

# The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

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### ***Labour History*, 109, November 2015**

This latest issue offers studies on key economic, social and political dimensions of Australian labour history. Despite the diversity of topics addressed, the contributions also cohere around two particular themes that are now front-of-mind concerns for labour historians. The first of these is the role of that “rough beast,” the democratic-capitalist state, in shaping class relations and working-class communities, in labour regulation and in containing and repressing labour activism. The second theme is the significance of space and place in labour identity, mobilisation and demobilisation. A further notable feature is the number of contributions dealing with recent times; proof positive that the historian's craft knows no temporal boundaries. The past is as close as yesterday.

For more details see <http://asslh.org.au/journal/contents-and-abstracts/labour-history-no-109/>.

# Editorial

Howard Guille

## Workers and Taxes: some history

The political debate in Australia has again shifted to tax. According to Benjamin Franklin, ‘In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes’. While taxes are a virtual certainty for wage earners, they seem to be optional for corporations and those with high income and wealth. For example, according to the Australian Tax Office, 579 of the 1,396 major corporations (40 per cent) paid no tax in 2013–14.

For wage earners it is ‘pay-as-you go’ income tax; GST at 10 per cent; beer excise at around 52 cents per stubby and, if you still smoke \$9.40 per pack of 20. The richer professionals have plenty of outs — negative gearing to write off taxable income and even pay for a holiday home; big concessions for putting ‘surpluses’ into superannuation, large ‘work-related deductions, and even family trusts.

There is not much history written about tax and it tends to be about ‘tax revolts’ or a chronicle of legislative and policy changes. Some is important —

Eureka and the revolt against the cost of mining licenses and lack of political representation; Gandhi and the 1930 sathyagraha against the salt tax.

Income tax was introduced in Queensland in 1902. This was a move to direct and progressive taxation on land and income and away from almost complete reliance on excise and duties. The early Labour movement pressed for land taxes. This was a political demand against the pastoralists and urban landowners and showed the influence of Henry George. The first Federal ALP Government of Andrew Fisher introduced a national land tax including on leasehold pastoral land. Federal income tax started in 1915 as a levy to pay for the war effort.

Tax, as part of public revenue, is the price of the ‘social wage’ — a term perhaps not favoured since the Accord years. Fred Argy, during the Accord years, defined the ‘social wage’ as that part of government spending which provides benefits, either in cash or kind, to individuals and families. It includes, health, education, housing, welfare payments and services, child endowments and allowances, childcare, pensions. It can extend

to recreation, sport and culture. The critical thing is that the social wage ‘decommodifies’ labour by providing goods and services outside the market; usually based on universal or means tested entitlement. Done well, the social wage promotes equality and reduces the threat to workers of the ‘reserve army of labour’.

There are very considerable histories of the growth and value of the social wage and the welfare state. Francis Castles’ book *The Working Class and Welfare* of 1985 was seminal in the idea that welfare and the social wage developed differently in Australia and New Zealand than in Europe. Employment and fair wages were much more central here; state spending and universal provisions were much less. The differences allowed the total tax revenues to be less and made workers more dependent on having employment.

This is still the case. Australia’s tax-to-GDP ratio is low by international standards. It has been in the bottom third of OECD countries since the mid-1960s. Currently, the ratio in Australia is 27.5 per cent, which is in the bottom five OECD countries along with Chile, Korea, Mexico and United States. The OECD average is 34.2 per cent and the Nordic countries, France and Italy are at over 40 per cent. The highest is Denmark at 50.9 per cent in 2014.

Across the western economies, including Australia, the 1950s to 70s were a period of increasing equality and less hardship for workers. Public services, the welfare state and redistribution through progressive taxation and public spending were keys to this. These were the results of political pressures through left of centre parties and industrial pressure through unions. Some recent Australian works celebrate this. They include Dennis Glover’s *An Economy is Not a Society* (2015), Andrew Scott’s *Northern Lights* (2014) and Winton Higgins & Geoff Dow’s *Politics against pessimism* (2013). On a wider perspective, the writing of the late Tony Judt, most especially, *Ill Fares The Land* (2010) is essential reading. So too, Selina Todd’s *The People. The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (2014).

All of these directly challenge neo-liberalism and myths of ‘small government’. Even so, the liberals and their financial and business backers have convinced us that ‘debt’ and ‘deficit’ are the ‘real’ problems. Moreover, the solution is to cut spending not to increase revenue. Indeed, there has been little emphasis on increasing revenue except through the proceeds of economic growth. In the 2000s, this was to come from the ‘housing boom’; at least until the bubble burst. In the last five years it was to come from ‘the mining boom’, at least until that bubble burst as well.

In the beginning of 2016, the Federal ALP has proposed changes to ‘negative gearing’. This is where losses from an investment made with borrowed money are charged against taxable income from another activity. Rental properties are the most prevalent form — the difference between rent received and all outgoings including interest paid can be charged against another business or professional income. There is no doubt that negative gearing increases housing prices and gives a big advantage to the already well-off. For example, nearly 30 per cent of anaesthetists negatively gear their properties, compared to just 3.6 per cent of cleaners. Negative gearing also helps pay for holiday homes for medical, legal and financial professionals on the Gold and Sunshine Coast and the Islands.

The ALP have proposed limiting negative gearing to new properties. The Prime Minister and other Liberals says this is scandalous because it will cut the resale price of housing. It is instructive of the continuing class nature of Australian politics.

Workers would be better-off with lower housing prices as this will reduce income and work pressures. Australian housing prices are among the highest in the entire world and housing unaffordability is well documented. Manufacturing and service industry employers should also welcome lower housing prices because this will reduce pressure for wage increases. The

finance industry, however, will lose, because workers will need to borrow less and there will be some reduction in property speculation. In sum, the Liberals are voicing the interests of finance capital who make their fortunes from extracting economic rents from the rest of us.

There is an analogy in the pressures from the Liberal Party and the Productivity Commission to reduce penalty rates on weekends. The usual argument is that this will allow more cafes and shops to open at weekends. Part, if not all, of the lower wages will go to higher profits for the café and shop proprietor. However, the extra profit will not stay with the proprietor but will go to the owners of the land — for which in most cases read shopping centre — where they operate. This is exactly as David Ricardo and more especially Karl Marx described. If the shopping centre can restrict the space available (which it does by ownership, marketing and planning laws) it is able to appropriate some or all of the profits. It is enough to turn one into a Georgist and advocate a strong, if not single tax, on property. Perhaps back to the future is the best way of helping workers.

The articles in this issue of our journal cover some interesting aspects of the lives of workers and the ways in which their organisations — namely their trade unions — have contributed to this.

Ron Monaghan recently retired after eight years as General Secretary of the Qld Council of Unions. Our interview with him brings out some fascinating aspects of the big changes in the direction of the QCU under his leadership. His account of the struggle against the privatisation plans of the Bligh Labour Government is an insight into how all the unions affiliated with the QCU felt so strongly about that issue that they were willing to risk unseating an ALP government over it. Ron also details his commitment to the QCU campaign to fully recover the wages stolen from indigenous pastoral workers by successive Qld governments

There is a common perception in the union movement that the Shop Assistants Union (the SDA) is a very “tamecat” union, with no militant tradition and a very right wing leadership. Duncan Hart demonstrates in his article that at least during the 1970s, the NSW branch of that union had a very strong policy and practice of militantly standing up for better wages and conditions of retail workers, and achieving some stunning successes as a result, under the leadership of Barry Egan.

Ruby Ludski is a young labour historian who presented a paper at the BLHA seminar in 2015 on the involvement of the Trade Unions and the Indigenous Stolen Wages Campaign: the Qld Nurses Union,

and we publish her paper here. John McCollow reviews a recent history of the National Tertiary Education Union, and Craig Buckley reviews the film “Blood on the Coal” — a history of coal mining, focussing mostly on workers and their experiences in the Qld mining industry. Finally Snow Heilbronn and Ross Gwyther present some reminiscences and stories about Bill Fleming who passed away late last year. Bill was one of the unsung everyday heroes of the working class, with both a strong commitment to his union organisation where he worked, as well as building broader cultural activities amongst young people.

# BLHA

## President's Column

Greg Mallory

After our successful 'Young Labour Historians Symposium' the Association hosted screening of the film *Blood on the Coal*. This was held in conjunction with the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division and the law firm Maurice Blackburn. The film portrayed the history of the coal mining mainly in the Ipswich area. The event was extremely well attended and the union has provided the Association with a number of copies of the video. I would like to thank Emma Thornton for organising this event.

The sub-committee established to build closer ties with the trade union movement had one successful event last year. A number of Executive members met with the retired CFMEU members. Three of us spoke about the aims and activities of the BLHA. We distributed copies of our journal and application forms to join the Association.

The AGM was held in December and the 2015 Executive Committee was returned except for Andrew Dallas who has returned to New Zealand to take up a post there. Andrew has been a

member of the Executive for a number of years and also served as Treasurer. Andrew will continue to be a member of the Association. I wish Andrew all the best in his new endeavours. I would also like to welcome India Anderson to the Executive. India was involved in organising the 'Young Labour Historians Symposium' and is currently doing honours in the History Department at the University of Queensland. I would also like to welcome Al Rennie who also joins the Executive. Al has a long experience in industrial relations.

One of the main activities of the Association has and will be the organising of the 2017 National Conference. The National Conference Committee has been meeting regularly and thanks to Phil Griffiths has come up with an overall theme which is 'Workers of the World'. At present we are examining a number of venues and we may have narrowed it down to a college at the University of Queensland. These proposals have

been presented to the ASSLH Federal Executive and everything is on track.

As I write this I have just attended a concert organised by one of our members Lachlan Hurse. The theme of the night was ‘songs of the labour movement’. The Brisbane Combined Union Choir performed, as did Lachlan’s group Jumping Fences. The lead performer was the American George Mann. George had recently been on a tour of Australia and America singing songs of the legendary IWW activist Joe Hill.

I wish members a productive year.

