

Key dates in the history of the Federation of Industrial, Manufacturing and Engineering Employees

*Chronology of the Federation of Industrial, Manufacturing and Engineering Employees
(FIMEE) 1911 - 1993.*

1911	The Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia, an amalgamation of smaller iron and steel industry unions, registered under the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act. Membership app. 5,000.
1911-12	Major strike of ironworkers at Hoskins Works at Lithgow prompts a call for nationalisation of the iron and steel industry. Holman Labor Government balks at high cost of establishing a new government-owned industry.
1915	Birth of the modern Australian steel industry with the Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited (BHP) beginning steel making operations at the Newcastle Steelworks.
1916-17	Poor working conditions and wage cuts prompted by the continuing home-front demands of the First World War lead to a wave of strikes in the steel industry, culminating in the Great Strike of 1917. FIA joins most other NSW unions in strike action. BHP dismisses strikers, employs non-union labour and organises a 'company union'. FIA de-registered as an industrial union.
1917	1917 - Formation of the FIA's Balmain Branch, covering the ship repair industry at Mort's Dock and nearby Cockatoo Island.
1919-27	A weakened FIA re-registered, and holds amalgamation talks with the Australian Workers Union. Rivalry between the unions and job cuts at BHP (prompted, BHP said, by high pay increases and a collapse in international steel prices) leads to a collapse in union membership. FIA revives as a more militant organisation.
1927	Australian Iron and Steel begin operations at Port Kembla.
1929-33	Great Depression. Australian steel production collapses to 1901 levels. FIA membership of 16,000 in 1929 halved.
1932	Construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge completed. Several hundred ironworkers were employed on its construction: eight ironworkers lost their lives.
1935	BHP takes over Australian Iron and Steel, and expands into pipe and tube manufacture.
1936	Ernest Thornton, a communist activist, elected as the first full-time National Secretary of the FIA. The FIA Federal Council also authorised Thornton to engage an office secretary and buy furniture. In 1938 Thornton was also elected Victorian Branch Secretary.
1938	FIA members at Port Kembla strike in support of the campaign to stop exports of pig iron to the aggressively militarist Japan. Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who insisted that the exports continue, was dubbed "Pig Iron Bob".
1938	BHP begin operations at Whyalla in South Australia.

1939	The first issue of the national FIA newspaper, The Ironworker, is published, and the FIA national office moves to Sydney. Communist candidates win control of the Newcastle and South Australian branches.
1939-45	Second World War. Steel production and employment boosted. FIA membership rises to 48,000 by 1942.
1943	The Ironworker becomes Labor News, reflecting the FIA's amalgamation with the munition workers union.
1945	FIA faction fighting intensifies, focused on tension between the national union and the Balmain branch, the only branch of the FIA not controlled by communists who supported the Soviet Union and its leader, Joseph Stalin.
1945-46	Major steel strike begins in Port Kembla and spreads to other centres, over victimisation of workers and other issues. The strike was only partly successful.
1948-49	FIA elections reveal bitter internal disputes over "Cold War" issues - many ironworkers refuse to endorse the Thornton leadership's support for Russia, and opposition to the Australian Labor Party. FIA official Cecil Sharpley defects from the Communist Party, and alleges that communist-controlled unions had rigged union ballots. Laurie Short, a boilermaker's assistant at Cockatoo Island, emerges as the leader of the pro-ALP forces within the FIA.
1949-51	Short initiates a legal challenge to Thornton's re-election as National Secretary in 1949. In 1951, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court ordered that Short should be appointed National Secretary, finding that Thornton's election had benefited from 1,800 forged ballot papers. Short's victory was a major setback for Communist Party control of Australian unions.
1952	Short entrenches his control of the FIA with election defeats for communist officials in every FIA branch.
1954	The FIA affiliates with the International Metalworkers Federation, reflecting the influence of American unionism on the new FIA leadership. Short was impressed by the organisation of the United Steelworkers Union, and borrowed its strategy of campaigning for employer-financed pension schemes, an idea virtually unheard of in Australia.
1958	A new Steel Award significantly improved steelworkers pay and conditions. The FIA also embarked upon a vigorous campaign to improve occupational health and safety in the steel industry.
1960	BHP completes construction of the Whyalla steelworks in the early 1960s, and in 1961 Comalco constructed Australia's first aluminium smelter at Bell Bay in Tasmania. Later in the decade Alcoa commenced operations at Point Henry in Victoria and Alcan established another aluminium smelter at Kurri Kurri in New South Wales. The FIA recruited thousands of new members in this new non-ferrous metal industry.
1965	The FIA successfully negotiates Australia's first superannuation scheme for manual workers. Some 30,000 BHP wage employees were eligible to join the retirement scheme.

1972	Nando Lelli, an Italian immigrant and steelworker, is elected Secretary of the FIA's Port Kembla branch. Lelli was a militant who at times clashed with the national officials. Post-war immigration had a significant impact at the Port Kembla steelworks: by the late 1970s its workforce consisted of Macedonians, Italians, Portuguese, Greeks and Vietnamese. This was a common pattern in FIA workplaces.
1974	FIA membership reaches a high of 72,500. Following an economic downturn which began that year, thousands of manufacturing industry jobs are gradually lost. FIA membership declines.
1975	FIA amalgamates with the Artificial Fertilisers and Chemical Workers Union.
1980	The FIA computerises its national membership records and its industrial research operations, one of the first Australian unions to do so.
1982	Laurie Short retires as FIA National Secretary. He is replaced by Harry Hurrell, the long-serving Assistant National Secretary.
1988	Harry Hurrell dies. He is replaced as National Secretary by Steve Harrison.
1991	The FIA amalgamates with the Australasian Society of Engineers, a union of metal industry tradesmen, to form the Federation of Industrial, Manufacturing and Engineering Employees (FIMEE). The Australian Glassworkers Union and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners amalgamate with FIMEE in 1992.
1993	FIMEE amalgamates with the Australian Workers Union.

Timeline continues from 1993 onwards on the [AWU Timeline](#).