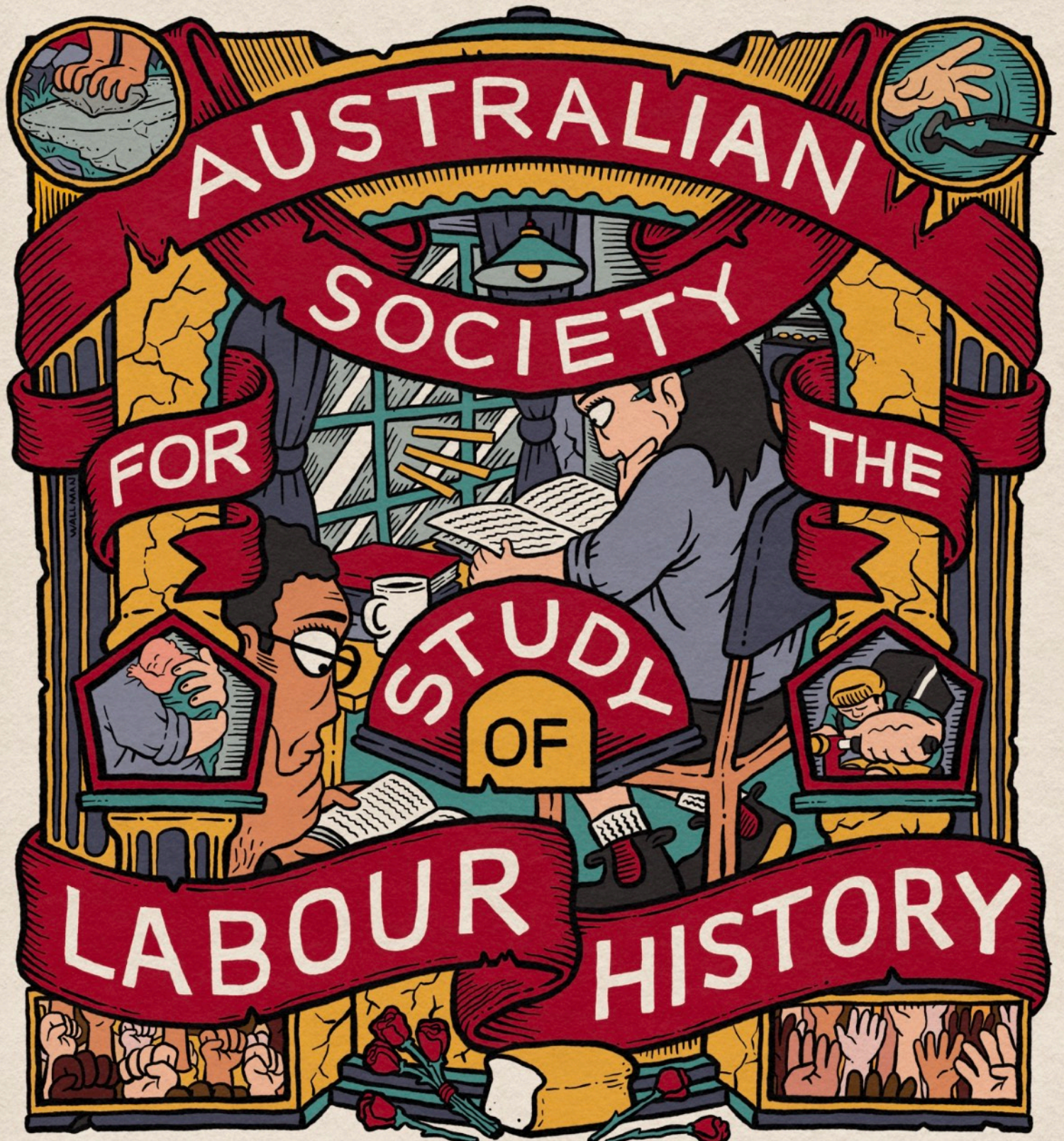


# RADICAL CURRENTS | LABOUR HISTORIES







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**ISSUE NO. 2**

# **RADICAL CURRENTS**

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# Resocialising workers – Thatcher's voluntary redundancy strategy

Margaret Thatcher's victory in the 1979 British general election was a watershed moment. Over the course of the next decade or so, her government succeeded in irrevocably changing Britain's socio-economic and political traditions. One of the principal aims of the Thatcher government's reform project was to undermine the perceived power and influence of trade unions over the economy. To weaken the collective orientation that had characterised many sections of the British workforce in the preceding decades, workers would need to be forced to question their existing assumptions surrounding union influence and managerial prerogative. Thatcherism aimed to engineer changes to the social psychology of the post-war era by upholding individualism, competition, entrepreneurship and avarice as the new normal. The all-pervasive power of the market, set free from government interference, would dictate the 'winners' and 'losers' in society.

Studies have shown how the Thatcher government attempted to overthrow the prevailing Keynesian 'common sense' that dominated the post-WWII political economy in the West. Some authors emphasise the program of privatisation and microeconomic change as key to the recasting of British economy and society. Others place the assault on trade unions through legislative and coercive action at the centre of the government's campaign. Often underplayed, however, as an important practical and ideological weapon in the armoury of the emerging free market agenda of the 1980s, is the role of voluntary redundancy. This was deliberately deployed – as both a direct and tacit strategy – to emasculate organised labour's opposition to the realisation of Thatcher's revolutionary political paradigm.

The escalating use of the extra-statutory payments associated with voluntary redundancy settlements during this period had the practical purpose of helping to severely rationalise workforces, while simultaneously championing the emerging discourses of Thatcherism. Notions of solidarity were framed as obsolescent, replaced by an ideology of individualism. Redundancy schemes were buttressed by high unemployment and a campaign of economic rationalisation. This was accompanied by an assault on trade unionism that sought to spread insecurity and fear amongst workers, undermining collective orientation and weakening workers' will to resist. Employment and redundancy statistics, archival records and oral interviews reveal that voluntary redundancy should be viewed as a key ideological weapon in the Thatcher government's reform project.

It is no coincidence that voluntary redundancy was particularly prevalent in traditional industries such as steel, coal mining, and the docks, renowned for their strong union organisation. These redundancy schemes were facilitated by large payments that were either entirely or partially subsidised by the state, effectively using huge sums of taxpayer money to empty workers, and their unions, from the workplace. In fact, such was the scope of the government's expenditure on the dock industry severance scheme that it was subject to investigation by a parliamentary watchdog, whose findings were deeply critical. Alongside an increasingly hostile economic and political

climate, voluntary redundancy schemes were used to dilute worker influence and shift expectations regarding job ownership, custodianship of industry and labour process control. All were necessary to challenge the prevailing status quo and change perceptions of workplace and societal dynamics.

A case study of industrial relations at the port of Liverpool in the 1980s demonstrates how voluntary redundancy was an integral, often overlooked, part of a broader raft of measures that sought to undermine union and worker resistance, particularly in industries with strong traditions of activism and solidarity. Between 1980 and 1988, Liverpool's workforce contracted from approximately 4600 to 1400 Registered Dock Workers, achieved solely through voluntary severance. This was accompanied by year-on-year decreases in man-days lost due to industrial disputes, hinting at an increasingly sober attitude towards collective action. A 1985 clerical worker dispute at Liverpool, where dock workers refused to lend their support to their clerical colleagues, could also be suggestive of a more subdued outlook, inspired in part by the constant rundown of manning through voluntary schemes. The major dock employer's frequent pessimistic forecasts, despite returning to profitability in 1985, is a good example of how some coercive methods surrounding voluntary redundancy were used to temper workers' outlook and encourage applicants for severance. In Liverpool, and more broadly across other ports, the relatively muted response to an official national strike call in 1988 and the abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme in 1989 were also symptomatic.

A mere decade earlier, when trade union influence was still strong and the political climate less hostile, these issues would have been contested tooth and nail by workers in the dock industry. The 'new realism' displayed is testament to the success of Thatcher's project generally, lending a mood of resignation to the outlook of workers. This encouraged even the best organised and most militant sections of workers to become increasingly complicit in commodifying their livelihoods by taking the enhanced money on offer through voluntary schemes, decimating resistance both ideologically and numerically while forcing acknowledgement (if not acceptance) of the new normal. Voluntary redundancy was a key instrument in diminishing resistance while simultaneously championing some of the founding anti-collectivist ideological principles of Thatcherism and a central component of her anti-union campaign, often underemphasised in favour of macroeconomic and legislative levers. In a practical way, the strategy was a major facilitator in rationalising organisations to enable flexibility and competition in the marketplace. In a more tacit fashion, alongside the broader antagonistic political environment, voluntary redundancy abetted the shifting of workers' expectations, eventually achieved at huge expense to the government and taxpayer.

