

# The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

No. 13, September 2011

ISSN 1832-9926

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# Editorial

Jeff Rickertt

The articles in this issue cover an eclectic mix of topics but each in its own way draws attention to one of organised labour's oldest dilemmas: how to know one's friends and enemies. With current Labor governments selling public assets, diluting workplace health and safety laws and criminalising basic union activity in the construction industry, it is, as ever, a topical question.

Often the enemy is obvious. Nobody on the labour side in 1891 was confused about the motives of the pastoralists and financiers. No-one had any doubts about Chris Corrigan and Peter Reith in 1998. But, as Phil Griffiths explains in his article on North Queensland unionism, alliances across the class divide were once commonplace. In Townsville in the 1880s, not only did the pubs function as union organising centres, the pub owners were often the ones doing the organising, naturally to their own economic and political advantage. A similar blurring of class allegiances was evident in Ipswich and Brisbane.

By the twentieth century, such cross-class fraternising was rare. The shearers' war and industrialisation saw to that.

As the class lines hardened, organised labour shed its entanglements with capital and emerged as an independent industrial and political force. In a sense, this made it easier to know your enemies but harder to choose your friends. The Hanson family is a case in point. Ted Hanson was a plumber by trade, a founding member of the Plumbers' Union and a long-serving Labor member of State Parliament. Jack, his son, was a leader of the Operative Painters and Decorators' Union in Queensland and a prominent member of the Communist Party. Both men claimed allegiance to the labour cause, but for most of their adult lives they were at ideological loggerheads, and at particular moments, such as during the 1948 railway strike, they were at political war. Their remarkable story is told here by Ted's granddaughter and Jack's niece, Caroline Mann-Smith.

In the workplace, the question of friends and enemies invariably takes on a different complexion as workers make common cause against the pressure of capital. In this issue we feature an interview I conducted with George Britten in November 2010, as part of the journal's work and union

life series. George, too, was a plumber but unlike Ted Hanson, he stayed with the tools for his entire working life, building a formidable reputation as a rank and file militant as he plumbed his way around the State. Whereas the Hanson biographies chronicle labour's political divisions, the work stories of George Britten celebrate the creativity, resilience and power of worker solidarity. The industrial action that George and his comrades took to make their industry safer and more civilised often got them the sack. But they did it anyway and, over time, they had success. If they did the same things today, under the construction industry laws maintained by the Gillard Government they would face gaol time.

Our final feature is Howard Guille's review of Tristram Hunt's biography of Friedrich Engels. As a young man, the bourgeois Engels made the cause of proletarian emancipation his own, spurning an easy life as a man of property to devote his wealth and intellectual prowess to supporting his friend Karl Marx and developing the body of radical theory that came to be known as Marxism. Howard ponders what Engels, the co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*, would make of his biographer Hunt, recently elected to the British House of Commons as the Labour member for Stoke-on-Trent Central. Hunt says he's a realist. Engels no doubt would ask: for which side?

I end on a personal note. As this is the final issue of the *Queensland Journal of Labour History* to be edited by Dale and myself, we thank the BLHA committee and members and the journal's many contributors for their support during our time in the job.

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