**Interview with  
Ron Monaghan, General  
Secretary Queensland  
Council of Unions  
2007–2015**

**Conducted January 2016 by  
Howard Guille  
and Ross Gwyther**



*Q: When did you come to Queensland*

I started with the Miscellaneous Workers Union <sup>1</sup>in 1979 in Sydney, and came to Queensland in 1989. The family wanted to come home, there was a position with the Missos up here and Wilf Ardill the Secretary was very welcoming to me. Before that, I had 10 years looking after the West of Sydney. The Missos were a lot smaller outfit then than they are now, but were a very active left-of-centre union, of which I was very proud and still am proud now to have worked for.

*Q: So just before the Goss Government?*

Just before the Goss Government — three to six months before the 1989 election. I worked on the election. There was an atmosphere that this was time, our time; that finally Queensland had matured, that it wouldn't be a conservative back-water, that we would bring Queensland up to the rest of Australia, and indeed, they would have a face in the world instead of being joked about as a banana republic.

It was a very telling time in Queensland history, and an amazing time for the union movement. I'd been observing it from down South — and talking to people like Wilf Ardill and Don Brown and other union leaders. The marches and the bans on marches; the Springbok tour; all the laws they'd been subjected to by Bjelke-Petersen and the Conservatives. People like Wilf and Don knew what had to be over-turned. 1989 was a time that people could look forward to; time to bring Queensland into the 20th Century or 21st Century, after 30 years of Conservative rule.

People had been subjected to a lot in that time, especially if you were progressive, especially if you were a union-progressive person. You were a target if you were employed by a union, or acted in a union, or were active in the ALP for that matter. My introduction to Queensland politics, was a very good starting point,

*How did you go from being a being a worker and a delegate on the job, to going and working in the union.*

I had a background in Unions. My Dad worked for 23 years as an Organiser for what is now the CFMEU, which was then the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU). Around our tea-table every night there was politics; why people should belong to Unions; why we struggled to get social justice, what laws should be there; why laws should be social and for the benefit of all. I had a background of all that.

At first, I could see my old man come home and be beaten down by not winning this and arguing about that, and I thought, well, 'I don't know if I want to go into the Union Movement. I'll do something else.' So, I went to Uni and I was going to be a teacher. So I did the Degree, and I was doing my Diploma of Education — halfway through there was a teacher glut and there were no jobs.

Going through University — I'd left home at 18 — I was supporting myself as a part-time cleaner, and as a part-time cleaner I was a member of the Miscellaneous Workers Union. I was a Delegate on the job, and was asked to be an Organiser on a number of occasions. I'd said, 'No, you fellows have got it really tough and all that. I'll be on your State Council, which I was for four years.' I'd joined the Labor Party four years before that because I believed

that was a political vehicle to what our aspirations were for legislation.

They asked me again when there were teaching jobs. This time, because there were no teaching jobs, I said, 'I'll give it a go for a year.' The union said, 'No, you give us five years and we'll see how you go, and we'll decide then.' I said, 'Righto,' and that was that. So 36 years later, I think it was the best move I ever did.

*So that was 1979?*

That was '79, and I'd joined the Labor Party four years before that in 1975. because I thought I was my duty to try to keep the Labor Party as close to the aims and aspirations of the union movement as possible. Without the unions, I believed the Labor Party would move to the Right like the Democratic Party in the United States.

In 1979, and before, there was free Health, free Education and a big Public Housing sector. I believed they should be free. Now, the only way to get that is legislation, and the only way to get the legislation is through a political party that will govern in the interests of workers. That's got to be one that is attached to the union movement. In other words the Australian Labor Party; that was my thinking then and in a simplistic way, still is.

So that's where I came from. I was on the State Council in NSW and I went from there to an Organiser. The training

I got came from Tommy O'Brien was the Assistant Secretary — that was Kerry O'Brien's dad; he worked with my dad in the BWIU. He went from the BWIU to the Missos after a fight with Pat Clancy about superannuation, would you believe. He was a lifelong friend of ours. I'd been there a month reading awards and agreements, and I thought, 'Oh, God, what have I done?' I didn't have a car because, you know, we weren't a flush union. One day Tommy threw me his car keys and said a bloke had got sacked at Dulux, 'Go and get him back.' I said, 'I know nothing about the paint industry.' He said, 'Oh, well, you know the bloke got sacked. Go and get him back.'

I went out to Dulux; they'd sacked a young bloke in the Lab who'd reached the ripe old age of 18 and should have gone from a cadet to an adult. We stopped the lab, and the lab had to okay the paint. The paint couldn't get out, but we needed the factory. The delegate in the Lab I talked to said 'We've got trouble doing much. They won't come out. They're Vietnamese.'

The factory had a lot of Vietnamese workers — it was the first big wave of Vietnamese migrants to Sydney. I said, 'What do you mean. Why don't we just go and ask them?' 'Well, where are the leaders? Let's go and have a yarn with them.'

So I went down and talked to the leaders, the natural leaders — really they were their delegates I explained



*Union members are joined by QCU General Secretary Ron Monaghan, in a rally as part of the successful campaign to retain the Renewable Energy Target in 2015*

what had happened, and said, ‘No person should be sacked just because they had a wages issue. This is about him being paid the adult wage — the bosses are now saying his work’s no good, but he hasn’t had any warnings or anything like that.’

We (the lab staff) went back out to the car park and we waited half an hour, and lo and behold, up the path comes all the Vietnamese workers. They joined us. The company, solved it the next day and the union got delegates in the whole production line. Something like this is just so heartening for a union official, but also for the people on the job because it should show them they had an outlook that was just wrong.

Just because people are quiet or can’t verbalise or English is a second language, doesn’t mean that they can’t analyse, they can’t think and then make a decision. That was my introduction. I thought, ‘Geez, how good is this?’ And, you know, it’s been proven so many times that people will judge the issues and 9 times out of 10 they will make the right decision. If you’ve got a crowd in front of you and you’ve made the wrong decision, they usually tell you, too. I’ve had that happen to me.

*Q: Moving on to politics do you still think the Unions are stopping a move to the Right?*

I still think that. My father worked for the BWIU, I am a lifetime member of United Voice and I purposefully joined the CFMEU because of my father, to contribute back because they gave us a living and all that. I believe the CFMEU is a militant union in an industry that's very, very hard. The builders push as far as they can to make profit; it has got the second-most deaths in any industry, after transport, and the second most number of injuries after manufacturing.

It's a very hard industry; there's sham contracting, under-payments, there are non-union (really anti-union) contractors. There are a whole lot of nasty things. The union could either be militant or just let things go. The CFMEU has chosen, and rightly so, to be militant. I do not believe that, at the moment, the ALP is doing enough to defend unions, specially the CFMEU, to the Royal Commission.<sup>2</sup>

The Royal Commission is an attack on all unions, and is using the CFMEU to spearhead that attack and say it's an outlaw organisation. I do not believe that. I know the people personally involved in running that union here and nationally. I know there's a few rotten eggs that's been weeded out, but that union is doing its very best to defend the wages and conditions, and the future wages and conditions, of

its members and the social wages and conditions.

I believe the ALP should come out and say that the CFMEU categorically is not a rogue union but that it is part of our heritage in the ALP. It will continue to be looked at fondly and defended against this political assassination by Abbott & Co that's been going on for two years and costing our society \$80m. There's nothing new about such an attack from the conservatives — it seems to happen every ten years in the building industry, the Cole Royal Commission, the Finch Royal Commission, and now this one.

If the ALP do not defend the union movement, they will pay in the long run. Moving to the right will not attract voters. If you look at the social wage, if you look at social conditions, they will not be defended by moving further towards the Liberal Party. If you want free Health, if you want free Education, if you want Public Housing to be available for all, then you must carve that position out and say how you're going to afford it.

It's the same with the NDIS, the same with Medicare. You must defend it. You can't just say, 'Oh, it's cost us money'. If it's a social good, then it's worth affording, and that's where I think the ALP is going wrong. If you do not carve out that difference, then the voters and the general populace won't see any difference between the ALP and Liberals. I think that the

Union Movement can be a beacon for the ALP to say what they're doing.

*Are there other areas where Labor is going right?*

The other instance of where the ALP is going wrong is in free trade versus fair trade. The CFMEU and other unions have been protesting about the proposition that workers could be brought in at pay rates lower than Australian rates; and brought in when unemployment is rife within Australia. It is not wrong to defend good wages and jobs for Australian people. Again, I think the ALP has not done enough to defend them.

The ALP should have said, we're after fair trade, not free trade. We're after building a society here for the people that live here, and if that means regulating free trade with other nations, so be it. Labor should argue on the basis of what best protects the interests of this country and best protects our interests as an international citizen. We live in a global environment. We must operate as such, but we cannot be victims of trading jobs to low-wage countries. I want the living standards of China to come up to Australia's standards. I want our standards in relation to social ways to come up to the Scandinavian countries — and I want the Scandinavian countries to go up, too.

That's, I was always taught, what internationalism is. It is to advance the

living standards of all in this world, and that's what unions, I was taught, are all about. I think the same principles flow through to the political party. The ALP must be differentiate itself from the liberals and conservatives. The Liberal and National coalition (the LNP in Queensland) rules on the basis of industry and business. That might be a simplistic approach but I think history and what they are doing now shows it.

That's where I approach unionism from and why unions are attacked so hard and so fast in this society. Basically, capitalist societies are run like businesses. It's cost-orientated. Thus, the present attack on penalty rates is a simplistic view that if you decrease workers' wages, then business will thrive and jobs will flow — that is just economic nonsense. Instead, cutting wages means total purchasing power will go down. Business will suffer and employment will suffer. Unions can be a civilising organisation of society, and should connect themselves to a political party that can deliver on these promises. If the party doesn't or won't deliver on those promises you must fight them to do that.

You must fight the party to make them do the things the unions want. We've lost free University education — which we had in my time. We might well be losing Medicare. Some of this is because the the political wing didn't stand up. They did not stand up. The people of Australia would have supported them if they did.