Voluntary severance essentially equated to the 'buying out' of perceived entitlement to long-term employment (particularly dispiriting in industries such as the docks with traditions of hereditary recruitment) and union involvement in organisational decision-making. For this to successfully propagate, Thatcher sought to shift broader social values and reorientate worker identity from being profoundly connected to employment, union and industry towards a more intimate link to active participation in a consumer-oriented, market-driven culture. So pervasive was this commodification that it is now equated with common sense thinking, with accepted wisdom dictating 'there is no alternative' to insecure employment and managerial privilege if a company, or indeed a nation-state is to remain globally competitive. Voluntary redundancy schemes were an important part of achieving this paradigmatic shift, particularly in industries with strong traditions of labour organisation.

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# Clothing Outwork as Sweated Labour

Clothing outworkers earn a living by sewing clothes in their own homes. In late nineteenth-century Australia, clothing outwork was notorious for being 'sweated' labour, where individuals worked intensively for long hours in order to make a minimum basic living. The core feature of sweating is payment by very low piece rates in irregular employment where individuals have no other job opportunities. Yet once factories became the mainstay of clothing manufacture in the twentieth century, outworkers were used mainly for overloads or specialist designs, and concerns were not raised about their wages and conditions. However, from the 1970s, in the context of the growing competitive pressures of global capitalism, claims were increasingly made that sweating had re-emerged for clothing outworkers in advanced economies.

This study aimed to find evidence to determine whether sweating existed once again in clothing outwork in Australia. An investigation conducted in 2000-2001 of the working lives of 119 Vietnamese clothing outworkers in Victoria, 114 were women, provided evidence of wages and working conditions. An interview team was recruited from government-funded English classes conducted for immigrant



*'Outworker Ghet Ky in her garage, November 2020, her workplace for 25 years', photographer Erwin Renaldi, courtesy ABC News.*

outworkers by the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (Victoria). Each team member contacted other outworkers and interviewed them in their own language in their own homes. Questions about the outworkers' experiences were driven by reports from interest groups of low wages and harsh conditions. If the reports were accurate, why were the workers willing to do this work? Was it by their own choice or was it their lack of choice that makes outwork fit the description of sweated labour?

The outworkers described their work to the interviewers. They received a series of separate sewing jobs from a factory or agent. Workers sewed a high volume of the same pre-cut garment or part-garment for each job. Meeting deadlines helped gain them future work. Thus, when they had a job, their hours were very long, with an average of over 12 hours a day and nearly 78 hours a week, more than half again of the ILO standard. Almost all interviewees reported they worked during weekends and holidays. Outworkers were paid piece rates of less than a third of the 2001 *Clothing Trades Award*.

Analysis of outworker narratives showed that this work was consistent with characteristics of sweated labour. Outworkers needed to work intensively for long hours to meet deadlines: *'I wake at 6.30 am. At 7, I give my children breakfast. Take them to school. Go home. Sit at the sewing machine and*



*work. Sometimes I skip lunch. If I am very hungry, I eat instant noodles. At 3.15, on the way to school to pick up the kids, I drop by the grocer. Get something for dinner. Back home, I prepare dinner in one hour, feed the kids, then continue working till midnight'. 'Rush jobs' had very tight deadlines: 'When there's a rush job, I'll stay up to work late. Once I worked all night, finishing at 5 am.' Workers could not sacrifice accuracy for speed: 'They deducted money because they said they had to ask someone else to repair the garments I sewed.'*

There was no intrinsic job satisfaction: *'I am a robot'; 'I am a machine.'* The repetitive, intensive work led to extreme exhaustion and stress: *'Every time I finish a job, I see a doctor about backache, shoulder ache or pain in the legs'.* Work invaded their sleep: *'I often dream about sewing and my legs move just as though I am working'.* Their sewing left them socially isolated: *'I have no friends. It's only thanks to the children I don't feel too lonely'.* Other family members were outworkers: *'My husband and I sew together every day'.* In some households, older schoolchildren helped out, although only to meet a deadline: (Schoolchild) *'With a rush job, I ... go to school ... come home at 5, have dinner, have a rest for a short while, then study until 9. After that I sew until 12 then I go to bed'.*

The responses also identified the core feature of sweating: poor pay in insecure work with no other job opportunities. Outworkers were paid by low piece rates: *'I am paid for what I sew ... it works out around \$3 to \$4 per hour'.* Some reported difficult jobs that paid a higher rate but took more time: *'if the material is difficult (such as muslin) or a dark colour or a striped one'.* They had no bargaining power: *'Employers compelled me to accept a low fee and I had to agree because there were many other outworkers willing to do it'.*

There were many instances of late or no payment: *'Twice they gave me bounced checks'.* *'Every day I drove to the factory, hassling them about owing me money'.* Outworkers knew they were exploited: *'I saw dresses like the ones I made sold at \$99.95 each but I was paid about \$2 to \$3'.* There were gaps between jobs: *'You can be given 3 weeks for one job. Another, you might be asked to work really fast to meet the employer's deadline. Then no work following'.* They had no choice about their job as no other work was available for them: *'Over the years, I have wanted to quit many times, but the situation hasn't been good enough for me to get another job'.* They were trapped because outworking prevented them from learning English: *'I thought, living in Australia, I had to know the language to find employment. But I've been so tired from sewing that I've had no time'.*

Most workers strongly disliked the job: *'I want to cry many times. I feel so miserable. Money was the only motivator'.* Individuals disliked the job the most when they could not earn a basic living: *'The really horrible thing is when there is no work ... therefore no money for the family. That's the true nightmare'.* A few responses indicated a less negative attitude. For example, if the income gave the family a living: *'I am very disheartened, because of the low payment and long hours. But I can provide for the family'.* Or when it brought prospects for their children: *'Although it [the work] is hard, it lets my children have an education ... I hope they will be ... able to get a job in an office and have a better life than mine'.*

This study showed that outworkers were isolated within their homes, carrying out large volumes of repetitive sewing tasks to meet tight deadlines so they could make a basic living. They did not choose this work for reasons of entrepreneurship, flexible hours or 'pin money'. They knew they were exploited but lacked bargaining power, facing fierce competition for the outwork that was available and unable to find other work. The study's major finding was that immigrant outworkers in Australia best tolerated their job when they could work themselves to exhaustion in the sweating system that characterised clothing outwork in Australia at the start of the twenty-first century.

*Christina Cregan is Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Carol Kulik is Research Professor at the University of South Australia. The longer version of this article was published in Labour History No.122 (May 2022), 181-205.*

# Frank Maybank, an Australian trade unionist in Central Africa

When one of the thousands of medals issued to mark the coronation of Elizabeth II made its way to a dusty mining town in northern Zambia (then known as Northern Rhodesia), it was returned promptly by its intended recipient Frank Maybank with a curt reply: 'Australian union and labour representatives do not accept such things.' What did he mean by this? For one thing, it was not true. Plenty of union representatives across Australia gladly accepted such things, as contemporary newspaper records attest. The truth of Maybank's claim to being an *Australian* union representative was also somewhat tenuous. Born in Britain and relocating to Australia as an adult, by 1953 he had spent longer in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia than in Australia. His claim to being a union representative was on more solid ground. For the previous decade, he had been general secretary of a trade union on the copper mines strung out along Zambia's northern border, a region known as the Copperbelt.

Maybank lived a tumultuous life. Born near London in 1901 and raised partly in an orphanage, he worked as a miner in New Zealand and Australia. He was involved in strikes in both and joined the Communist Party of Australia after spending time in the Soviet Union. He arrived on the Copperbelt in 1939 and became centrally involved in a wartime strike wave on the mines that saw him arrested by the army and deported until an international trade union campaign pressured the British Government to allow him to return. He picked up where he left off and led a series of major disputes before an acrimonious struggle within the union resulted in him being turfed out of the organisation and, once again, packing his bags. In 1956, he moved to Western Australia and to a quieter life, where he did finally become an Australian citizen.



