

# The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

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# Editorial

Ross Gwyther

The mechanical appliances consist of a chronometer and a motion picture camera. This invention is the most powerful tool ever for the measurement of efficiency, suggesting the whip of taskmasters and owners in earlier times.

Editorial, *Australasian Engineering and Machinery*, 1913.

In Sydney at 9 o'clock in the morning of Thursday the second of August 1917, 1000 men employed at the Randwick tramway workshops, and over 3000 workers at the Everleigh railway workshops stopped work. Through their unions they had been attempting unsuccessfully to stop the "Americanisation" of their working life through the introduction of time cards.

Within a few days the strike had spread to workers throughout NSW and some in Victoria and Queensland as well. It was to become one of the iconic general strikes of Australian working life. It was to last until the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, was to end in bitter failure, and at its' height was to attract some 200,000 people to street protests in

support of the strike — at a time when the Australian population was only 20% of current numbers.

Large meetings at the Brisbane Domain (the current City Botanic Gardens) supported the strikers, and listened to delegates talk about the problems with the card system — how it was to be used to establish "average times" for each particular task, and open those who were unable to keep up with those times to being sacked. Queensland rail workers blackbanned any rail transport of goods between NSW and Queensland, and the Ryan Labor government, although under severe criticism, did not overturn this ban.

The strike was not in support of higher wages or better conditions — rather a strike to challenge the control over labour time — a strike at the heart of what defines capital. No wonder there was such a determined campaign to resist and defeat the workers.

One important incident in the strike is often overlooked by those of us talking about Australian labour movement history. At 5 o'clock on the 30<sup>th</sup> August three men on strike had an altercation with a farmer who was driving goods

declared black. The driver, Reginald Wearne, drew a revolver and shot dead one of the men, Mervin Flannigan, 32 years old. Wearne was never convicted of the crime. Mervin Flannigan, along with Norman Brown from the Rothbury lockout, should be remembered as one of the martyrs of our labour movement.

In the long run the strike was anything but a failure. On the one hand some of the workers taking part in the strike went on to apply their hard industrial lessons as a new generation of Labor Party leaders — such as Eddie Ward and Ben Chifley. On the other hand it was to be only a few years later before the socialist movement came together to establish the Communist Party, which played such a critical part in the labour movement over the following decades.

2017 is a year with quite a few such dramatic anniversaries.

December 20<sup>th</sup> in 1917 saw one of the great people's victories of the First World War. Prime Minister Hughes, having been rebuffed in 1916 in his attempt to legitimise conscription of workers to fight in the war, had jumped political ship, teamed up with the conservatives and won victory in the polls early in 1917. He saw it as a shoe in to run a second referendum on conscription. However again the forces of workers around Australia, teamed up with farmers in rural communities, socialists and peace activists in the

cities were able to defeat this second referendum by a majority of 167 thousand. As Ian Turner pointed out in his history of industrial labour during this period, a key part of that struggle was the Australian Peace Alliance, formed by Victorian trade unions in 1914.

Of course the other momentous event one hundred years ago was the Russian revolution. The storming of the winter palace in October 1917 (or November, depending on your choice of calendar) introduced a new era in political struggles not just in Russia, not even in Europe, but in virtually every country in the world. The annual Labour History Australia conference being held in Brisbane this September is entitled “Workers of the World”, and one of its key themes is the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on labour movements in Australia and in other countries.

This year is also the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a book that was literally to shake the world for the following centuries — Karl Marx's *Capital — a Critique of Political Economy*. Even today the impact of that work is attested to by the continual attempts to prove how wrong and irrelevant Marx was.

Anniversaries have two valuable functions for us. They provide an opportunity for us to consider the shoulders of those we stand on. But they also prompt us to examine our

paths ahead. Our journal this month has some topics to satisfy both of these needs.

The Australian Journalists Union was established in 1910 with a meeting of 100 journalists in Melbourne. The current union, MEAA Media, included a story of their history in a recent journal and we reproduce that story here. The union established the principle of equal pay for men and women 60 years before the Commonwealth Equal Pay decision in 1969, and one of their most significant contributions was the establishment of the Australian Press Council in 1976.

Frank Bongiorno delivered the Alex Macdonal lecture this year, on the topic of Labor, Labour and Australia's 1980s" and we publish an edited version of Frank's talk here. He talks in some detail about the contradictions which the ALP found during its years in office from 1983, as it moved from the previous Keynesian and protectionist policies to the neo-liberal directions of "unleashing market forces and deregulation". He places these moves in the context of world forces responding to globalisation. He critiques the moves to the Accord and discusses some of the arguments which relate the current dramatic de-unionisation to that policy. At the same time he identifies some of the positive aspects of Labor's reforms — social spending and a renovated welfare state.

An interesting history of Rex Patterson, Minister in the Whitlam Government, is provided by Lyndon Megarity. As the chief proponent of the "development of North Australia", Patterson's rise and fall is documented. Some of his remarks from the early 1970s show remarkable insight — "*.. China and Japan could become our two most important customers...the main determinant of growth in northern Australia will be investment in mining for export..*"

We publish three book reviews this month — a review by Greg Mallory of "*The House that Jack Built*", the story of Jack Munday and the NSW Builders Labourers struggles, a review by Ted Riethmuller of "*Wharfie*", the life story of Wally Stubbings, and a review by Deb Jordan of the classic Jack Lindsay book on the WWI Conscription referendums, "*The Blood Vote*".

We also include another story of working life by Ted Riethmuller, "*Lindsay Takes a Sickie*". Ted has written a number of such anecdotes and we have already published some others in earlier journal issues — they always bring to the journal a warm and insightful touch.

This year the Brisbane Labour History Association is hosting the bi-annual conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The inclusions in our journal are a good complement to the many papers and

discussions which will be held later in September.

Two of our journal editors, Ross Gwyther and Howard Guille, are stepping away from the editorial board after this journal issue. We have both

enjoyed the task of putting together papers and stories that speak of working class experience and carry in their histories some lessons for the future struggles of the labour movement. We wish the new editorial board all the best for future issues.

# **BLHA**

## **President's Column**

**Greg Mallory**

The planning for the 2017 National Labour History Conference is well under way. So far we have obtained approximately \$10000 worth of sponsorship from the union movement. The unions that have contributed to the conference are the MUA, CFMEU Federal Office, CFMEU Construction Qld Branch, Queensland Teachers Union, Independent Education Union, National Tertiary Education Union, Australasian Meat Employees Union, United Voice and the Queensland Council of Unions. The Brisbane Labour History Association thanks these unions for their support. We have two keynote speakers, Professor Ruth Milkman from the City University of New York and Professor John Maynard from Newcastle University. We have nearly 60 papers for presentation. The

conference theme is 'Workers of the World' which recognises the 100 year anniversary of the Russian Revolution as well as immigrant workers and globalisation. The conference will take place at Emmanuel College at the University of Queensland. Ros McLellan from the Queensland Council of Unions will open the conference. Members who are interested in going should consult the BLHA website.

The QCU is holding a welcome for Ruth Milkman at the QCU Building starting at 4 pm on 22 September. The QCU will be sending out invitations to interested parties.

On 22 September, the day before our conference, there will be a Special General Meeting of the Federal body.