

# The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

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*Labour History* (ISSN: 0023 6942) is an internationally recognised journal published twice a year, in November and May, by the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History of which the Brisbane Labour History Association is the Brisbane branch. Contents, abstracts and prices of back issues are available at the web site [www.asslh.org.au](http://www.asslh.org.au). With the demise of the History Co-operative, the Journal has linked up with the non-profit publisher JSTOR. There will be a number of advantages for individual subscribers, including online access to the full run of *Labour History* from 1962 on.

Members of the **BLHA** who are not already receiving *Labour History* are encouraged to subscribe. The full rate for individuals is \$60.00; the concession rate for students/unwaged is \$40.00. Rates are kept relatively low as ASSLH is a non-profit organisation. New subscribers to *Labour History* receive the current year's journals and a free back issue of their choice.

*Labour History* November 2010 will feature a special section devoted to the cross-fertilisation of labour and environmental history. Edited by Janis Bailey and entitled 'Greening Labour History', this section will include articles from the **Red Green and In-between** conference held earlier this year by the Brisbane Labour History Association. The topics range from environmental campaigns for the Georges River (Sydney) and Mt Lesueur (Western Australia) to the creation of a living museum at Mangere (New Zealand). There will also be a number of articles outside this section, research notes, a personal memoir concerning ASSLH's first three years, and a series of tributes to Jeff Shaw. In May 2011, the 100<sup>th</sup> issue of *Labour History* will be published. To celebrate, this special issue will provide valuable overviews of a wide range of topics such as industrial labour, voluntary labour, convicts, labour and politics, gender and work, the politics of consumption, and anti-labour history.

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# Editorial

## Jeff Rickertt

Throughout the history of the workers' movement, few battles and debates have been settled permanently; most have ended in a temporary and partial victory to one side or the other, only to re-emerge at a later date in a different form. So long as workers confront the pressure of capital, this situation won't change. Each new generation will be compelled to re-fight the struggles of the past.

In this issue of *The Queensland Journal of Labour History* we show just how linked the past and present can be. As we go to press, the Queensland Builders Labourers' Federation is celebrating 100 years of existence. To commemorate this remarkable milestone we feature an overview of the union's history by Humphrey McQueen, author of *Framework of Flesh*, an account of the BLF's long fight for health and safety. Unions of construction industry labourers have existed since at least the boom years of the 1870s, but the BLF as we know it dates from 1910, when a new organisation of builders labourers emerged out of the industrial defeats and economic chaos of the 1890s, and combined with interstate unions to form a national federation.

One hundred years later, much has changed in building and construction, but, as McQueen points out, the industry's class relations are essentially the same: employers still call the shots and the imperative is still profit, while the state, through such bodies as the Australian Building and Construction Commission, still does its bit to keep workers in line. On the job and through their union, construction workers continue to rely on each other to keep themselves safe and to win better wages and conditions.

The ABCC is, of course, a creature of the Howard years kept alive by the Federal Labor government, despite promises made before the 2007 election. Parliamentary Labor's adherence to many of the worst aspects of the Coalition's legacy reminds us that the age-old debate over how organised labour should respond politically to the employing class has never left us. In my article on the history of state socialism in Queensland from 1889 to 1905, I discuss the ideas and activities of some of the socialists who helped found the Queensland branch of the ALP, believing that a political party of the working class should not only represent workers but should offer

them more than piecemeal reforms. Their hopes were dashed quite early, though in those years they did at least achieve a consensus on the Labor side that public ownership was a good thing. As Labor member for South Brisbane, Harry Turley, put it in 1896:

No politician in Queensland today would advocate the selling of our railways to a syndicate. If it is right and beneficial for the State to build a line and run an engine on it, why should it be wrong and injurious for the State to build that engine or to mine for the coal it consumes?

From a different perspective entirely, Tony Gough's article on 19<sup>th</sup> century civil servants points out that working for the state was not all beer and skittles either. State employees of the 1860s had their grievances too, and, like the tradesmen of that era, they discovered that a bit of collective pressure went a long way in securing what they felt was their due. They, too, learnt the lesson that a gain won was rarely won forever. To hang on to improvements, pressure had to be maintained. The struggle was continuous and, as the BLs have demonstrated, tenacity and longevity were important.

In this issue we pay tribute to two working-class militants who were both tenacious and durable: Bob Walker and Jeannie O'Connor. Though they trod different political paths, both were tireless fighters for their class

and uncompromising in their criticism of the capitalist version of democracy. We offer a bumper review section this issue, with reviews of three important new books of labour history and a collection of poetry by Brisbane socialist, peace activist and retired meatworker, Jim Sharp. We actually intended to review a fifth book, Tom Keneally's *The People's Train*, a novel based on the story of Brisbane's Red Russian community, but the publisher apparently pulled the book from sale due to poor early reviews. Thus inspired by the thought that the written word really can change the course of human affairs, I conclude in quiet hope with a prophetic verse from Jim Sharp's marvellous collection:

a raging movement will herald that day  
cleaving the top end of town  
asunder  
and all talking shops will tremble  
and all dynasties will come crashing  
down.

\* \* \* \*

.....  
 • "Politics is the gentle  
 • art of getting votes  
 • from the poor and  
 • campaign funds from  
 • the rich, by promising  
 • to protect each from  
 • the other."  
 •  
 • ~ Oscar Ameringer  
 •  
 • .....

# BLHA

## President's Column

### Greg Mallory & Bob Reed

#### Second annual Alex McDonald Memorial Lecture

On 20 May 2010, BLHA presented the second annual Alex McDonald Memorial Lecture at the TLC Building. The speaker on that occasion was Dr Ros Kidd, whose topic was "*One of the Great Scandals of Australia's History: Aboriginal Labour in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Queensland*".

The lecture was an erudite and captivating distillation of certain elements of Ros' academic work over the past 15 years or so dealing with the immoral and unrelenting misappropriation of the wages of Aboriginal labour by a succession of Queensland Governments from the late 1890s. The depth of detail presented by Ros was truly impressive and underlined in emphatic fashion a shameful and unremedied aspect of Queensland labour history. Anyone wishing to learn more should get a copy of her book, *Trustees on Trial*.

The lecture was extremely well attended and BLHA expresses its deepest gratitude to Ros for taking the time to advance the education of those present. It was fitting that the lecture be held at the QCU's headquarters as QCU is currently funding test litigation to recover moneys owing to Yarrabah man, Uncle Conrad Yeatman, who was present on the evening (courtesy of the QCU) and who spoke passionately about his own history as an Aboriginal worker and the stolen wages issue generally.

Our thanks to the QCU and to BLHA committee members who worked hard to make the evening a success, particularly Jeff Rickertt, Avalon Kent and John Spreckley.

#### BLHA membership

BLHA financial membership has grown to 60 individual and 16 institutional members. It is gratifying to see that a number of Unions have now come on board. Secretary Jason Stein deserves great credit for his efficient