*Maybank working at Sons of Gwalia Mine.*

Maybank's working life helps us identify connections between different parts of the labour movement around the British Empire and the influence of Australia's labour movement on other parts of the world. In colonial Zambia, he represented a group of highly mobile, transient white workers in the mines, of whom he was one. For Maybank, the Australian labour movement represented an ideal. He once succinctly explained his militant approach to industrial relations: 'Ain't I a bastard, well I received my training in Aussie.' What was this ideal? Militancy was one part. The tactic of Maybank and his comrades was to strike first and make demands later, and it worked. White miners won huge pay increases in these years, imposed a closed shop on the industry and became some of the most affluent workers in the world. Another part of the Australian ideal was racial segregation, these high wages were for

white workers only. The idea that high wages and good working conditions could only be maintained through the exclusion of non-white workers was enormously influential. Maybank represented white workers (and only white workers) on the copper mines.

Colonial-era Zambia was not a 'white man's country' by any stretch of the imagination. White settlers numbered in the low tens of thousands. Most workers in the mines were African, and there was no question of excluding them from the mining industry entirely. Instead, Africans were excluded from skilled jobs and restricted to manual work. The closed shop imposed by the white mineworkers union was a crucial part of this exclusion. Workers had to be union members to get skilled jobs in the mines and be recognised as white to become union members. International labour migration had helped transmit these ideas to the Copperbelt. Many of the white workforce had experience working in Australia, South Africa and the United States (some had worked in all three). Indeed, when Maybank arrived on the Copperbelt there were two white trade unions in the mines, and both were headed by Australians. He and the other man who negotiated the closed shop agreement that excluded African workers had both been officials in Australian trade unions. Yet as Maybank's remark about refusing a Coronation Medal suggests, his image of Australia's labour movement as radical and implacably militant was at odds with reality.

This connection between labour radicalism and racial segregation, which was commonplace in the early decades of the twentieth century, was increasingly untenable by the mid-century. On the Copperbelt, African workers struck on the mines in 1940 and had formed their own trade union by the end of the decade, one much larger than the white mineworkers union. Organisations that Maybank had been a member of in Australia became increasingly critical of racial segregation and the 'White Australia' policy. When these organisations reported on Maybank's activities, they increasingly omitted to mention that the trade union he led was a whites-only body.

Transnational connections existed between the labour movement in Australia and Central Africa, personified in the migration of people involved in both. Historians have become increasingly interested in these kinds of connections. However, Maybank's misrepresentation of Australian labour indicates an important point here about the weakness of transnational connections. Information flowing between places could be misinterpreted, and was, sometimes, deliberately. Maybank could explain how his own militancy was rooted in his experiences in Australia's labour movement and present that movement to Copperbelt audiences as something different from its reality. Equally, Maybank's old comrades in Australia could present him as an organiser of African and white workers, when in fact, his union enforced racial segregation in the mines.

Information about places that were geographically distant could be misrepresented to suit domestic audiences. Connections were sometimes weak enough to allow these misrepresentations to go unnoticed and unchallenged. Assessing the strength of these kinds of transnational connections is as important as demonstrating their existence. Maybank was a worker of an imperial world, and this world began to break up in the mid-twentieth century. The mobility that characterised the first fifty years of his life ceased, and he spent his remaining forty years in Australia comparatively quietly. Despite all he had seen working around the world, he was convinced that 'Australia is still the best place in the world for the worker.'

*Duncan Money has recently published a book on Zambia's mineworkers and works at Leiden University, the Netherlands. The full version of this article was published in Labour History No.122 (May 2022).*



# Managing Horses on the High Seas: Horse Grooms in the Service of the British Empire

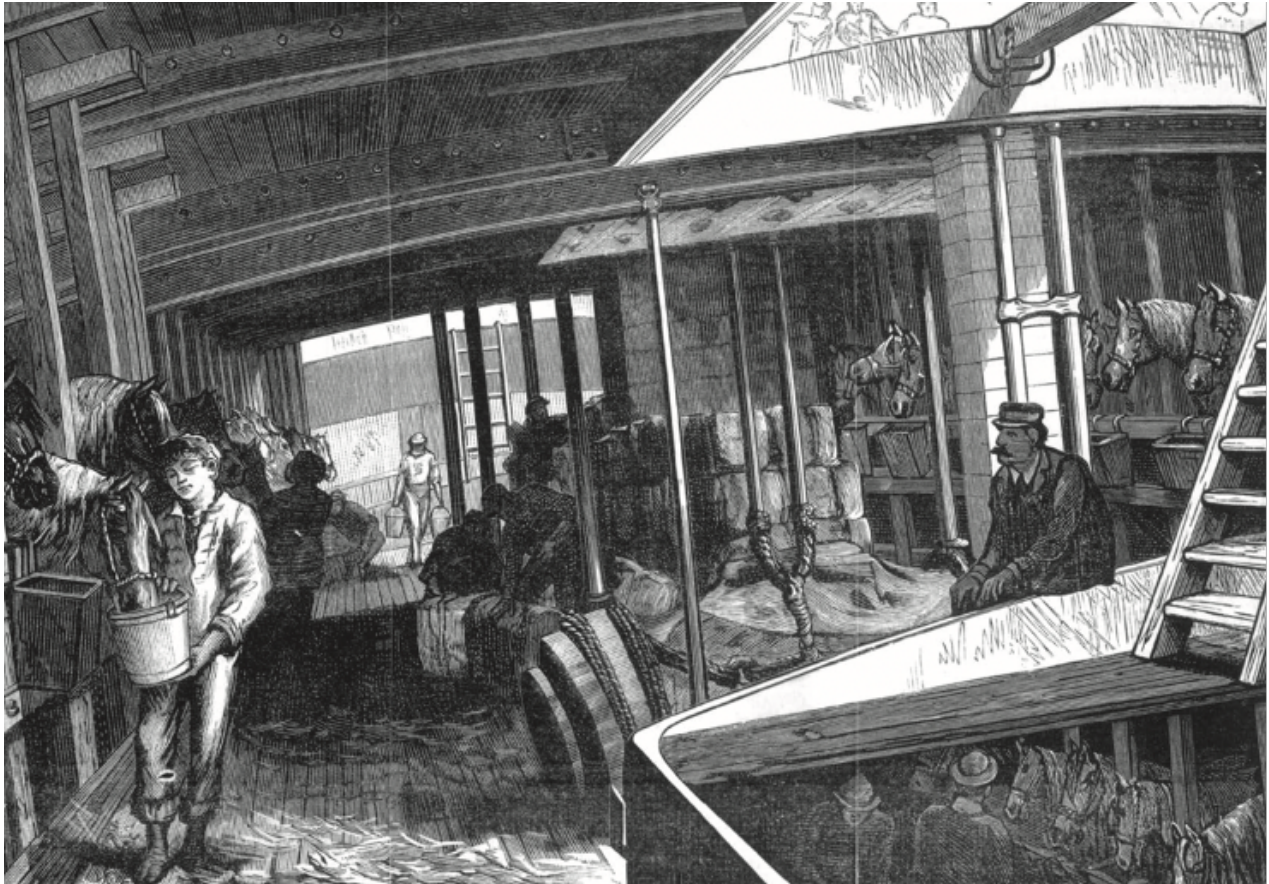
The everyday running of the British Empire depended on a myriad number and range of workers whose stories often get swept under the carpet of the grand narratives of the Empire. One such group of workers was Australian horse-grooms, who travelled to India in the nineteenth and twentieth century in search of work. They often ended up destitute, at least for brief periods, before travelling on or settling in India.

The British in India needed horses from Australia because even the most robust Indian horses were considered ‘unsuitable’ for British military and leisure use, which included horse racing, steeple-chasing, polo and hunting. British attempts to crossbreed European and Indian horses failed when they did not adapt to the Indian climate. Pure-bred Arab horses were tried but rejected due to concerns of expense and quality. Instead, the British turned to importing Australian horse breeds.