*Union officials Peter Hindle, Ron Monaghan (General Secretary QCU), Ged Kearney (President ACTU) and Les Moffit visited Palm Island as part of the stolen wages campaign. Pictured here with Paul Ahwang. Photo courtesy PI Voice Feb 2015*

*What's happened within the ALP for right wing ideas to get such purchase?*

I'll look at the ALP and ask whether they share our views totally? I'm a Life Member of the ALP. I will always be a member of the ALP, but there has always been a struggle. I was taught by my elders that there will always be a struggle in society and you should look at, the lefts and rights of the big ideas, and make up your mind what side you're on, and what side you push.

Looking at the struggle between the Left and Right, there'll always be a push by the employers and the other side for unions to be responsible and flexible. Now, again, you have to make up your mind what that means. As far as I'm concerned, unions are there to defend and increase the benefits that workers get have in their wages and their social wage.

I think that's the struggle within the ALP and, at times, within the union movement itself. It will always be there. There are right and left unions. The Royal Commission has, I think, thrown up and shown up the treatment workers and union members get when there are tame cat unions.

A union that loses sight of the struggle will start to believe it can get what it wants by by cooperation with people and employers that are really their opposites. I think such approaches are doomed to failure in the long run. Look at it it this way. The CFMEU has increased membership every year over the last five years. They have been attacked mercilessly in the press. They've been attacked at the Royal Commission, but their members will not let go of them. Why? They have gauged where their interests lie, and

they have gauged what they're going to support. I would say exactly the truth is on the other side of the picture.

If unions do deals on penalty rates, if unions do deals that are against the interests of members, they (and unfortunately their members) will pay in the long run. I make no aspersions on any unions on that, but I believe it to be true. The bosses who are attacking the CFMEU, those who are appearing at the Royal Commission are those who wanted to pay lesser rates, and weren't allowed to do so.

*Q Much of the limited growth in union membership over the last 20 year has been in 'white collar' areas and unions outside the ALP. How do you deal with having a number of large unions outside the ALP; Teachers and Nurses being obvious examples?.*

It is a very good and very big question and the answer is multi-factored. One of the major things — though not enough to explain everything, is that Australian society has changed from a manufacturing base to a services base. Manufacturing was always very, very well unionised, so the unionised blue-collar sector of society has shrunk. The private sector has lost manufacturing, especially the big manufacturing. It is a lot easier to organise a big factory than a place of two or three employees.

What has been the non-unionised sector has grown. Another factor is that some big unaffiliated unions, the

white-collar unions, have grown — Health Unions especially. They are heavily public sector, which has twice to three times the unionisation rate of the private sector. This was partly a result of Labour because when it was in government, it always encouraged unionism

The shift to enterprise bargaining is another big factor. I believe we made a mistake in relation to going to enterprise bargaining. We had an award system. We had award pushers, such as the Metal Trades Award, where unions like the AMWU could make gains that could then be flowed on through the award system to the rest of the workforce. Kelty argued for enterprise bargaining. When the Federal Industrial Relations Commission said you aren't mature enough to go to enterprise bargaining, Kelty said we "wouldn't eat the Commission's vomit" — his famous words.

Well, we got what we wished, and what that did was to fragment bargaining. Moreover, we didn't have the resources to do it. I'll go back to the CFMEU as an example. Say a building site that might have 500 people on it. Nowadays, the prime contractor on that site has no employees, not one, and there will probably be 100 sub-contractors. For example, there might be five plastering contractors, and they might have five EBs. Almost automatically there will be a fight for the union to get one set of rates for the whole site. This will set the the building watchdog will then

attack the CFMEU. Before enterprise bargaining, there was the building trades awards and site allowances (over-awards) negotiated between the union and the prime contractor.

Enterprise Bargaining should be, at the very best, at the industry level. At the very worst in construction, it should be at the building site level, where the agreement was with the prime contractor who had to pay the rates.

This is not just in construction — it is all sectors and industries. I think we made a tactical mistake and we are paying for it' plus, our resources aren't big enough. We work in industries and the old test of 'ability to pay' was that if a company could not pay the going or industry rate, it needed to get out of the industry. That was the mantra going right back to Dickens.

*What about measures to encourage union membership*

I've always been for closed shops. If there is enterprise bargaining by a union in a workplace, everybody that works there gets the rates and the benefits. People who are getting the rates should pay something towards the bargaining. I think a bargaining fee was the way to go. Everyone on a site that's bargained for, should pay for the union. They do not have to join the union, but should pay a fee to the union that's basically equivalent to the union fee.

We buggered that up. I think that should have been pushed by the ALP a whole

lot more. We also made a blue when some unions tried to charge twice the union fee as a bargaining fee. It was a blue. We should have charged the same rate. Arch Bevis made a good speech in Parliament in defence of bargaining fees, and I think was on the right track. Again, the Party should have stuck to it. It should have been policy, because if a union can close the shop, it has resources to go and organise and bargain elsewhere. What we have now is that those who want to can say 'Oh, I'll get the rates, anyway.' and freeload off the efforts of others.

Instead, in some places we are getting competition between unions to cut rates. At Curtis Island there was a deal done with the AWU which the employer chose instead of dealing with the the CFMEU. Yet all the workers the members joined the CFMEU, despite who was signatory to the enterprise agreement. They stuck to the CFMEU as well because they knew the agreement could be better. Even so, I think the bargaining system itself should be looked at closely by the ALP along with the unions. It needs serious reform. It is not a system that suits where we in Australia in 2016.

*What if the ALP leadership says, 'But enterprise bargaining was done with the ACTU.'*

Yes, and that's true; but. I'm not on my own in thinking that Enterprise Bargaining has been a tactical mistake by the union movement. You can't go

back to just an award system and it would take a lot of thought to work out what should replace enterprise bargaining. It has fragmented our union forces. The places that always had over-award payments have got the best EBs. So, we've got the elite of the union movement, which is great. They should have good wages and conditions — but we always had it. What we did was fragment the bottom end.

*Is there's a growing feeling among the Union leadership about that?*

I think there's a groundswell. Enterprise bargaining has not increased union membership. We're holding our absolute numbers, but percentage-wise we're on the decline. Now, we're still the biggest social movement in Australia, with over 2m people that belong to it, and are very influential, but that can't last — look at the the American system with 7 per cent or something of people belonging to a Union.

We no longer get the industry pushers to raise the rates. We lost the consciousness of why that's important and we are not educating people for those industry pushers. The Metal Trades unions and members, for instance, were very educated. The campaigns and the education material were very well thought out and supported by magazines and a lot of information. There were a lot of ABS stats showing where wages were, where they should be, where

we were nationally, where we were internationally, and we explained to the workforce why we should go there.

This does not happen now with enterprise bargaining. The arguments are at particular sites and mainly about that site. For example, at Dulux Paints, there are now different rates at the different factories round Australia. They do not even have a common rate; yet when we had an award, we had an industry rate plus an over-award for the paint industry. I remember sitting there with all the paint companies, all the paint companies in Australia, and we got a rate of pay struck whether or not we had to go to industrial action. That pay rate applied to all factories. All that went with enterprise bargaining, We still had good wages because it was a militant industry. But, it split factories; it split workers.

*You were the QCU secretary for the Bligh Government, the Newman Government, and the Palaszczuk Government. Why is the QCU important?*

Because it can get the movement together. When Bligh started the privatisations, I was approached and asked whether the QCU would run an anti privatisation campaign. I took the proposal to the Executive, because you can't do anything without the Executive. I knew that the Premier had a lot of support. She was a very popular Premier and the Treasurer was banging on about where the debt would go and

how we'd all be ruined So I took it to the Executive and it was principally supported by the unions that were directly in the gun, the RTBU, the ETU, the AMWU, the Services Union and the AFLUE. But, the Executive unanimously supported a campaign of anti-privatisation against the sitting Labor Government.

It was a big step that would make a lot of trouble with the Party. Despite that, the QCU Unions did it and I think it is part of what lost them the election so badly. Now, we did that unashamedly. I put that we keep the campaign going to the Executive five separate times. Each time they were in for keeping going. We ran ads, we letter-boxed, we interviewed, and we got on radio. The ads had a dynamic to it that I think hit home. We had a grandfather and granddaughter asking about who owns the railways, and then there was a hesitation. It just demonstrated that what we were selling off was OUR assets.

It was bittersweet. The alternative was to lie down and try to get a Labor Government back in that that was not representing the interests of the union movement. Instead, we stood on our dig. I'm very proud of the QCU and the unions there. We stood on our dig and we were blamed. There were people who set out to split the Left of the union movement about it, and I had words with them. I said, 'I don't care what you do, we're going ahead.' I tested it every time on the Executive.

The QCU and the Unions were solid and the ALP was out of step. We ran the campaign for two years.

*What then?*

After the 2012 election, the QCU was in the wilderness with one of the worst Governments Queensland had ever seen, even counting Bjelke-Petersen. Newman then started on privatisation. We ran another three year campaign against privatisation. Then we got the Bokie Laws where if you were a licensed electrician or licensed plumber and were drinking a beer with two others, you could lose your licence and your right to work in the industry.

We went and saw Bleijie about that — he laughed at us and said to us, 'Go to buggery', and he wouldn't change. Then he attacked the Workers Compensation system and we forged an alliance with the lawyers about common law damages. Then he attacked the CMC. We worked with academics on that. He attacked the doctors in relation to that. We worked with the doctors .

We campaigned, we put money there, and, after three years, we won it back. People say that the Palaszczuk opposition had to support the unions because they were only seven. That's not so. They were fully supportive of what we were doing and Anastacia Palaszczuk said that the privatisation was a mistake and apologised, and got us back on track. I think that the QCU was instrumental in that because the ALP parliamentary caucus was so

small, the unions had to be united, and they had to bring the party back to the industrial wing and the people back to the party..

Now, that was a lot of work, because unions are disparate politically; they are disparate industrially. There's white and there's blue, there's in between. There is a mixture, but they stuck, and one of the ways they stuck is round the Executive table of the QCU. There was a common will to get the political wing back to delivering to the industrial wing and the people of Queensland. That common will of the unions on the Executive was never wavering. It wasn't wavering from the first start of the anti-privatisation to the end when Labor got back into government. The relevance of having a peak body is there, albeit you get 30 secretaries of very independent nature round the table, 30 egos, and it's pretty hard, but you must do it.

