria Officers Association (SSBOA). At that meeting a provisional committee was formed. Amongst other things, the Constitution at the time provided for the newly formed Association to protect the interests and rights of its members and to discuss matters affecting the welfare of members.

Early campaigns conducted by the newly formed SSBOA was the establishment of a superannuation scheme introduced late 1923, the introduction of long service leave in 1925 and the provision of housing loans for staff.

Post-war issues related to the cost of living, salaries and classifications. Discussions at that time included whether to remain an independent body and negotiate directly with the Bank or register with the federal Arbitration Court. The Association's view was to remain independent, and this was confirmed by a ballot of members during May 1945.

During the post-war years the SSBOA did not have a strong commitment to a five-day week although it had a sub-committee which moved very cautiously on the issue, but with cost-of-living pressures on employees increasing so too was their attitude for a five-day working week. It was that campaign that brought the SSBOA into close contact with Australian Bank Officers Association (ABOA). It was a hard-fought campaign that threatened industrial action and changed the SSBOA forever. The campaign was successful and on 12 January 1963 Saturday morning work for bank officers in Victoria finally ceased.

The events of the late 1950's, including the five-day week campaign and the major wages case of 1955, brought significant change to the SSBOA. The committee began to realise that closer co-operation and even amalgamation with the ABOA would be necessary to improve conditions for its members. A decision for the SSBOA to merge with the ABOA was

made early in 1961 and caused significant division within the SSBOA and sometime later a spill of committee positions. The SSBOA was dissolved on 31 August 1963 and on 9 October the inaugural meeting of the State Savings Bank Division of the Australian Bank Officers Association was held.

Following the spill of positions, the newly elected President was Brian Kincade, he served in that position until 1976 when he resigned believing he had served long enough and achieved his objectives. Brian brought a new form of militancy to the association which on occasions caused conflict, particularly with the more conservative New South Wales branch. He had significant influence over the SSB Division and was able to organise the membership behind him. His influence extended over time to the wider trade union movement. By the late 1960's he had become vice president of the ABOA's federal executive and vice president of the State Division of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations. Brian was influential in encouraging Bill Parkinson to stand for election as the first full-time secretary in 1964. They became a formidable team and lead the division with great commitment and accomplishment.

Kincade and Parkinson, with the support of the newly elected committee of management, set about focussing on industrial issues including increased salaries for members, revamped superannuation fund and staff reporting. Savings Weekly, the association newsletter, changed its focus from social matters to reporting on industrial issues. The SSB Division continued to work tirelessly, in conjunction with the Associations Federal Executive to improve the working conditions of its members. This culminated in bank officers taking strike action for the first time, on 3 November 1969, in support of a 25 per cent wages claim.

The ensuing years saw the Division continue to pursue issues that affected its members including, branch security, improved superannuation benefits, share in increased productivity of changes due to automation being introduced by the Bank and equal pay and opportunity for its many female members.

Following Kincade's resignation, Robert Lowe was elected unopposed as Division president. Lowe brought a more moderate approach to the role and soon became active on the ABOA Federal Executive, in 1976 as federal councillor and Federal Treasurer in 1978. This new era also brought a new generation of members onto the Division's Management

Committee who were eager for change, a new assistant secretary and the introduction of Division organisers. Issues considered by the Committee of Management at the time included, branch opening hours, part time employees, a shorter working week and a rank-and-file proposal to secede from the federal body. A meeting of members was held on 15 October 1979 and after a bitter debate a motion to secede was defeated. Other significant matters included a staffing crisis during 1984 in which representatives both the bank and union were summoned to a conference by the then State Treasurer, Hon. Rob Jolly and a Restructuring of the Award covering SBV employees.

When Bill Parkinson was elected as the first full-time secretary, he worked out of bank owned premises, at nominal rental, at Champion House in Swanston Street. That building was demolished in 1971 and the Division, again at nominal rental, moved to bank owned rooms above its Western Branch. The Division of Management were keen to have their own premises and being in a sound financial position purchased a stately old Victorian house in Windsor for around \$70,000, spending about another \$70,000 extending and refitting before moving in during January 1978.

There were significant changes in the committee of management during the 1980's when several new members of the committee were elected. Robert Lowe was replaced as president by Norm Bristow, and Steve McKenna was elected secretary replacing Bill Parkinson. The president, secretary and management committee were faced with complex industrial challenges including job evaluation, structural efficiency and bank deregulation.

Any history of the SBV Division, however brief, cannot be considered complete without mentioning the contribution and commitment of Frances Smith. Frances was first elected to the SSBOA committee of management during 1955, when a typist at the Elizabeth Street branch, and served on the committee until her retirement in 1984. Frances became the first woman vice-president of the division in 1967 and in 1983 was elected as a delegate to the Victorian Trades Hall Council. She was also elected on several occasions to represent the members at ABEU federal conferences. In 1976 the Bank appointed her a relieving manager and in 1978 as Manager, Footscray North.

Following the sale of SBV to the CBA the Division was tasked with negotiating with the CBA, amongst other things, a redeployment and redundancy package and a review of all other conditions and benefits

including housing loans. Several well attended stop work meetings were held in support of the Divisions actions. Secretary McKenna noted that the sale of SBV was “the single most important issue this union has ever had to tackle”.

This marked the end of the State Bank union.