However, unlike other ‘commodities’ circulated within the British Empire, horses had complex logistical needs. They could not be loaded onto a ship as cargo, forgotten until they reached their destination. The journey from Australia to India took at least 19 days, and horses needed constant tending. Horse traders in Australia, therefore, employed grooms to accompany their horses. While smaller traders are estimated to have hired around 50 men each season, larger trading companies hired armies of grooms. Australia’s pastoral economy frequently experienced seasonal unemployment during the hot, dry months between October and January. These were the very months considered best for shipping horses. Sea passage was easier then. Moreover, this was winter in India, considered ideal for the acclimatisation of Australian horses before the monsoon and summer heat. Consequently, by the 1860s, records show over 100 grooms travelling from various ports of Australia to India every year. Names and other details are not always available from the government records. But their identities – especially name and age – become visible in the sources from time to time, and we can know something of their work.

Once on board, grooms were expected to feed, care and tend to the horses at regular intervals. A typical day’s schedule for a groom was physically demanding, even without considering the confined environment, movement of the ocean and likelihood of seasickness for both men and animals. Each groom was in charge of approximately 11 horses. At four o’clock each morning, they woke and fed the horses in their charge, before sweeping and mopping the decks. Next, they drew three buckets of water from the tank for each horse. Grooms also had to clean the stalls, groom each horse, and shovel all manure that had accumulated from the previous day. This was followed by feeding the horses a

midday meal and finally dinner, after which, grooms were expected to walk the horses on deck and return them safely to the hold. Two grooms took night-watch on rotation, to prevent horses from lying down and to sound the alarm in case of accidents. Grooms were paid a maximum of £8 (total for the 19 days) for this demanding work in what could be extremely trying work conditions. From time to time, grooms who returned to Australia would share their painful experiences in local newspapers, albeit anonymously. For instance, an ex-groom wrote in 1870 of the low wages paid and 'the heat and effluvium arising from a hundred and sixty horses in an iron ship, despite all precautions, such as windsails, a thorough draught, and a plentiful use of carbolic acid, & etc. – the incessant torment of the diabolical flies, which necessarily breed ...', of the 'many discomforts' on 'a wretched voyage.'



*'Tween Decks of a Horse-Ship Loaded for India'. Engraving by James Waltham Curtis in Illustrated Australian News, 4 October 1882. Courtesy of State Library Victoria, <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/2529>.*

The journey was not the only challenge the horse grooms faced. Upon reaching India they were often let go by their employers. Many grooms went to India with the understanding that they would find jobs easily, or their return passage to Australia or an onward passage anywhere in the British Empire would be arranged by the employers or the government of India. This was an alluring prospect for those who had difficulty finding work in Australia, or who wanted to return to Britain or travel to other colonies but had no means to pay for their passage.

However, grooms quickly discovered that it was extremely difficult for lower-class Europeans to find work in India, due to competition from colonised subjects who could be paid lower wages. The promise of onward or return passages was simply fraudulent. Consequently, many grooms became destitute on the streets of India. An ex-groom, who considered himself fortunate to have secured passage back to Australia, recalled his experience, which he hoped

would dissuade others from falling prey to horse traders and would encourage the Australian administration to adopt better policies. He described how his aspirations were destroyed when he could not find any employment in India nor get a return passage to Australia. Soon the police caught him and sent him to gaol, and later to a workhouse.

The presence of destitute and vagrant British grooms from Australia also became a concern for more affluent Australians in India who did not want to be associated with destitutes. An Australian employed in Calcutta wrote that it was near impossible for less-educated Europeans to obtain employment in India as they had to compete with well-educated men from England for the elite jobs open to Europeans. Furthermore, destitute grooms frequently had to depend on charity from colonised subjects. This emphasis could be read as a way of evoking shame among his readers as the idea of supposedly superior Europeans being dependent on the charity of locals – ‘natives’ – was considered unacceptable. He finally pleaded with the editor and readers to prevent young fellows from travelling to India as grooms.

While there were concerns on both sides engaged in the horse-trading activities – the government of India and the government in Australia – both colonies attempted to make the other responsible for the ‘welfare’ and repatriation of the destitute grooms in India. While no effective resolution was found, the destitution of the horse grooms in India kept rising, causing a lot of moral and social uproar from the British in India, as they did not want to associate ‘whiteness’ with poverty or misery.

Finally, the horse trade between Australia and India declined. By 1918, the price Australian horse traders demanded did not match the price the patrons in India were willing to pay. Moreover, by the 1920s, there was a rapid increase and reliance on imported automobiles for everyday transport in British India. The use of horses for patrolling and everyday transport was significantly reduced, while motor-car racing partially displaced horse racing as an elite pastime. While the trade did not disappear, it significantly shrank, reducing the number of grooms required.

By the mid-1920s, very few grooms travelling between Australia and India are detectable in the records. And with the large-scale mechanisation of the British Indian Army, the market in India for Australian horses had all but disappeared by 1938. The case of grooms from Australia, destitute in India, thus shows how the same Empire that provided networks and opportunities for travel and employment to many Europeans, simultaneously allowed systematic exploitation not only of colonised subjects but also of British transient workers. This is a small account of the otherwise ignored or overlooked workers whose stories of their service in the British Empire are yet to find a place in the pages of history.

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# Putting Aotearoa New Zealand's gender pay gap in context

The gender pay gap in Aotearoa New Zealand is comparatively small, with efforts to close it yielding slow, non-linear progress. Recent legislative and policy reforms have put the pay gap back under the spotlight. New Zealand's *Equal Pay Amendment Act 2020* locates pay equity claims within the existing 'good faith' bargaining framework, with court action a last resort. In addition, a raft of government-led equity initiatives seeks to eliminate pay gaps across the public service. Recent improvements have been attributed to landmark pay equity settlements in female-dominated areas though the private sector lags behind that of the public sector, and pay gaps remain more acute for Māori, Pacific and immigrant women who are over-represented in lower-paid, less secure jobs.

Efforts by the state, unions, women's organisations, individual activists and others – in progressing equal pay campaigns, bringing legal cases and developing legislative and policy initiatives – have ebbed, flowed and interacted. This is exemplified by the 2015 landmark Court of Appeal case of *TerraNova Homes & Care Limited vs SFWU Nga Ringa Tota Inc.* [2014]. The decision reaffirmed that the *Equal Pay Act 1972* extended to pay equity, and provided the impetus to others in female-dominated professions to issue equal pay proceedings. Earlier, the more progressive short-lived *Employment Equity Act 1990* comprised equality approaches yet to be revisited in regulation. However, it is striking how rarely studies have focused on the relationship between the employment relations setting and these efforts to close New Zealand's gender pay gap – despite the gap's political, policy and practical significance. Our study of efforts to progress pay equity since the 1950s thus framed statutory provisions, legal cases, policy initiatives and campaigns with a political economy approach. We emphasised four employment relations dimensions: the role of the state, unions and collective organisation, collective bargaining, and management autonomy.

The study shows that progress has occurred against a backdrop of high levels and organised unionisation; centralised bargaining arrangements; state support; and pluralistic management and workplace strategies moderated by dialogue and engagement. However, the specific impacts of (labour) institutions on women are neither simple nor unambiguous. Indeed, the state has played a crucial yet shifting role in advancing and impeding equal pay progress as an arbiter, regulator, employer and campaign partner. The picture is more complex than a link between greater state action on pay parity during Labour's time in office, and a pro-business agenda during National Party governance. In the late 1980s, for example, Labour pursued neo-liberal economic reforms that dismantled the centralised arbitration and bargaining system, disproportionately impacting women workers and affecting unions' capacity to act on behalf of women's equal pay interests. Rising casualisation resulting from the National government's *Employment Contracts Act 1991* and related policies dealt a further blow to the position of lower-paid (and more ethnically diverse) women.

The second dimension, the role of unions and collective organisations, highlights female-dominated unions with women in both mainstream and separate structures; includes women's employment organisations and campaigning; and women in state, non-governmental and quasi-

autonomous governmental bodies' initiating or supporting progress on equal pay cases and state action. Their resources (including political influence) were strengthened when women had a significant presence at all union levels, and unions worked with other groups. However, little attention has been paid to the sustained, targeted agency of women's (employment) organisations and activists in bringing and keeping equal pay on union and other agendas, and campaigning around pay cases and legislative change. There are few histories of these efforts and a small body of campaign records. While these groups share the goal of gender pay parity, they have pursued different forms of collective organisation, suggesting the need to examine their aggregate effect.