They all saw the need to campaign, to take on privatisation first against the ALP and then against the LNP. And, to take on the other issues. The Executive members were very forthright in their opinions, but that's the nature of the beast. Yet I'm very happy that they did it because I don't think it has been done before in Queensland history. We went, in 2012, from the biggest defeat the ALP has ever had anywhere in Australia, to a win and return to Government three years later. The QCU really proved its worth.

## Notes

- 1 The *Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union* (FMWU), or Missos, amalgamated in 1992 with the *Liquor Trades Union* to form the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union (LHMU). It was renamed *United Voice* in 2001.
- 2 Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption, (Justice Heydon) established by the Abbott Government in 2014.

## Assistance Wanted - Meat Workers Union

Labour historian and BLHA member Jeff Rickertt is writing a history of the Queensland branch of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union (AMIEU). He is keen to hear from anyone who owns documents and photos that might assist the project. He also wants to interview current and retired members and officials about their union experiences. If you have information and stories to share, Jeff can be contacted on 0421 637 172 or by email at [jrickertt@optusnet.com.au](mailto:jrickertt@optusnet.com.au).



*AMIEU Picket Line, TA Fields Meatworks, Early 1980s  
(Source: Jim Sharp & Ted Riethmuller)*

# **Challenging the Groupers: The NSW Shop Assistants' Union in the 1970s**

**Duncan Hart**

Within the labour movement today the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) is seen as a bastion of conservatism, both industrially and politically. Leading figures in the modern SDA, such as state secretaries-turned-senators Joe Bullock and Chris Ketter, or national president Joe de Bruyn, are practically by-words for reaction and venality within the union movement.<sup>1</sup> Explaining how this political outlook came to be is an important task confronting labour historians, given the importance the SDA now has in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and union movement as Australia's largest private sector union.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the SDA and its predecessor unions remains to be written. Nonetheless, even in living memory important disputes have flared within the SDA which represented turning points for the union that help, in at least some way, to explain the situation of the union today.

The case this article will examine is that of the NSW branch of the SDA

under the leadership of Barry Egan, who was state secretary from 1970 until 1979 and national secretary from 1970 until 1978. During this period, the SDA was split nationally between pro- and anti-Egan forces, with the resultant triumph of the "Groupers" led by Jim Maher and Joe de Bruyn laying the basis for the union as it exists today. Despite Egan and his opponents having similar ideological underpinnings and backgrounds, through the course of the years-long contest, crucial questions about what kind of union the SDA would be were posed: the bitter fruits of which continue to plague retail workers today.

Barry Egan's ascension to the position of secretary of the New South Wales branch of the SDA, and then quickly to that of national secretary, points to his similar political outlook with other branches of the union. At the time of the 1970s, the union's various branches were all dominated by a conservative right wing agenda, with varying degrees of influence from the National Civic Council (NCC). Egan himself testifies to this and described the politics of the NSW branch as "middle of the road right wing ALP."<sup>3</sup> Egan even attended some meetings held by the National Civic Council and describes listening to speeches by B.A. Santamaria, founder of the NCC, early in his tenure as national secretary.<sup>4</sup> Articles in *The Australian* and *The Age* remarked on the irony of his career, as he had been in upper-level management

at Walton's department stores prior to taking on the job of organiser in the union in 1968.<sup>5</sup> Given this, there seems to have been little to hint at Egan's future confrontation with the union.

What seems to have drawn Egan and other branch leaderships into conflict was Egan's ambition for the union he had come to lead. He saw himself as a "modern union leader", looking towards an expanded rather than limited role, for unions.<sup>6</sup> Egan's SDA, for instance, was the first in Australia to create a union-run superannuation fund, to employ research officers, and undertake other welfare projects for members — even cooperative housing for a time.<sup>7</sup> In this Egan saw himself "diametrically opposed" to the NCC, which he argued subordinated the members to its own political agenda.<sup>8</sup> Egan was not neutral to politics but he saw himself as a "moderate" between the two wings of the labour movement, and his decisions during his term of leadership also lent itself to the formation of a "centre faction" in the NSW Labor Party.<sup>9</sup>

In his first few years as leader from 1969 to 1971 the NSW SDA was able to grow from a more or less moribund organisation of only 5,000 members to become the largest branch of the union, growing by 10,000 members a year.<sup>10</sup> While Egan argued that this was done through voluntary membership drives, he was also instrumental in the creation of the National Membership

Agreement (NMA) signed on 17 March 1971.<sup>11</sup> This agreement, contracted primarily between the SDA and Federated Clerks' Union, and the six largest retailers at the time, provided for compulsory union membership for all employees.<sup>12</sup> This agreement involved dues being collected by the company on behalf of the SDA which were paid quarterly, and this dramatically increased membership for the SDA nationally. Even the official history of the SDA Victorian branch — which puts forward an extremely antagonistic perspective in relation to Egan — describes the NMA as "the most momentous development in the history of the union."<sup>13</sup> Within a few years it saw the membership of the SDA leap to 56,000 in NSW and rise from 8,000 to 20,000 in Victoria by 1975. Whereas the SDA's official history offers no explanation for why this deal would be signed (saying "why the big retailers signed the agreement is not clear"<sup>14</sup>), others have argued that it was clearly entered into by the employers out of fear that the relatively weak and conservative shop assistants' union would be unable to resist competition from unions like the Storemen and Packers or Miscellaneous Workers' Union, all of whom could have caused headaches for the bosses. Giving the SDA compulsory coverage would make it difficult for competitor unions to enter the industry.<sup>15</sup> The signing of the membership agreement very much shaped the future of the union, as it has been maintained more or less

to this day despite it no longer being compulsory for workers to be members of the union. This now leaves the SDA as Australia's largest private sector union, with around 230,000 members.<sup>16</sup> The power that the agreement gave the employers over the union would also have fateful consequences for the struggle between Egan and the national leadership, which we shall see later.

The turning point in the relationship of the NSW branch and the rest of the SDA was the decision of Egan to merge his branch of the union with the Australian Workers Union (AWU) NSW branch in August 1974.<sup>17</sup> This merger had some organisational payoff for AWU and SDA members in NSW. The two unions remained distinct, united only at the top and with some sharing of resources. The greater ramifications were political. The merger fitted with Egan's own political ideas of political "centrism" between left and right in the union movement. The AWU, while also not a militant union by any stretch of the imagination, had been one of the most hostile opponents of the Industrial Groups (Groupers) and the Catholic Social Movement which had come to dominate those organisations during the split in the ALP in the 1950's.<sup>18</sup> The NCC was the organisational successor of the Catholic Social Movement, led by the same figure, Bartholomew August Santamaria.<sup>19</sup> On 19 October 1974, at a meeting of the national council of the SDA, Brian Harradine, who was at the time secretary of the shop assistants'

union in Tasmania (and a handful of similarly conservative unions at the same time) moved to expel Egan from his position of national secretary for "an error on a balance sheet."<sup>20</sup> The national council passed this motion in the absence of the NSW delegates, who had left the meeting in the face of refusal by the national council to countenance a motion put forward by the NSW branch for a rank and file ballot for national office bearers.<sup>21</sup> In response, the NSW branch organised a stop-work meeting of shop assistants in Sydney and Wollongong from 9am until midday on 5 November 1974, to report to members "on attempts by other branches [of the SDA] to remove Mr Egan as national secretary of the Union and to take over the affairs of the N.S.W. branch."<sup>22</sup> At this meeting, Egan sheeted the blame for this clearly and publicly at "extreme right-wing elements in the trade union movement, the base of these elements being in the NCC of B.A. Santamaria."<sup>23</sup> The merger between the SDA and AWU in NSW was the clear rupture, when all-out war was declared between the NSW branch and the federal organisation, led by the Victorian and Tasmanian branches.

This declaration of "war" reflected, and reinforced, a divergence of industrial strategy between the NSW SDA and other branches of the union. Prior to the merger with the AWU being announced for instance, the SDA NSW branch had put forward an incredibly maximal

log of claims in March 1974, pushing for rights and conditions for workers which today read like a fairy tale. These included a 35 hour week, adult pay from 18 years of age, double time for nights and Saturdays and double time and a half for Sundays, as well as casual loading of 33 per cent and even a loading for part timers of 25 per cent.<sup>24</sup> This was on top of a demand for a \$124 a week wage, which after taking inflation into account equates to \$950 in 2014 prices according to the Reserve Bank's inflation calculator.<sup>25</sup> While not achieving the full sweep of these extensive demands, the NSW SDA led a 24 hour strike of shop assistants which saw 6,000 rally across the state.<sup>26</sup> They won an increase in weekly pay to \$100 a week, an increase of 26% on the previous year, and an increase in paid annual leave from three to four weeks. This award rate remains higher, taking into account inflation, than the current General Retail Award: \$766 a week in 1974 compared to \$722 today.<sup>27</sup>

The union journal, *Voice*, also began to feature reports on strikes of retail workers from 1975 onwards; almost every edition reported on strikes at one workplace or another. Quite bitter disputes seem to have raged at Wollongong, where the union movement generally was quite strong. The March 1975 edition of *Voice* reported on the case of seven members of the SDA who were involved in the picketing of Conspiracy Boutique, which had sacked the workers due to

their involvement with the union. The strike and picketing saw solidarity from other unionists who saw the issue of defending the right to unionise as a principle, and on 14 November 1974, strikebreakers trying to cross the picket assaulted the picketers. Bob Dunn, of the Federated Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Union, was struck a heavy blow across his skull by a metal bar, apparently fending off an assault upon Irene Sanaghan, an organiser with the SDA. This precipitated a city-wide general strike, which saw 10,000 workers march in support of the fired workers, including 2,000 Wollongong shop assistants, on 19 November. Conspiracy Boutique was forced to close its doors, to be replaced by a "union-friendly" employer that rehired the sacked workers.<sup>28</sup> Wollongong also saw a two month strike of Coles and Woolworths workers in September and October of 1975, defending the right of union delegates to attend to their duties in company time — the longest strike in the history of the union.<sup>29</sup> These are just a few of the strikes reported. All were given favourable coverage and signified that the union, while hardly embracing militancy, saw positives in encouraging strike action and generalising such examples to the broader membership. This view contrasts starkly with that of the SDA's Victorian branch leadership, whose current secretary, Michael Donovan, believes that the SDA "has never sought to be confrontationalist in its approach."<sup>30</sup>

