

The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

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Editorial

Howard Guille, Ross Gwyther and Bob Russell

This issue of the journal once again takes us from the 19th century to the present. It does so when the Australian car industry is being closed, Qantas workers are paying with their jobs for bad management, both Alcoa and Rio are closing aluminium refineries and smelters at Gove and Point Henry and mining has lost its lustre. Anti-worker political forces are rampant in Queensland and the Commonwealth. The waters around the Barrier Reef are to be filled with millions of tonnes of spoil from new coal ports and Mr Abbott says he will not support the creation of any more national parks and that timber workers are “the ultimate conservationists”.

In 2012–13 the Queensland Government shredded the public service. Now with its controls on political spending it is trying to shut up its critics especially the unions. Unions are required to ballot their members before spending more than \$10,000 for a ‘political purpose’. Yet Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie is making it much easier to keep political donations secret by lifting the disclosure threshold from \$1,000 to \$12,400 and scrapping caps on election spending. It seems to us very much like

making it as hard as possible for unions but as easy as possible for big money.

Other changes to industrial law and practice are even more anti union and anti worker. They include restrictions on entry to work sites, reducing the number of allowable matters in State awards and agreements and, as we go to press, imposing individual contracts on senior medical staff in public hospitals. The industrial changes in Queensland were described by one union officer as “*work choices on steroids*”

The VLAD (Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment) Act started out against motor cycle gangs but needs to be seen as an attack on freedom of association and the right to work. It is anti civil liberties and allows the Attorney-General to use regulations to define any group as ‘illegal’ and the police to determine whether anyone is an ‘associate’. The ALP opposition voted for the original legislation in November last year but in March this year announced it will press for repeal. As the Queensland Law Society says these laws put at risk the democratic rights of all people and threaten the fundamental principle of the separation of powers.

A spoof advertisement for Australia and Queensland is an apt summary of where we have got to;

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Business without borders.

Bargains galore.

*Hurry, labour for as little as \$1
a day.*

Forests going cheap as chips.

*Great Barrier Reef — own a
piece of coral as an executive
paperweight.*

*Who needs a car industry or an
airline.*

*Stride across the globe and
pick the low hanging fruit.*

*Australia — open for business
— closed to refugees.*

A common thread connects the various articles in this issue and that is the injustice and repression that Queenslanders have had to combat from before federation down to the present. Peter Cross, Jeff Rickertt, Elisabeth Gondwe, Howard Guille, Lisa Jackson and Humphrey McQueen chronicle various aspects of this history. Jeff Rickertt provides a detailed discussion of our first battle for free speech as part of the campaign for full civil liberties in his discussion of the Australasian Socialist party's struggle for the right to be heard in Brisbane. Given recent moves that place civil liberties under a cloud in Queensland, this article on our first free speech movement could hardly be more timely. We also reprint a speech given by Humphrey McQueen

last year on the history and continuing significance of May Day in Australia. As he says, 'it is our duty to keep the past alive' and that "we are not in for the long haul, but the endless haul"

The three writers from the North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum draw our attention to a less well-known history, the incarceration of the poor, sick and inebriated at the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum on North Stradbroke Island. 2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the remaining building from what was Queensland's workhouse for the poor from 1865–1946. It had 21,000 inmates over its life — the majority who were aged labouring people shipped there from all over the state.

Peter Cross continues our analysis of the turbulent 1960s in Brisbane with a close look at the relationship between Alex Macdonald and the student new left. Peter is an undergraduate Law/Arts student at the University of Queensland. He has a particular interest in Queensland political culture and has worked with the Centre for the Government of Queensland under Danielle Miller and Roger Scott. We welcome this article and would be pleased to have more contributions from a new generation of students.

We continue our series of interviews with current union and political leaders. This issue features an interview with Jen Thomas, the Acting

Secretary of the Services Union. Our interest in this union was sparked by a new activist program that the union is running. Distinct from delegate training, this program adopts a broad notion of activism in the workplace and in the community. While we know that activists created trade unions, the question now is whether unions can successfully create activists.

Finally on free speech and activism, we remember and mark the contribution of Tony Reeves. In his own words ‘You don’t know what it’s like to be a member of the Labor Party till you’ve been expelled at least once — in my case, twice’.

BLHA

President’s Column

Greg Mallory

President’s column February 2014

The Association held its AGM in December. Danielle Miller has stepped down as she has taken a job in Melbourne and Andrew Dallas has stepped down as Treasurer but continues on as an Executive member. I thank them for their work over the years. The AGM voted two new members to the Executive, Emma Thornton and ‘Snowy’ Heilborn. Both have long experience in the trade union movement and ‘Snowy’ has attended virtually every event conducted by the Association since its reformation in 2000. The AGM also heard a report on

selling the journal at various bookshops around Brisbane. This was met with mixed success with some bookshops selling them and others giving them away as these shops could not enter the journal into their computer system.

Ross Gwyther has continued his work on the project *Queensland Comrades Speaks*. This project is funded by the Search Foundation and is based on a series of interviews of labour movement activists who were active in the Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s. Ross has conducted 15 interviews so far and plans to do another eight during 2014. A web page

has been established as part of the BLHA website and transcripts will be available.

At the Federal level the ASSLH ran the national conference in July in Sydney. Sigrid McCausland attended and has written a report in the September journal.

On a sad note I would like to report on the death of one of our members Tony Reeves. Tony was a colourful character who wrote a number of books on prominent crime figures in Sydney. He was also an active ALP member until his resignation from the party over privatisation. Tony was a former Sydney City Councillor during the Green Ban era of the 1970s and a good friend of Jack Munday.

As President I would like to see the Association be involved in more activity besides our Alex Macdonald Lecture

and October Symposium. We need to get more young people involved in the Association. Perhaps we could have a seminar which explores postgraduate work in the area of labour history or a seminar on trade union work which involves young people.

We already have had some ideas on possible symposium discussions for this year. This year there will be a lot of public discussion on war since it is 100 years since the start of World War 1. Conscription was a big issue then and the role of trade unions and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was significant. It has been suggested that the Association run a symposium on the theme of the trade union movement and war. Another suggestion is a bus tour of Brisbane examining various labour history sites. The Executive will discuss these proposals at its first meeting of the year. I wish the Association and members a productive year.