In respect of collective bargaining, we charted the decentralisation of bargaining arrangements and the concomitant rise from the late 1980s of enterprise-level employment relations and human resource management that emphasises management as the source of power. A centralised system and the historical strength of organised labour were associated with a narrowing gender pay gap. This echoes international experience, which shows that higher union membership corresponds with a higher level of collective bargaining though the degree of influence of this and other employment relations dimensions on reducing the gender pay gap was sensitive to the context in which bargaining occurred. For instance, female union membership and density in Aotearoa have risen while overall union density and influence have declined, affecting unions' capacity to place pay equity at the centre of bargaining. However, women's position in unions and qualitative shifts in how unions operate have been pivotal. Furthermore, while unions anticipate a central role in setting pay claims under the *Equal Pay Amendment Act 2020*, our research findings emphasise that there is a need for a cohesive, multi-party approach to progress pay equity.

The fourth dimension, management autonomy, has changed considerably over the time we studied. With the demise of the centralised arbitration and bargaining system from the late 1980s, growing management autonomy, and human resource management have done little to advance pay equity. Latterly, state and ministry leaders' advocacy for the closure of gender pay gaps in the public sector suggests that an increasingly pluralistic approach to people management is developing in the context of women's increasing proportion of its workforce and union membership. The need for more inclusive employment relations approaches is re-emphasised.

While this summary cannot detail the ideological, policy and environmental twists and turns that have influenced the size of the gender pay gap over time, our longitudinal study stressed the significance of key employment relations dimensions and their interaction within a dynamic political economy. Reduction of the gap has been uneven and protracted, especially for minority women. This suggests that the vacuum left by diminished forms of collectivism needs to be filled, at least in part, by greater dialogue and collaboration between the negotiating parties. Aotearoa New Zealand has entered a new era of regulation and public sector reform that seeks to redress gender pay inequity amid the recalibration of the relative powers of the social partners in a system that emphasises flexibility and greater state support. Our study indicated a need to encourage substantive change by integrating formal equality regulation and policies with workplace initiatives while strengthening campaigns that encourage a conceptualisation of pay equity as an inclusive, rather than a gender, concern. While we make a case for examining the gender pay gap with systematic regard for employment relations and wider dynamics, subsequent research might analyse the centralising effects of collective bargaining via the proposed fair pay agreements system, and the meaning of the Covid-19 pandemic on women's pre-existing structural disadvantages.

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# Women Taking on Skilled Jobs in the Newcastle Steel Industry, 1980s – 1990s

The Newcastle steel industry was a pronounced illustration of Australia's labour market, one of the most sex-segregated in the industrialised world in the 20th century. After the BHP steelworks opened in 1915, women were employed in very small numbers, in lower-status white-collar jobs, cleaning and food services, while men were employed in their thousands in the steelworks and its subsidiaries. This changed briefly during World War II, but women were again excluded after the war. In the following decades, BHP preferred recruiting men from overseas to employing local women.

It was only after the *Anti-Discrimination Act*, ushered in by the NSW Labor government in 1977, made it unlawful to 'discriminate on the grounds of sex ... in the areas of employment' that BHP began making tentative steps in hiring women for blue-collar jobs. In January 1980, the employment of four female apprentices in the mechanical and electrical shops was heralded as 'historic for Newcastle feminists, and for Newcastle steelworks.' They joined just over 400 women out of a total of 10,797 workers. Of these women, only 140 worked on the vast plant where the four female apprentices would be based.

Young women in Newcastle experienced a high rate of unemployment (double that of young men). Concerned local and state bodies collaborated to support women to enter non-traditional occupations. A Community Task Force for Youth Employment launched a 'Girls in Trades' campaign to encourage employers to take on women apprentices. Supporting this initiative, TAFE established pre-apprenticeship courses to ensure they had the basic skills, and in 1981, at least nine of the first fifteen graduates gained apprenticeships. The NSW state government established the Hunter Equal Opportunity Program, which, among other activities, convened a seminar on women's entry into non-traditional employment. One dissenter, a building contractor, was adamant that women had no place 'in building, construction and civil engineering' based on his experience with one woman.

Naysayers could not stop the momentum. The combined campaigns resulted in the Hunter Region leading the rest of Australia in the number of young women apprenticed by government and private employers in non-traditional trades. Enrolments at Newcastle TAFE rose from 12 in 1980 to 152 two years later, with another 51 at other colleges in the Hunter Region.

Three surveys of female apprentices from the early 1980s and later interviews with women steelworkers reveal the obstacles they faced breaking into masculinist domains. A key finding was that the women found their work interesting, and did not, to any significant extent, experience the predicted difficulties which had been used to justify their exclusion. No evidence emerged that the work was too dirty for them, and although some tasks posed physical challenges in the first two years, the female apprentices managed these by using levers or hoists or asking for help. By their third year, they had learnt techniques to cope and



built up their strength. In addition to apprentices, very small numbers of women were employed through traineeships entailing university studies. After training as a metallurgist, Denise Goldsworthy became the first female shift 'foreman' in the BHP steelmaking department. Determined to prove herself, Goldsworthy took on the challenge of shovelling coal through the open door of a 1,700-degree centigrade furnace. After only six weeks, she could shovel the coal squarely through the furnace door, earning the men's respect.

The most significant obstacles were social rather than physical. In contrast to the women employed during World War II, the young apprentices of the 1980s were not part of a cohort of women who worked together. For them, isolation was a key challenge. As one young woman said, 'the men let me know I was the only girl all the time.' 'Ridicule' was also cited as the cause of a number of resignations. The women who were able to ignore this behaviour found that it eventually stopped. One female apprentice recalled, 'The first month, I felt like chucking the job in. I thought, no, I'm not letting them get to me. When I started to stick up for myself, they started treating me like their sister.'



*Denise Goldsworthy, Operations Superintendent, BHP Steelmaking, 1997. Sydney Morning Herald, 6 March 1997. Photograph by Robert Pearce. Supplied by Australian Community Media.*

Sexual harassment was a serious problem. In one survey, one-third of the female apprentices reported having been subjected to 'unwanted physical contact.' The first female electrical engineer employed at BHP was subject to repeated invasions of privacy and threats of violent rape. Instead of undertaking a proper investigation, BHP management moved the engineer to another section where she could not pursue her specialisation, so she resigned. One apprentice commented that the men needed to be trained that 'girls are only there to do the job, not as some sex object.'

The capacity of women supervisors to exercise authority was considered a potential obstacle. This was proven incorrect by the women who climbed up the ranks. When Goldsworthy was appointed foreman, her superintendent deliberately gave her the most difficult crew, assuming she could not handle them. She proved him wrong. After she was promoted to superintendent, and two men were burnt to death in an accident, members of her crew sought her out to talk about it, admitting they could not have talked to a male superintendent in the same way. When Janet Murray worked in the blast furnace, she developed a fascination with the chemical processes of smelting iron ore with coke and limestone, and by 1995 had earned a promotion to operations superintendent. In that role, she had no problems with giving men orders. The promotions of women to superintendents of two of the most important departments on the plant were not tokenistic. They are striking examples of BHP management recognising ability regardless of gender. Despite the many obstacles, all the women who stayed in the steel industry proved that change could happen, however slowly, even in traditionally segregated workforces.

*Drs Jude Conway, Nancy Cushing and Josephine May are historians with an interest in the lives of groundbreaking women in the Newcastle region, and in the city itself. The full version of this article was published in Labour History No.122 (May 2022).*

# When Unionists Responded to Escalation in the Export of Live Cattle, Brisbane, 1978

Late 1978 saw the Australasian Meat Industry Employees' Union (AMIEU) Queensland branch, engage in three pickets of the Hamilton Wharf, Brisbane. They were attempting to deter the live animal exporter, Elders Smith Goldsbrough Mort (Elders), from loading cattle for shipment to Japan. For the AMIEU, the live animal export industry directly threatened meatworkers' jobs. These shipments of cattle violated an existing agreement between the union and the graziers' representative, which restricted the number of animals that could be exported annually. The significance of their action lay in the changes that followed later.