From 1975, alongside positive reporting on industrial disputes, *Voice* began to run more broadly “progressive” political articles on topics outside the immediate concerns of retail workers, as well as a number of scathing attacks on the NCC. These articles included assessments about the growing power of multinational corporations,<sup>31</sup> and the necessity of “industrial democracy” “for transforming an authoritarian and undemocratic economic system in the hands of a few... into a system in which workers, through their unions, will participate”.<sup>32</sup> The NCC was castigated as a “right wing extremist” organisation patronised by employers and politicians, and almost certainly funded by the CIA, designed to infiltrate and destroy the union movement.<sup>33</sup> Egan in his editorial also called for rank and file election of federal officials, which seems to have been an issue of some tension given it led to the walk out of NSW delegates at the national council meeting which sacked Egan in 1974. At the heart of the matter was an effort by Egan to see the strength of his branch reflected in a concomitant influence in the national organisation. The NSW branch was by far the largest branch at this time, with 60,000 of the union’s 140,000 members, but representation of the union’s national council heavily favoured smaller branches like Tasmania who had half the delegates of NSW despite having only five per cent as many members.<sup>34</sup>

Thus while Egan and the NSW branch generally did not come from a particularly different political viewpoint to the rest of the union nationally, in the process of the struggle between Egan and the others there does seem to have been some *differentiation*, revealing that Egan and his opponents were on different trajectories.

Besides rallying his own members to back him, as was his clear priority, Egan also appealed against his sacking as national secretary at the October 1974 meeting of the SDA’s national council in the courts, and was reinstated by the Federal Court on 3 September, 1975.<sup>35</sup> He was also instrumental in leaking information to the media that clearly proved Brian Harradine was a member of the NCC, leading to his expulsion from the ALP, thus avenging himself on the key figure who had attempted to have him ousted.<sup>36</sup> Despite this victory, continued legal battles raged. In a judgement of September 9, 1977, the Federal Court ordered elections in all branches of the union, besides NSW and Victoria (who had either just had, or were about to have, elections), in order that a new national secretary might be elected. Egan’s supporters were all elected in NSW, where 20,000 members voted.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, Egan helped sponsor opposition groups to contest the incumbents. In Queensland, Senator George Georges stated his intention to stand against the branch leadership, but withdrew his nomination after the union threatened

disaffiliation from the ALP.<sup>38</sup> In Victoria, the “Team for a Better Union”, coordinated by Mary Alexander (now Easson), received one third of the vote. Alexander herself received 40%, standing against Jim Maher for state secretary.<sup>39</sup> Despite clearly retaining the support of his NSW base, Egan was not able to build up sufficient support nationally to change the balance in his favour on the national council.

By now, the ground was beginning to fall out from under Egan’s feet. In early 1977 he and the AWU had been approached by officials of the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU), to discuss the potential to merge. The BWIU was controlled by left-wing officials from the pro-Moscow Socialist Party, but who were in competition with the far more militant Builders’ Labourers’ Federation (BLF) at the time. The BWIU, according to Egan, hoped that by merging with the AWU they could strengthen their forces in the construction industry as against the BLF.<sup>40</sup> Egan, for his part, argued in *Voice* that the BWIU, AWU and NSW SDA had a similar interest in industrial peace in the construction industry, and that furthermore the merger would retain the independence of the affiliated unions, as had happened with the AWU-SDA merger.<sup>41</sup> No doubt also at play would have been his desire to continue to build a “moderate centre” in the union movement, though he never puts this forward explicitly.

Despite these facts, for the rabidly anti-communist NCC this was seen as disastrous. Even today the official SDA history paints Egan as practically a revolutionary socialist, who favoured “political strikes and union militancy”, and was tarnishing the good name of the “responsible” SDA “with his undemocratic and megalomaniac behaviour.”<sup>42</sup> What mattered in a very concrete way for the NSW branch was that two senior figures in Egan’s leadership defected, Don Robertson (father of John Robertson, recent NSW Labor Party leader) and Brian O’Neill.<sup>43</sup> O’Neill leaked the proposal of the merger to the media in August, prior to any discussions among members. His betrayal enabled the national SDA to set up a parallel union structure in NSW with which to compete with the NSW SDA branch.<sup>44</sup>

While the official SDA history speaks of a “membership revolt” in NSW, which saw for instance a meeting of over one thousand shop assistants called by O’Neill’s breakaway union vote against the proposed merger, Egan tells a different story.<sup>45</sup> What actually determined the contest was the six major employers, whose compulsory union arrangement had provided such strength to the SDA, being convinced by Jim Maher, Victorian Secretary as well as national president of the union, that the BWIU-SDA merger represented a threat.<sup>46</sup> Almost overnight, workers at Woolworths, Coles, and the other major retailers

found that their union dues were being sent by the company not to the NSW SDA led by Egan but the breakaway union led by O'Neill. This meant that after just one month, in September 1977, fully half of the union's membership had been "marched out of the union",<sup>47</sup> as Egan described it.<sup>48</sup> The NCC dominated the state branches of Victoria and Tasmania and sent an army of their organisers into NSW to try to sign people up to the breakaway union, coordinated by Joe de Bruyn, who became national secretary in 1978 at the meeting of the newly elected national council.<sup>49</sup> Of note for those familiar with his subsequent history as a highly conservative writer in the *Australian*, Greg Sheridan was one of the organisers recruited specifically for the task of undermining the SDA NSW branch during this period.<sup>50</sup> Even with a blitzkrieg of this magnitude, Egan held on for three more years, until 5,000 members remained in his union and the breakaway union led by O'Neill achieved recognition at the NSW Labour Council.<sup>51</sup> The final nail in the coffin was the victory of the legal challenge brought by the federal leadership of the SDA against the SDA-AWU merger that had happened in NSW, which found that it was an invalid merger due to the lack of proper paperwork.<sup>52</sup> This meant that Egan's union lacked legal standing to claim to speak for NSW shop assistants in relation to the state award. Unrecognised by the major employers, who refused to deduct union dues and

who victimised those who remained loyal to the Egan-led union, and without legal standing, Egan's NSW SDA was wound up in 1981, thus ending a turbulent decade for the SDA.

The significance to be drawn out of this period for unionists today is multifaceted. On one hand, Egan was not a radical, and his opposition to the NCC and the federal leadership of the SDA developed over a number of years as it became clear he had an ambitious agenda for the union, and wanted to bring it to a more politically centrist position in the union movement. Nonetheless, clear lines of demarcation emerged in the willingness of the NSW SDA to take industrial action, winning conditions and pay that have not been exceeded since, over 40 years later. This remains of note, even if it is just to counter the widespread idea, peddled by the SDA today, that strikes are impossible and without any success. The scope of political discussion played out in the pages of *Voice*, on such topics as the history of the union or multinational corporations, are also far in advance of the calibre of discussion of other SDA branch journals at the time or since.<sup>53</sup> Also of incredible importance was the weakness of the union in the face of sustained employer hostility once compulsory unionism was applied. While Egan holding on for a number of years shows that some rank and file organisation must have been built that could collect dues independently

of the employers, there was clearly a dependency. And the current SDA leadership, who defeated Egan on the basis of collusion with the employers, remain dependent on that relationship, even though the NMA expired in 1991. The defeat of Egan was formative for the SDA in its current incarnation — reliant on the big retail employers, making deals with companies in order to get access to the members, all the while using the influence such large numbers provide within the ALP to push a right-wing, conservative agenda that has not changed much since the days of the NCC.

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## **Trade Unions and the Indigenous Stolen Wages Campaign: the Queensland Nurses Union**

**Ruby Ludski**

The primary jurisdiction of a trade union is to campaign for and obtain better conditions for the workers it represents. However, unions have also become involved in disputes which do not fall within this traditional role. The trade union movement has developed an interest in social justice issues beyond those that directly affect its members. An early example of this is the Green Bans undertaken by the Builders' Labourers' Federation in the early 1970s. Trade unionist Jack Mundy, who coined the term 'Green Ban', described them as 'the withdrawal of labour for social or environmental reasons.'<sup>1</sup> Peak bodies such as the Queensland Council of Unions also lend their support to numerous social or environmental causes. Similarly, the Queensland Nurses' Union (QNU) have placed a notable focus on social justice issues. According to their website; 'The QNU has a firm commitment to facilitating action to achieve social change.'<sup>2</sup> This essay will investigate one example of this; the Queensland Nurses' Union's involvement with the Indigenous Stolen Wages campaign in the 2000s. The paper will explain how the QNU

came to be involved in the campaign, what it contributed and the outcome of its involvement.

The QNU was formed in 1982 as part of a reform of Queensland Nursing unionism. Separate councils were elected for the QNU and the Queensland branch of the Royal Australian Nursing Federation (RANF), formally separating the two organisations. The QNU held jurisdiction over state awards and the RANF over federal. The Union covers nurses and midwives working in the public or private sector including in aged care. Membership reaches throughout the state including regional and remote areas and the Torres Strait. By the QNU's own account, 'Nurses and midwives have a long and proud history of organisation on industrial, professional and environmental issues.'<sup>3</sup> One need only look into the catalogue of *The Queensland Nurse*, the Union's monthly magazine, for evidence of this. The magazines run articles on a number of issues including international awareness campaigns and charities.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, archived copies of its website demonstrate a focus on social campaigns. One notable example, from the early 2000s was their campaign to end the detention of children and separation of families under the federal government's asylum seeker policies.<sup>5</sup> Others include the 'Queensland is Not for Sale' campaign against privatisation and the recent 'Say Yes' campaign in favour of the Gillard Government's Carbon Tax.<sup>6</sup>

The QNU has a history of action on Indigenous issues. The most notable example is the 1985 campaign to achieve wage equality for Indigenous nurses. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 1980s, the Queensland government refused to fund award wages for its Indigenous employees.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Indigenous nurses continued to be paid considerably less than their non-Indigenous counterparts and were rarely awarded penalty rates.<sup>8</sup> The QNU began a campaign in late 1984 to force the Queensland government to pay Indigenous nurses award wages.<sup>9</sup> Union representatives lobbied Health Minister Brian Austin but it was a difficult campaign against the conservative Bjelke-Petersen government.<sup>10</sup> Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Pat Killoran was particularly resistant to the demands, citing budgetary restrictions as his main argument.<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bob Katter Jnr. was more responsive. Following initial lobbying efforts by the QNU, Katter warned, "If we were to persist in delaying the payment of award wages some very serious problems could arise."<sup>12</sup> Concern over costly industrial action led Katter to make assurances that award wages would be paid, although this success was limited.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the QNU's lobbying in 1984 the cabinet directed the treasury to provide the funds to bring Aboriginal nurses in Health Department hospitals to award wages.<sup>14</sup> However, this measure covered only seven hospitals and the nurses at the

twenty Aboriginal or Islander hospitals in North Queensland and the Torres Strait did not share in the success.<sup>15</sup> Having this history of awareness and responsiveness to Indigenous issues, particularly those related to wages and equality, sheds light on the QNU's willingness to become involved with the Stolen Wages campaign even though that campaign did not directly affect its members.

