

## Union pulled together as ‘Spanish flu’ hit

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The birth of Federation just over 101 years ago was shaped amid similarly extreme and uncertain times as is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Spanish flu – which would kill an estimated 80 million globally and 6387 in NSW between January and September 1919 – was sweeping the world and had a marked effect on the union’s beginnings.

With the Government prohibiting meetings and gatherings, no Council meetings were held until late in 1919 as more than 290,000 people in greater Sydney would become infected.

Historian Bruce Mitchell wrote of the time: “The first year of the Federation’s existence was not only marked by simmering dissensions, it was also a difficult time to start a new organisation. Sydney experienced the influenza epidemic which led to the closing of all schools until March [1919] and some for even longer.”

The “simmering dissensions” Mitchell refers to were chiefly related to arguments in the ranks about equal pay for women, a rift between headmasters and assistants, and between the radicals and the conservatives, which would manifest itself across Federation business including whether it should take on the leftist title of “union” or the more liberal “federation”.



“Restrictions were placed on public meetings so that the Council was unable to meet regularly and the task of recruiting members began very slowly: at the end of March no members had been enrolled and by the end of 2 June only 300 had joined,” Mitchell wrote in. *A History of Public School Teachers' Organisations in New South Wales, 1855 to 1945*.

The first edition of the union journal *Education* on 15 November, 1919, reported: “Owing to the outbreak of the influenza epidemic, restrictions were imposed upon the community and meetings were prohibited. No Council meetings could be held; but any urgent matters were attended to by the President and Hon Secretary.

“As a consequence the work of organising was greatly interfered with and the membership grew very slowly,” the journal recorded. “The membership at the end of each month was as follows. March 0, April 31, May 129, June 300, July 530, August 861, September 1561, October 1837.

“Considering the abnormal conditions under which the Federation has been working, this result is fairly satisfactory, but much remains to be done in organising those who have not yet joined. Teachers have only themselves to blame for their underpaid services, and unless they co-operate to their full strength, their proper place in the life of the community will never be recognised.”

By the end of year, the membership totalled about 2400, representing little more than 30 per cent of employed teachers, which was a level very similar to that obtained by the Teachers' Association over the previous decade.

In its column in *Education* on 15 December, 1919, the NSW Public School Cookery Teachers' Association one of the many organisations that fell under Federation's umbrella, wrote of its unique contribution during the pandemic.

"During the recent influenza epidemic, when the Cookery Schools were required for food relief kitchens, the teachers in charge, under the direction of Miss Wilson, supervisor of cookery, were engaged in the preparation of invalid foods. Owing to the pandemic, the laundry text book was delayed in reaching completion."

News of pneumonic influenza, which became known as Spanish flu, was first published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in May 1918. By July 1918, came news it had caused a significant number of deaths among French and German troops and was spreading rapidly through England and Ireland. Journalists at the time puzzled over the arrival of the disease in summer disease, unlike the usual winter influenza.

In a report for *Inside Story* earlier this month, Christine Vickers wrote: "Australia's distance from Europe and the rest of the world bought it time, giving doctors a chance to learn about the illness before it struck."

"On 27 November, 1918, pneumonic influenza was proclaimed a notifiable disease for ships bringing troops back to Australia at the end of the war, and the many soldiers who showed signs of the disease were immediately quarantined."

As is the case now, federal and state governments first met in Melbourne 27 November, 1918. The Commonwealth was authorised to take control of a state where infections had broken quarantine and the borders closed to traffic.

Theatres, hotels, cinemas, race meetings, music halls, churches and schools were closed and the medical, nursing and military arms of the Defence Department were called in to action. The pandemic threw the people and government into a community effort rivalled only by that of the recent war, in an attempt to lessen the spread, and impact, of the disease.

In his Presidential Address at Annual Conference – reported in *Education* on 15 January, 1920 – President A.G. Gilchrist said: "The work of organisation during the year has been greatly retarded, owing to circumstances beyond our control.

"The abnormal conditions which existed during the influenza epidemic prevented the Federation from making that progress in organisation which might be expected under normal conditions."