On Tuesday, 17 October 1978, the first of the three pickets began as a well-organised protest by 300 AMIEU members, both men and women. The picket swelled later in the day to 700 members. AMIEU secretary, Colin Maxwell, had emphasised that the picket was to be undertaken peacefully by only union members and that outsiders were to be reported to the union executive. These outsiders could range from police acting as plain clothes infiltrators to interested members of the public. There is no indication that any outsiders joined the picket. The majority of the early morning picketers came from the Borthwicks abattoir in nearby Murarrie and four large boning rooms close to the wharf. They were joined that morning by other meatworkers from boning rooms and abattoirs in Brisbane and the metropolitan area and from the regional towns of Toowoomba and Beaudesert. Almost 5,000 meatworkers went on strike that day across Queensland.



Injured meatworker Ronald Daly at the Hamilton wharf today.

Up to 600 Queensland police officers confronted the picketing members. Some were brutal in their treatment of the picketers. They were recorded beating Ronald Daly, a Borthwicks meatworker and following him to hospital to charge him, kicking another fallen meatworker, and frogmarching arrested picketers into 'paddy wagons'. They arrested forty-five meatworkers, including a pregnant woman who was escorted to a sedan by two policewomen. Police laid a number of charges, including: using obscene language, resisting arrest, assaulting police officers, wilful damage to property, wilful destruction of property, and assault occasioning bodily harm. Forty union members, including three women, subsequently forfeited bail, paid for by the union, and five members were ordered to appear in court on 12 charges.

*'Mass Arrests Over Wharf Demo',  
Brisbane Telegraph, 17 October 1978, 1.*

The AMIEU's plan for a peaceful, orderly picket was thwarted by the resolve of the Queensland police, with police-escorted trucks carrying the cattle breaching the picket and causing the affray. The number and determination of the police surprised the truck drivers as they had been assured by Elders' agents that there would be no problem unloading the livestock, provided the drivers were members of the Transport Workers' Union. In response to the police escort of the trucks, the picketers had climbed onto the vehicles, thrown cans of drink and stones, and screamed 'scabs, scabs' and other obscenities at

drivers. They damaged one truck. The press reported that meatworkers had gained access to the wharf by scaling the fence and lowering a truck tailgate, which released three steers.



*AMIEU State President Dick Annear Urges Union Protestors to Calm Down. Courier Mail, 18 October 1978, 3.*

Channel O News reported that Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had ordered uniformed police and members of the Special Branch to attend the picket and to make arrests. This order came after his department had been contacted directly by Elders. In the 1970s, 'Queensland exceptionalism' underpinned the Bjelke-Petersen state government, which was populist, conservative, authoritarian, and anti-intellectual. Former QLD Police Commissioner, Ray Whitrod, raised interstate, wrote

in his autobiography that 'Queenslanders [were] not like other Australians.' The Bjelke-Petersen years were notable for the Queensland cabinet's control of the police, the media, and electoral politics, factors exposed by the 1989 Fitzgerald Inquiry into corruption.

The Fitzgerald Inquiry also revealed that Merv Callaghan, the QLD Police Union of Employees (QPUE) secretary, benefitted from a close relationship with the Premier, who had previously been the Police Minister. This allowed QPUE members political protection from accusations of wrongdoing and reinforced the symbiotic arrangement between the cabinet and the police. Thus, police were exonerated from culpability for their violent actions used to break the initial 1978 picket. In parliament, Bjelke-Petersen, using polemical vitriol, denounced the violent behaviour of 'Communist and extremist' meatworkers without mentioning police behaviour. He also criticised 'the rain of rocks and bottles' on the trucks and 'the platoon of university radicals' whom he wrongly claimed had joined in. The comment about university students was a common refrain from the Premier after a series of demonstrations across the 1970s involved students, but there is no evidence that this picket had attracted participation from anyone other than meatworkers.

Labor Party Member, Bob Gibbs, stated in parliament that he did not condone violence, but people were entitled to job security. However, he criticised the AMIEU and its members' behaviour at the picket. Gibbs questioned the Premier on the role that the National Party played in events surrounding the picket, and he drew attention to the fact that Tom Burns, leader of the Queensland Labor opposition, was threatening to launch civil action against the police involved in the violence. This action was not launched.

The 17 October 1978 picket was part of an industrial campaign that had no connection to animal welfare or animal rights. In Queensland and federal parliaments, live animal export was treated as an economic and industrial issue. However, having gained media and political attention, the issue of live animal export grew in importance as subsequent federal and state government policies became more resolute in encouraging the growth of the industry for economic gains. As the industry expanded from the 1980s, attention also came to focus on the issue of animal welfare and rights. The AMIEU broadened its strategy to work with social movement organisations, specifically those interested in animal welfare and rights.

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# Labour History and the 'Neoliberal Era'

During the past four decades, the term 'neoliberalism' has increasingly permeated academic research and everyday political debates. This proliferation, though, has often been accompanied by growing confusion and inconsistency regarding the meaning and application of the term. This discussion examines the concept of neoliberalism with specific reference to labour history, focusing on the 'neoliberal era' and a single question: how might neoliberalism be reconceptualised more coherently and consistently?

Two, very different, instances of labour legislation are introduced to explore this question. First, Aotearoa New Zealand's *Employment Contracts Act 1991* (ECA) provides the initial example from which the discussion proceeds. This Act may be situated towards the libertarian end of a libertarian-authoritarian neoliberal spectrum, due to its lack of explicitly anti-collectivist, anti-union provisions. A further example, France's 1791 *Loi Le Chapelier*, typifies the authoritarian end of the spectrum, due to its repression of collectivism and unions. These examples may help to illustrate the historical continuity that exists from the earliest manifestations of 'free' wage labour to the present 'neoliberal era.' They indicate that what we know as 'neoliberalism' with respect to labour is grounded in capital-labour relations, rather than emerging from theory.

The term 'neoliberalism' has been engaged, almost exclusively and with varying degrees of rigour, by critics of market-oriented policies that prioritise private capital accumulation and employer prerogative. The newness justifying the 'neo' prefix is generally associated with the twentieth century, particularly the responses by liberal economists of the 1920s and 1930s to the rise of anti-liberal, anti-market state intervention. These economists concluded that free markets, including free labour markets, could not be assured through nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism. Instead, free markets had to be constructed, through systematic policy and legislation. This is the broad scenario regularly conjured up by the term 'neoliberalism,' depicting a body of neoliberal theory that, over decades, led to policy and legislative implementation: 'neoliberalisation.'

The *Employment Contracts Act* undoubtedly constituted a considerable step towards a neoliberal goal of free labour markets – an epochal transformation whose impacts resonated internationally. It eradicated the centralised system of industrial awards governing pay and conditions while abolishing compulsory unionism and reducing constraints on employers' ability to hire and fire workers. Yet the Act remained at the libertarian end of the libertarian-authoritarian spectrum. Its authors refrained from overtly anti-union measures, thereby conforming to a hollowing-out paradigm that remained broadly true to laissez-faire liberal traditions.

The *Employment Contracts Act* was the material reassertion of the power of capital and employers, rather than the implementation of a particular set of neoliberal theoretical objectives. In this respect, it may be viewed as a legislative reaction against a long-established, broadly social-democratic system of anti-liberal regulation. Therefore, the shifting dynamics of industrial relations constitute the primary drivers of legislative change,

requiring no prior neoliberal (nor indeed any) theory. The following example may help to clarify this interpretation.

Two centuries before the *Employment Contracts Act*, on 17 June 1791, the French Revolution's National Assembly deputies unanimously passed the *Loi Le Chapelier*, outlawing unions and strike action. This legislation emerged in response to employer demands for the National Assembly to act against striking Parisian workers. Therefore, the legislation embodied a reaction against workers' collective action, albeit couched in the perennial liberal rhetoric of individual freedoms; in short, it jettisoned *laissez-faire* in relation to worker rights.

The *Loi Le Chapelier* encapsulated, in eight succinct paragraphs, liberalism's reactionary, authoritarian dimension: legal compulsion to enforce market-based competition and individualised employment. Its provisions included: the banning of collective organisations 'in the same trade or of the same profession' established with the intent of pursuing 'their alleged common interests' (Articles 1 and 2); prohibition of citizens attempting to 'set prices for their industry or their labour;' and outlawing campaigns to prevent the undercutting of wage rates (Articles 4 and 6). Imprisonment and fines were decreed for anyone attempting to impede 'the free exercise of industry and labour' (Article 8).