The Stolen Wages Case was a campaign by Indigenous workers, primarily in the pastoral industry, and their descendants to receive compensation from the Queensland government for wages withheld and misappropriated between 1897 and 1972.<sup>16</sup> During this period, Aboriginal people were not paid their wages directly. Instead, the majority of their wages were paid to a Government Protector to be held in trust, with a smaller percentage going to the Station Masters to be handed out as 'pocket money'.<sup>17</sup> This process was intended to protect Aboriginal people from being exploited by their employers, although in practice it led to different forms of exploitation. Dr Ros Kidd, the leading historian in the area of Stolen Wages, estimates that during this 75 years approximately \$500 million was withheld, a figure which Labor Premier Peter Beattie did not dispute.<sup>18</sup> The Queensland government has been well aware of the Stolen Wages issue. Ruth Matchett, the Director General of the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs from 1990–1995, recalls a

number of proposals for how to use the money remaining in the trust funds and how best to compensate the Aboriginal community.<sup>19</sup> She claims that none of these proposals were acceptable to the government. In 1997 the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Secretariat (QAILSS) commenced research into these funds to determine how much was owed and whether there was sufficient evidence to commence legal proceedings.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, in early 2000, QAILSS began to seek negotiations with the State government.<sup>21</sup> The Beattie government was responsive to negotiation attempts but elected to table discussions until after the 2001 State election.<sup>22</sup>

On May 9 2002, the QAILSS negotiation team, comprised of representatives of the major Aboriginal organisations in Queensland, met with Beattie and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs Minister Judy Spence.<sup>23</sup> The previous year QAILSS had submitted a proposal of \$180 million in reparations and were optimistic of realising that figure.<sup>24</sup> However, as soon as the meeting commenced Beattie placed a \$55.6 million 'take it or leave it' offer on the table with no room for negotiations.<sup>25</sup> The reparations, known as the Indigenous Wages and Savings Reparations Scheme, were to be distributed in one off payments of between \$2000 and \$4000 to individuals who'd had their wages withheld.<sup>26</sup> Beattie acknowledged that this figure was far lower than what

had been stolen but considered that his offer was 'generous'.<sup>27</sup> Spence revealed that the government 'acted on the advice that no money had been systematically stolen', that the reparations were designed to 'alleviate the hurt in Aboriginal communities' and that they 'paid as much as the government could afford'.<sup>28</sup> The offer was initially accepted by negotiation leader 'Sugar' Ray Robinson although many in the team were disappointed.<sup>29</sup> Community response was mixed, with some believing the offer was 'too little, too late' and others believing it was the best that they could hope for.<sup>30</sup> It was later argued that the sum was insufficient and accepted without proper community consultation.<sup>31</sup> The Indigenous policy of the Beattie government generally has faced significant criticism because of its paternalism and lack of communication with the Indigenous community.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, the campaign was resumed to fight for higher rates of compensation and to include the descendants of affected individuals among those who were entitled to receive compensation.

During the early 2000s the QNU was already at odds with the Beattie Labor government over stalled enterprise bargaining negotiations. The heightened radicalism and discontent of its members in this period allowed the QNU to quickly become involved in the Stolen Wages case. The QNU entered into its fifth round of enterprise

bargaining in 2002, and in the same year the QNU launched the 'Nurses: Worth Looking After' campaign in order to alleviate the nursing shortage by 'rebuilding nursing as an attractive career option'.<sup>33</sup> The QNU argued that an increase in wages was essential in order to attract new people to the profession and warned that it was prepared to use strikes and work bans to achieve its objectives.<sup>34</sup> Engagement with the EB5 campaign was heavily encouraged in monthly magazine, *The Queensland Nurse*, with numerous dedicated articles in each issue during 2002 and 2003. The campaign involved work bans at roughly 100 hospitals as well as numerous strikes across the state.<sup>35</sup> Involvement in protest activities typically creates a sense of camaraderie which can be used to mobilise members for other protest activities.<sup>36</sup> This industrial action created a more radically mobilised membership, more willing and motivated to protest against the Queensland government. The QNU was disappointed by the outcome of the 2002 EB5 campaign and a substantial pay increase was not achieved until 2005.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the new agreement did not result in any real increase in nursing numbers.<sup>38</sup> This led to feelings of disenchantment and frustration towards the Beattie government. Similarly, the Stolen Wages campaign was unsatisfied by the outcome of their compensation negotiations. This tense relationship with the State Government created an atmosphere which made the QNU

more willing to become involved in campaigns against Government frugality such as the Stolen Wages campaign.

Throughout the Stolen Wages campaign the QNU was involved in many capacities. Prior to the Beattie government's offer, unions gave support to the campaign in the form of legal assistance for claimants. A string of successful legal cases prompted the government to offer the compensation, a move that caused 'a surge of support for Aboriginal workers in Queensland from unions and community groups across the country.'<sup>39</sup> The Queensland Council of Unions (QCU), the peak body representing many unions including the QNU, declared its support for the Stolen Wages campaign in 2002.<sup>40</sup> At a 2003 rally, QCU Secretary Grace Grace explained, 'it is a wage

justice issue, which is a union issue'.<sup>41</sup> The QNU provided a similar official endorsement. Support from the QNU provided a high level of legitimacy to the campaign because of the level of respect that the profession commands in Australian society. According to QNU research and policy developer, Liz Todhunter, "Because the community trusts and respects the profession when nurses speak out about an issue, the general public tends to listen".<sup>42</sup> Following the 2002 offer the QNU and the union movement as a whole became more vocal. At a 2003 rally, QNU Assistant Secretary Beth Mohle declared, "On all of the levels, on an industrial level, social justice level and on a health level, the Queensland Nurses' Union supports this campaign to see Stolen Wages properly paid to the Indigenous community of Queensland."<sup>43</sup> She argued "What the



Stolen Wages Rally, Brisbane (Photo: Dee Hunt 8/8/03)

*QCU President Grace Grace addresses QCU rally in support of the Stolen Wages campaign outside Old Parliament House in 2003n*

Queensland government is currently offering is insufficient to address this past injustice — surely this offer is not the action of a smart state or a fair state. We can, we must do better than the offer that is presently on the table.<sup>447</sup> At the rally, the Queensland Council of Unions launched a post card campaign to raise awareness of the Stolen Wages issue, which was supported by the QNU as well as numerous other unions. The QNU encouraged engagement with the campaign among its members through their newsletter and website.<sup>45</sup> Unions also participated by providing legal and political expertise and support to the campaign.<sup>46</sup> In order for affected people to claim the \$2000 or \$4000 offered by the government, the onus fell upon those people to provide documentary evidence to support their claims.<sup>47</sup> Union legal expertise was invaluable in supporting these claimants.

Despite the efforts of Indigenous communities and unions, the Stolen Wages campaign cannot be described as a success and is still ongoing. As of 2008, only \$22 million of the agreed upon \$55.6 million had been paid out.<sup>48</sup> According to critiques, this failed distribution of funds was due to several reasons: the burden of proof falling on the claimant; the cap on payments; and the stipulation that accepting a payment required the forfeiting of any right to claim further compensation.<sup>49</sup> The QNU has maintained an ongoing interest in the Stolen Wages campaign. A 2009 article in the Union's magazine

criticised the mechanisms in place for distributing the compensation and the decision regarding unspent moneys. By 2009, when the payment's had ended and much had not been claimed, the Bligh Labor government made the decision to begin a second round of payments to the sum of \$14.6 million with the remaining, \$21.1 million to be placed in a fund to support Indigenous education.<sup>50</sup> The QCU and the QNU have criticised this decision as it 'perpetuates the original injustice suffered by Indigenous workers and denies them the closure that Peter Beattie spoke of in 2002.'<sup>51</sup> As of 2014, the QCU continues to list the Stolen Wages Case as an active campaign although the QNU is no longer directly involved.

The QNU, however, remains active on social and Indigenous issues, some of them affecting its members and some relevant to the wider Indigenous community. The QNU has an interest in Indigenous health, including fighting to save jobs at The Torres Strait-Northern Peninsula Hospital and Health Service in Far North Queensland from the health cuts imposed by the Newman LNP government in 2013.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, several of their Indigenous members, including Beryl Meiklejohn and Dr Sally Goold have made significant academic contributions to Indigenous studies. Both academics have lectured in Indigenous health at Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University respectively. Beyond the

concerns of its membership base, the QNU displays an interest in the wider concerns of the Indigenous community, with its website and magazine featuring information about Indigenous health, wages and conditions.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, one of the key values on their website states, “The QNU respects the fact that indigenous Australians are the original owners of our land, and that reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is a vital goal”.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, on February 19, 2013 the QNU signed a pledge to give their resources and support to Indigenous people fighting for land rights.<sup>55</sup> These statements emphasise QNU’s ongoing commitment and support for Indigenous campaigns in Queensland.