Therefore, the legislators responsible for the *Loi Le Chapelier* were consciously constructing a competitive, individualised labour market: an explicit reaction against workers' collective organisation. If similar legislation were passed today, it would no doubt be classified as 'neoliberal.' In both these cases – the *Employment Contracts Act* and the *Loi Le Chapelier* – a liberal rhetoric of individualism and market freedoms was engaged as legitimisation. Yet not even the starriest-eyed idealist could see this rhetoric as the driving force behind either.

'Reliberalisation' may be a more appropriate term than 'neoliberalisation' to describe these processes. With specific reference to industrial relations, the processes often characterised as 'neoliberal' may be better understood within a materialist framework, as emanating from the capital-labour relation in its innumerable incarnations. 'Neoliberalism,' then, may be reinterpreted as the intellectual codification of employers' endless, anti-humanist reaction to the no less endless challenge by workers, individually and collectively, against dehumanisation – that is, their reduction to no more than suppliers of labour power, as conceptualised by Marx.

While twentieth-century neoliberal theory no doubt has had a significant influence on industrial relations policy during the 'neoliberal era', the origins of contemporary 'neoliberal' legislation can be traced back to employers' earliest reactions against labour's nascent mobilisation. Interpreting the labour history of the 'neoliberal era' demands recognition of not only its contextual and theoretical distinctiveness but also its continuity with the preceding centuries of capital-labour relations.

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# Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov: Behind the Scenes

*Notwithstanding its anodyne title – ‘Conduct and Problems of a Safe House’ – this previously top-secret report, declassified by ASIO and now accessible through the National Archives of Australia, is remarkable for its candour about Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov. The Petrovs, high-ranking members of the Russian Intelligence Services and attached to the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, defected in April 1954. The report was written by Senior Field Officer A.M. (Max) Monkhouse for the Deputy Director-General (Operations), G.R. (Ron) Richards. Monkhouse was seconded from ASIO’s NSW office to join an elite group formed within ASIO known as the Royal Commission Section.*

*The report is undated (and also unredacted), but we can assume early 1956. It is part of a 122-page file entitled ‘Royal Commission on Espionage 1954-1955. Lessons arising from’ (A6122, 96). Its acerbic criticisms of the Petrovs come as a surprise: ASIO was entrusted with their welfare and protection, and there is no hint in the royal commission’s final report of the difficulties ASIO confronted during the court proceedings. Indeed, the royal commissioners were full of praise for the Petrovs. In contrast, this report finds little to praise. From the perspective of ASIO, it permits a startling glimpse into their characters and into their lives in the safe house. The following edited statements are taken verbatim from this report.*

‘Vladimir Mikailovich PETROV is a rotund man, broad-shouldered, 5’6’ in height, grey, straight hair who looks older than his 48 years ... [H]e suffers from an inferiority complex, is dogmatic in his views, and a man of very limited intellectual or cultural standing. As such he is a poor conversationalist ... [H]e broods and sulks rather than face an issue, acting in such circumstances like a chastised schoolboy. When annoyed he has the peculiar habit of twitching his upper lip; it is most pronounced.

His main weakness is intoxicants. He seeks consolation and/or relief in the bottle at every opportunity. Drinking is an obsession with him, and now controls his existence ... The effect of drunkenness can well be described as a paranoid state. His right eye becomes stary, his left eye half closed, but the general appearance is that of a madman. In such a state, he is incapable of reason or logic, his voice assumes bellowing proportions, his language filthy. At times he becomes physically aggressive, but this is usually directed against his wife...

PETROV’s drinking excesses was the major problem to the Safe House team. At times there appeared to be no real answer. In this PETROV exhibited maximum cunning by concealing bottles and indulging in intoxicating orgies which could have resulted in serious embarrassment. An instance of his actions when under the influence was to run down the street looking for women clad only in his underpants ... It was now necessary to keep [the liquor] under guard and give it to PETROV by the glass only on request. Even this course needed to be restricted because of his frequent demand ...



In the early months of the [Royal] Commission in Sydney, PETROV became depressed with his environment, and stated that the future offered a lonely existence because 'most Australians objected to him.' It was therefore necessary to ridicule this state of mind by introducing him, under cover, to a family not connected with A.S.I.O. When this was done, the desired result was obtained ... A fondness for chess completes the picture of the man – a simple peasant with no courage or guts, reserved, addicted to drink and weak, but predictable.



Evdokia Alekseevna PETROVA is a well kept woman of 41 years of age, who though she has aged over the last 12 months, does not look her years ... even now she is attractive ... By nature an ambitious type, she had one objective in life – to better herself ... Combined with her ambitiousness is a strong will and a dominant approach ... She is most conscious of her appearance and realises the tactical advantages she can gain, but nevertheless welcomes any attention lavished on her ...

In her efforts to create attention she often overplays the part, thus spoiling what might have been a most favourable impression ... At times she exhibits a sympathetic understanding, and performs kindly acts, yet she exploits this created false sense of appreciation to the fullest. A normal tactic is to use her husband as a mouthpiece to express grievances, but she has been known to criticise him for tactlessness when the grievance has not met with approval. ... Indicative of her nature was her expressed desire to see every member of the Soviet Embassy torn to shreds – she said she would welcome and enjoy the spectacle.

She has repeatedly asserted that she believes in Communism and all of its ramifications, yet in actual fact she is class conscious and eager to associate with the upper bracket. She will in almost every case discontinue a conversation at a moment's notice if an opportunity presents itself to entertain a person of a higher social standing or who is in a more authoritative position. In such cases her real character is exemplified as she will issue orders or indicate in some way that she had previously been in lower company. No officer at the station was exempt from her criticism. She had, however, courage enough to openly engage any person in argument, and would admit defeat.

She remarked on one occasion that during the whole of her lifetime she has never had more than a temporary friendship with any female; she did not in fact enjoy feminine company as a rule. She believes that her intellectual standards are above those of her own sex ...

Mrs. PETROV married her husband as a matter of convenience, and for social standing. Although at most times loyal to him, indications were that she was not in love with her husband. She knew his many shortcomings and his objectional habits, and often rebuked him, but she enjoyed the privilege of being Mrs. PETROV. Without him she would soon be forgotten – it would be a blow to her egotism. In this union she was the dominant partner ... A summary analysis is that she is shrewd, cold, calculating, vain and selfish, a woman who appeals for sympathy but gives little in return.'

*Phillip Deery is Professor Emeritus at Victoria University. His most recent book Spies and Sparrows: ASIO and the Cold War was published by MUP in 2022.*

# Whitlam and the Suburban Strategy: Some Local Perspectives on 1972

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the 1972 federal election and the Whitlam Government. Labor's winning campaign – its first at the federal level since 1946 – was a centralised affair by the standards of the time. Its director, federal secretary Mick Young, broke with the tradition of leaving slogans and branding to the State branches and opted for a zeitgeist-capturing national theme. The result, 'It's Time,' was optimistic, made-for-television, and memorable.

Yet this was also a campaign that stirred enthusiasm – to say nothing of opposition – at the grassroots. Voters encountered 'It's Time' on t-shirts, balloons, badges, and bumper stickers, as well as TV, and 125 Labor candidates carried the party's banner in the electorates. Young was conscious of this and sought feedback from the candidates (successful and otherwise) immediately after the election. Only 39



*The Age*, 1 December 1972, 9.

responded in any detail, but their replies, preserved in the Labor Party's papers at the National Library, tell us much about how 1972 played out on the ground.

The most enthusiastic responses came from seats with the largest swings, which were not always seats Labor won. Many were in the suburbs of Melbourne, where Labor had long struggled, and its candidates faced formidable margins. In the Bruce electorate, for example, Labor candidate Russell Oakley gained a 7.7 per cent swing, reducing soon-to-be Opposition Leader Billy Snedden's margin to 2.2 per cent. This was, he thought, a product of good local media work: extensive coverage in the *Waverly Gazette* and *Oakleigh Standard Times* was his 'most effective weapon in the campaign.' In nearby Henty, Joan Child managed a 9.1 per cent swing, falling only 300 votes short of victory. Her campaign used clever gimmicks, like handing out fly swats inviting people to 'get rid of the pests' by voting Labor. But their success may also have owed something to Child's shrewd approach to canvassing a mainly

middle-class seat, whereby she chose volunteers ‘psychologically adapted to the type of people they were doorknocking.’