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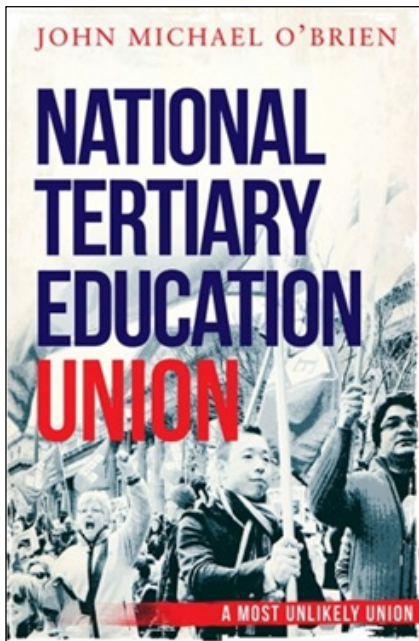
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*Review of*  
***National Tertiary Education  
Union: A Most Unlikely Union***

**by John Michael O'Brien,  
Sydney: UNSW Press, 2015  
(351 pp).**

review by John McCollow



The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is a union of some 28,000 members<sup>1</sup> formed in 1993. It represents academic, administrative, professional and general workers mainly in the Australian higher education sector. While it is the main union covering academic staff, it shares and competes

for coverage of the other categories of staff with a number of other unions (with the patterns of coverage and membership density varying significantly from state to state).

Union histories are unlikely to be best sellers and in many cases deservedly so. Especially where commissioned by the union itself, as is the case here, the result is too often so bloodless and dry that even the most enthusiastic union activist gives up a few chapters in. Numerous copies of such works are currently gathering dust in the storerooms of various unions. Further, that O'Brien's subject is a relatively recent, relatively small union<sup>2</sup> representing a group of relatively privileged public-sector, white-collar workers probably means that even amongst labour historians and industrial relations academics there will be a limited market for this book — which is a pity.

The first point to be made is that O'Brien writes well. Though there are occasional lapses in syntax and intelligibility, in the main O'Brien writes in a well-organised, easy to read, flowing style. Given the relative obscurity and/or complexity of some of the issues he deals with (particularly for readers with little background in Australian industrial relations or higher education), this is no small accomplishment.<sup>3</sup>

O'Brien claims that 'while the NTEU provided significant financial support' for his research, he 'maintained complete editorial control'.<sup>4</sup> While, as a former NTEU activist and honorary official, O'Brien is clearly sympathetic to the union, the text generally bears out his claim to have employed an 'analytical, rather than partisan'<sup>5</sup> approach.

Importantly, O'Brien actually has an interesting story to tell. The strategies and struggles of the NTEU to set itself up as a viable organisation and its management — successful and less than successful — of internal tensions arising from "essentialist" versus "pragmatic" notions of the nature of higher education, the differing histories and cultures of its predecessor organisations and of its various membership constituencies, and its ongoing handling of local versus centralised decision-making make thought-provoking reading. In relation to constituencies, O'Brien does not restrict himself to consideration of how the union dealt (and deals) with the differences between the agendas of academic and professional/administrative/general staff, but explores the differences that exist within these categories (e.g. between casual and tenured academic staff). Further, the book provides extended analyses of the union's relationship with its women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) members.

Although the NTEU is a young and small union, its emergence coincided with major changes both in the Australian industrial relations and higher education systems and, as such, its history provides a unique insight into these developments — and, on this basis, deserves a wide readership. As O'Brien states in his sub-title, the NTEU is in some ways an "unlikely union".<sup>6</sup> Certainly it would have been hard to predict its emergence even as late as the late 1980s<sup>7</sup>. But the sweeping Dawkins reforms in higher education, the neo-liberal higher education policies of subsequent Coalition and Labor governments, the push by the ACTU for industry unions, and the decentralisation of bargaining all created conditions which, on the one hand, were ripe for exploitation by those pursuing (what would become) an NTEU agenda, and, on the other hand, set the framework within which the new union would struggle to represent the interests of its members.

Specifically, the waves of higher education and industrial relations reforms made possible — but did not guarantee — the amalgamation and federal registration of five very disparate employee organisations<sup>8</sup>, the growth of the NTEU membership, and the emergence of the NTEU as a formidable negotiator and by far the

most important employee voice in higher education.

In terms of the amalgamation process, O'Brien describes the politicking and manoeuvring by key players to secure registration and head off not insignificant internal opposition — particularly within FAUSA, the largest predecessor organisation — but also external opposition from other unions. The inclusion of the tiny ANUAAOA in the amalgamation process might seem on first glance insignificant, but was, in fact, crucial, as it was the only partner who at the time of the registration application already had federal registration to represent non-academic staff.

Once, registration was gained, the NTEU successfully exploited its claim to be the only union representing both academic and general staff in higher education to recruit additional members. This is one aspect of O'Brien's treatment of the NTEU that I thought was deficient. I don't have the figures, and nor does O'Brien provide them, but I suspect the vast majority of the members recruited have come from other unions, not from the un-unionised workforce. A criticism of the NTEU from at least some unions is that it has been a concerted and unprincipled poacher of members. O'Brien cites examples where other higher education sector unions were their own worst enemy, pursuing strategies that alienated their

memberships and drove some of them into the arms of the NTEU. However, it appears that he starts from the proposition that the NTEU is where all higher education workers ought to be, rather than considering that there might be legitimate alternative views of the NTEU's behaviour in this area.<sup>9</sup>

O'Brien notes that the NTEU's 'often hard fought enterprise agreements reach more than 150,000 employees'<sup>10</sup> and certainly these agreements have a significant influence on life in Australian universities. On this basis, it can fairly be argued that the NTEU exercises power disproportionate to its size. O'Brien details the NTEU's approach to enterprise bargaining. In an era in which public sector wages and conditions have been under almost continual assault, and in circumstances where the Federal Government during the Howard years specifically tied university funding to a number of hard-line industrial provisions,<sup>11</sup> the strategies pursued by the NTEU can fairly be argued to have been amongst the most effective of all public sector unions. While, as in all areas of the public sector, there were losses, the highly disciplined approach to enterprise bargaining adopted by the NTEU not only "held the line" on a number of key conditions, but delivered some improvements in areas such as parental leave, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and employment security. Further, wages growth for university staff is at a higher

rate than for traditional comparator labour markets.<sup>12</sup>

As O'Brien shows, however, the NTEU's pursuit of its bargaining strategies was not without controversy, debate and drama and, as in all industrial campaigns, there were some significant casualties.

To his credit, O'Brien includes an examination of the NTEU's policy as well as its industrial work. He notes that the NTEU was formed just as the determination of higher education policy shifted from a relatively small integrated "policy community" of which higher education unions were a part,<sup>13</sup> to 'explicit state direction'.<sup>14</sup> Unlike in the industrial arena, where despite an increasingly hostile environment, the NTEU was able to assert itself and remain a significant force, in the policy arena the union voice was increasingly marginalised. Despite this, the NTEU continued to devote significant energy to policy work. O'Brien discusses, for example, the NTEU submissions to the West, Bradley and Lomax-Smith Inquiries and its engagement with issues such as the Research Quality Framework, institutional governance and academic/intellectual freedom. After some debate, the NTEU also decided to maintain publication of *The Australian Universities Review* — inherited from its predecessor organisation FAUSA — as a professional journal devoted to 'continued discussion and advocacy of

policy issues'.<sup>15</sup> For all that the NTEU has been excluded from the table of policy decision making, O'Brien notes that, unlike the higher education employers, it at least speaks with a collective voice.

Sometimes policy objectives complemented industrial objectives and could be pursued industrially. O'Brien cites the case of action taken at the University of Sydney in 2011 involving the use by the university to identify staff for redundancy using their Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) rankings — a ranking system which the NTEU saw as flawed. As in this case, however, most industrial action in relation to policy matters was post-hoc:

... the union had a limited capacity to resist major policy changes without significant allies holding similar views, [but] it was still possible to deal with some of the consequences of those developments in a bargaining context, or as part of an industrial campaign.<sup>16</sup>

Some issues created tensions between the policy position of the union and its industrial strategy. The most important example of this is university funding — a problem for higher education unions since before the formation of the NTEU. O'Brien describes, for example, how in the late 1980s the FCA (an NTEU predecessor then

representing academics in colleges of advanced education) maintained public opposition to the introduction of the higher education contribution scheme (HECS), but privately assured the ALP and ACTU that ‘if it was the only way the [higher education] system could be expanded, their opposition would be muted’.<sup>17</sup> Given that, in times of reduced government funding, increased private funding of higher education (mainly from students) is a precondition for the higher wage outcomes noted above, it is unsurprising that O’Brien concludes that, ‘while the unions never abandoned their formal opposition to student fees, the NTEU has tacitly supported HECS throughout its history’.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, O’Brien cites the NTEU’s recent ‘\$100,000 university degrees’ campaign as successfully ‘embedding the notion ... in public discourse’ and providing an alternative to the position of ‘most Vice-Chancellors [who] have embraced the deregulation of fees as the principal means of maintaining the overall financing of the sector’.<sup>19</sup>

While O’Brien alludes to various theories of industrial relations and higher education policy/practice in the age of neo-liberalism, he does not delve into these in any detail. Nevertheless, his book will be extremely valuable to theorists in these areas as it provides a detailed case study of how the complexities of neo-liberalism have played out for one organisation: the challenges faced, the strategic choices made, the struggles, the victories, the

defeats, the ambiguities. A rewarding read.

### **John McCollow**

(John McCollow, now retired, was a long-time research officer with the Queensland Teachers’ Union. As a sometime casual academic he was also a member of the NTEU. His PhD thesis was about FAUSA, one of the predecessor organisations of the NTEU.)

### **Notes**

- 1 This is the figure used by O’Brien, which is what also appears on the NTEU website and is a “rounded –up” figure to the nearest thousand of the 2014 membership. According to the 2015 NTEU Annual Report, membership for 2015 was 27, 153.
- 2 Even within the education sector, the NTEU is small. The Australian Education Union claims 185,000 members and the Independent Education Union claims 75,000 members. See their respective websites: <http://www.aefederal.org.au/>; <http://www.ieu.org.au/>.
- 3 He was also saddled with the proclivity of education sector for long and inelegant abbreviations, e.g. FCASCAE, HEWRR, DIISRTE, ANUAAOA; thankfully he provides a glossary.
- 4 P. 336.
- 5 P. 4.
- 6 Though I think the degree to which it is ‘a most unlikely union’ is debatable.
- 7 And it is worth remembering that there was no federally registered union to which higher education academics could be a member until late 1986. The Federated Australian University Staff Association (FAUSA) was registered in December of that year; the Union of Australian College Academics (UACA) was registered in February 1987 (these were two of the five NTEU predecessor organisations).

- 8 In addition to FAUSA and UACA, the other organisations were the Australian Colleges and Universities Staff Association (ACUSA), the Australian National University Administrative and Allied Officers' Association (ANUAAOA), and the University of Adelaide General Staff Association (UAGSA).
- 9 Indeed, the absence of “outsider” perspectives is a general weakness in the book. Almost all of those interviewed by O’Brien in his research are current/former NTEU (or predecessor organisations) officers or activists.
- 10 p. 288.
- 11 Through the Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements (HEWRRs).
- 12 See NTEU Annual Report, Cumulative Salary Increases by Sector, 2009 to 2017 (Chart) p. 9, <http://www.nteu.org.au/library/view/id/6525> (accessed 3 December 2015).
- 13 Prominent members of this policy community were the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC), the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC), and the Australian Committee of Directors and Principals (ACDP) of Colleges of Advanced Education. FAUSA and UACA were members, but of significantly less prominence.
- 14 P. 183.
- 15 P. 225.
- 16 P. 216.
- 17 P. 34.
- 18 Idem.
- 19 pp. 290–291.

*Review of*  
*Blood on the Coal*

Craig Buckley

In September last year, Members of the Brisbane Labour History Association were fortunate to enjoy a screening of *Blood on the Coal*, a documentary which traces the history of the mineworkers of Queensland and their union. The making of the film was funded by the membership of the CFMEU — Mining and Energy Division. The result is a wonderful example of working class history.

Narrated by the instantly-recognisable voice of Jack Thompson, the film records the development of coal mining in Queensland, the working conditions of miners, and their struggles both industrial and political. However, the events which feature most prominently in the documentary are a series of Queensland mining disasters: the mine explosions at Mt Mulligan (1921), Scottsville Mine at Collinsville (1954), Box Flat in Ipswich (1972), and a string of such disasters at Moura — in the Kiangra Mine (1975), No. 4 Mine (1986), and then in No. 2 Mine (1994).

The focus upon these tragic events surprised me a little at first, especially when some significant industrial struggles (such as the 1949 national coal strike) are dealt with in a more cursory fashion. Of course, in condensing such a rich and eventful history into 103



minutes of footage, choices have to be made about what to emphasise, what to include, and what to omit. It did not take me long to realise that the choices made by the makers of *Blood on the Coal* were well suited to the film's purpose.

In *Blood on the Coal*, the film-makers have chosen to identify the important role played by the close-knit mining communities of regional Queensland. The film portrays how the collective experience of mineworkers and their families — of economic hardship, of industrial struggle, and indeed, the devastating impact of underground mine disasters — shaped those communities, providing mineworkers with a source of shared understanding, support, and solidarity. Such portrayal in turn demonstrates the significance of the struggles with mining corporations and governments over issues such as housing for mineworkers, and the introduction of fly-in/fly out work arrangements. They can be seen as conscious attempts to undermine those communities, the collective spirit they

engender, and their support for their Union.

By far the best feature of *Blood on the Coal* is that it lets the workers themselves tell their story. It makes excellent use of first hand testimony from the men and women who worked (or still work) underground, and their families. They recount their lives in makeshift mining camps, working in dangerous environments, under oppressive conditions. They relate their experiences of corporate prioritization of profit over safety, and its consequences: the fires, the gas explosions, the rescue attempts, and the friends and family members who remain, to this day, buried in sealed up mines. The stories are sometimes humorous, sometimes sad and painful, but always moving. Perhaps ironically, amidst all this tragedy, it is a story about John Howard which manages to provide some comic relief.

*Blood on the Coal* is an important piece of labour history, and I hope those who have not seen it will have the opportunity to do so. For those interested in purchasing a copy, I understand it is available for sale from the CFMEU Mining Division. The DVD also contains some additional interviews and footage not included in the screen version.

Finally, I think that a union deciding to record its history (and its members' stories) in film is a commendable

development. It will be interesting to see whether this medium makes union history more accessible to workers, and whether other unions will follow suit.

More information about the film can be found at the following website: <http://bloodonthecoal.com/> . BLHA would also like to thank the CFMEU — Mining and Energy Division for kindly donating two copies of the DVD to the Brisbane Labour History Association. No doubt these will serve handsomely as raffle prizes at future BLHA events.

# In Memorium

## **William Fleming**

**contributed by  
Snow Heilbronn  
and Ross Gwyther**



Bill Fleming, a long time labour movement stalwart, passed away last December. Bill had been a shop steward for the Boilermakers Society for 27 years. He was a delegate to the Queensland Trades and Labour Council and served on State Council. William was also a State Conference delegate, State Administrative

Committee member and Vice President of the branch.

He was born in 1925 in Brisbane and grew up in a family with strong working class traditions - his great grandfather had been a shearer during the famous 1890 shearers' strikes. During his work at Commonwealth Engineering workshops his advocacy and support for his comrades at work earned him their respect — during one of a number of times when he was sacked he had left his toolbox at work overnight. The toolbox was delivered home to him, and a mass meeting of his workmates then threatened to walk off the job if he wasn't immediately re-instated.

Bill also had a long association with the left in politics. During the 1940's he was a member of the Eureka Youth league, and was instrumental in setting up a EYL concert party consisting of ballet dancers, singers, comedians and a band — his role was as a ventriloquist! The concert party entertained troops at the Brisbane barracks, and held concerts for the public such as one called "Stars Arising" put on at the Princess Theatre near the Mater Hospital. His involvement in the EYL was also in campaigning for higher youth wages

and over the length of apprenticeships. He joined the Communist Party in 1947, campaigning over peace issues with his wife Pat who he married in 1953. Along with many people, he opposed the extreme politics of the Bjelke-Petersen Government. He took part in all the peoples' campaigns in the last 50 years of the 20th century.

Bill will always be remembered as a champion of working class people.

He wrote the following short story of his life for the Union journal a few years ago:

*I started my apprenticeship with Evans Deakins, Rocklea as a Boilermaker in 1941. I took part in many campaigns to improve conditions for apprentices, such as better pay and daytime college instead of night college for apprentices. I joined the Boilermakers Society as an apprentice in 1943 and have been active ever since.*

*My position was as door keeper, a hangover from the old craft days. When I became a tradesman I became a member of the Queensland district committee and continued on the committee until the amalgamation of the AEU and the Sheetmetal Workers Union. I was one of the Boilermakers Union representatives*



*Bill Fleming and Kevin Laughlin, former organiser with the BWIU.*

*on the Queensland Trades and Labour Council until amalgamation.*

*I was active in the campaign to amalgamate the Boilermakers Society and the Blacksmiths Union, which was very successful. The Boilermakers was the first union I marched with on Labour Day. To this day I am still marching on Labour Day, now with the AMWU.*

*In 1947, after time in the Queensland Railways, I began in Evans Deakin's shipyard where we took part in all union campaigns. In 1948 there was the Great Rail Strike in Queensland, where the Hanlon Labor government used police to beat up on workers marching to Trades Hall in support of the striking rail workers. In 1957, along with many others, I was laid off after the launch of a ship. Most of those laid off were good unionists.*

*In 1957, I started work at Commonwealth Engineering. I was not there long before I was elected delegate*



*Eureka Youth League Concert Band at Albert Hall in 1945  
- photo from Bill Fleming's collection..*

*of the Boilermakers Union. At the plant there were the AEU and the Sheetmetal Union. We had many disputes between them, which was bad for unity and we learned from hard lessons. We had a six week strike in the 60s to bring our wages up to those paid by the company in Sydney, but we were forced back to work by the courts.*

*When the amalgamation of the unions was proposed, all three of them worked hard to make sure it was a success. After the amalgamation was carried, there was never an inter-union dispute. In fact, if the employer claimed he had*

*too many of one trade and wanted to make them redundant, we moved them on to the work of another trade to save them: from boilermakers to sheetmetal workers; or fitters to sheetmetal workers; and so on. I became the delegate for the amalgamated union and was a delegate for 27 years.*

*There were many disputes with the company. Most notable was the struggle for the 38 hour week and we were amongst the first in Queensland to break through. We also won two sets of clothes and a pair of boots per year.*

*In 1979, I was part of a union delegation to the USSR at the invitation of the metal union of that country. We visited engineering workshops in all major cities. After this I went on to visit a shipyard in Hamburg, Germany and then on to England to visit a car plant.*

*In 1987, I was again part of a union delegation to a peace conference held in Hiroshima, Japan. When I retired I was presented with an Award of Merit and a gold badge by the National Council of the union. I had held the following offices in the union: branch president, shop steward, delegate to State Council, state administrative council, state trustee and state vice-president.*

*On May 1, 1996 I was presented with a Meritorious Service Award by the Queensland branch of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. At the time of writing I am Queensland State Secretary and assistant National Secretary of the Retired Members Association of our union.*

## Contributors

**John McCollow**, now retired, was a long-time research officer with the Queensland Teachers' Union. As a sometime casual academic he was also a member of the NTEU. His PhD thesis was about FAUSA, one of the predecessor organisations of the NTEU.

**Ruby Ludski** is a History Honours graduate from the University of Queensland. During her final year of study Ruby completed the Summer Scholars Program with UQ's Centre for the Government of Queensland and participated in the Queensland Speaks oral history project, documenting the State's vivid union history.

**Duncan Hart** is an activist with Socialist Alternative in Brisbane, and has been a rank and file member of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association since he started work 10 years ago. He is the founder of SDA Members for Marriage Equality and recently has been involved in challenging a dodgy SDA-negotiated agreement with Coles that undermines Award entitlements to penalty rates

**Craig Buckley** is an industrial officer with the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union. He is currently the Secretary of the Brisbane Labour History Association.