The single biggest swing of the election occurred further south, in Flinders, which incorporated Frankston, the Mornington Peninsula, and Phillip Island. There Colin Bednall cut Liberal minister Phillip Lynch’s 13.5 per cent margin down to 2.9 per cent, a result Bednall attributed to good media campaigning. As a former journalist and TV executive, he knew what he was talking about: he had himself photographed with Bob Hawke and Graham Kennedy, made headlines by flying to Tahiti to protest French nuclear testing, and got plenty of local exposure by writing reports on his own mundane campaign activities, like addressing pensioners’ meetings, for the local papers.

Bednall’s success was a surprise, but the suburban swing to Labor was no accident: Whitlam, with his focus on urban amenities, had deliberately courted the suburban vote. This left some country candidates feeling like afterthoughts. From Cowper, a northern New South Wales seat and Country Party stronghold, Thomas Cronin told Young he’d run the incumbent close without national assistance. His advice: ‘Labor must go all out to win country seats. It’s the country image – the [Al] Grassbys and the [Rex] Pattersons – that appeals to people.’ From Farrer, a Liberal seat centred on Albury and Wagga Wagga where Labor nonetheless managed a 6 per cent swing, candidate Kevin Esler made a similar call for more attention: ‘I think we could have gone closer in Farrer if we had the support of major party figures, and I think an able and expert campaign could take this seat for Labor at the next election.’

Elsewhere, some candidates thought the Coalition had waged the better ground war. In Canning, a country seat located south of Perth, Allan Scott found himself up against a ‘superior organisation’ in the form of paid organisers from the Liberal and Country parties. In Brisbane, Liberal Kevin Cairns may have lost his seat by 35 votes, but Denis Murphy still thought him a formidable campaigner who ‘was too good for us in the gut fighting of the last three weeks.’ And in Kingston, an Adelaide marginal where Labor survived a small swing to the Liberals, incumbent Richard Gun thought his opponents both ‘well-organised’ and ‘unscrupulous.’ He wasn’t sure if their ‘lying [and] cheating’ hurt him, but he suspected their effective postal vote campaign had.

The Melbourne candidates did not think themselves out-organised, but some believed a little more effort could deliver more suburban seats. Child told Young that middle-class voters in Henty and similar seats ‘were showing complete disillusionment with the Liberal Government.’ Labor could, she thought, ‘have added some of these seats to our government if more work had been put into the middle class areas.’ Gareth Clayton, who contested nearby Isaacs, similarly wondered if a few more local ads or shopping centre stalls might have yielded the thousand extra votes he needed to win.

The chance to try again came soon enough, with an early election in 1974. Again, there were big swings, but this time most were regional and most went against Labor: the party lost three country and two suburban seats, one in Sydney and one in Brisbane. In Victoria Bednall again failed to dislodge Lynch, but Child and Clayton eked out small gains to win Henty and Isaacs, helping Labor retain a narrow majority of five. Here, at least, the suburban strategy was paying off.

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# A personal reflection on writing labour history in WA

The history of workers and their organisations has been written by activists and scholars. Often they were one and the same. What they had in common was a conviction that labour history plays a significant part in the creation of present circumstances and that writing and analysing the narratives of working-class activism is a significant contribution to understanding society.

Western Australia has a strong history of labour organisation, which has not always been fully recognised in the dominant narratives of social and economic development. Its range encompasses collective action by dispossessed First Nations, by convicts and emancipists, as well as by migrants from many parts of the world. Within this broad compass, we can locate the struggles for equal treatment by women, by workers of non-British ethnic origins and by others discriminated against by the dominant culture of British imperialism.

In 1987 I was appointed to a teaching position in the Department of Industrial Relations at the University of Western Australia. I had just spent five years at the University of NSW, where there was a strong tradition of research into labour issues. As well as specific departments of Industrial Relations and Economic History in the Faculty of Commerce, there were individual scholars with interests in labour history in the Faculty of Arts. There was an undergraduate labour history course, which I taught with colleagues from the Department of Economic History. There was also a local branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, which had regular meetings, lectures and seminars, as well as its own journal.

While there were no specific labour history courses taught at UWA, this is not to say that there was no labour history research being done. In particular, Lenore Layman had been ploughing a lonely furrow at Murdoch University with her research on WA labour informing her teaching. Other historians had ensured that workers were not omitted from their research, although their principal focus was elsewhere.

So while a considerable amount of work had been done, little was specifically identifiable as labour history. My approach to the privilege of holding a tenured teaching position at a serious research university was to look at what gap I could fill, that others probably wouldn't. I had done this in Papua New Guinea, writing Masters and PhD theses on the history of workers' organisations in a situation in which they had received passing attention by others but were not attracting the focused research I felt their role in the development of that country called for. One of my PhD examiners had contacted me directly to point out that I was unlikely to enjoy a stellar academic career if I persisted with an interest in this area. It's quite likely that he was correct, but I felt that attempting to make a contribution in an under-researched area was a more appropriate focus for me than an approach based on considerations of career strategy.

In looking at how I could contribute to scholarship in WA, I had a major disadvantage. Like many new UWA appointees, I had little knowledge of WA in general. I did, however, know quite a few WA labour movement veterans through their visits to Sydney and Melbourne. I had heard them speak eloquently on the role and position of workers in WA. After I arrived in WA, several veterans were extremely generous with their time in explaining to me the position of workers and their organisations in the history of the State. I spent many hours in the homes of Joan and Vic Williams and Annette and Duncan Cameron. Their long-term activism was reflected in extensive collections of published material as well as personal archives to which they allowed me access. For me, these were inspiring people, but much of what they had to say was not reflected in the published material on WA labour or in courses at its universities.

A Masters in Industrial Relations degree was being taught at UWA, and I was able to convince colleagues that it should include a Labour History course. One immediate problem was that my knowledge of WA labour history did not equip me to provide a traditional lecture-focused program – I simply didn't have the necessary knowledge. Part of the solution was to invite some of the labour movement veterans to present seminars to this class, and an additional bonus was being able to open these seminars to the University community more broadly. Bill Latter, Lloyd Davies and Joan Williams were early volunteers, and their seminars were later developed into publishable papers.

This course also provided an avenue for student research to make its way into the public arena. Because it was in a postgraduate coursework degree, this course tended to attract students with considerable personal experience. Much of this was in the labour movement. Others had family connections with working-class activism. A major research paper was built into the course to enable those with such specific interests to build on that in a more rigorous intellectual environment than might otherwise have been available to them. Particularly significant in this regard was the project one class undertook investigating aspects of the industrial action centred on the Midland Railway Workshops in 1952. Subsequent studies by eminent labour historians such as Lucky Taksa and Bobbie Oliver provide scholarly accounts of this strike, its part in national railways and the history of working-class activism, but in the early days of developing the UWA Labour History course, it provided students with an opportunity for original research, which culminated in a public seminar hosted by West Australian Rail in its Perth headquarters. There were also several research students in UWA's Department of Industrial Relations, looking at labour-related topics.

So between the labour movement veterans and these students, a considerable amount of quality research was being produced, which I felt deserved more public dissemination. The upshot was a discussion with colleagues in the UWA Department of Industrial Relations about the possibility of using this material as the starting point for a journal. Given the technology of the time and the resources this required, this undertaking needed considerable institutional support. While few colleagues shared the view we had about the role of working-class activism, this Department was generous in its support of the idea.

So in January 1988, *Papers in Labour History* no. 1, was published. It was deliberately modest both in its physical presentation and in its academic scope. We aimed to make it readable for a wider audience than traditional university publications, and the choice of 'Papers' in the title was part of this. Looking back on the early editions, I am struck by the number and quality of contributions from veteran activists, those holding current positions in labour organisations and students. While it wasn't the sort of project which might attract the funding which drives so much academic endeavour today, I'm pleased to have been associated with it and with the contribution it made to an under-researched area of significance in WA life.

Even with the considerable institutional support of the UWA Department of Industrial relations, maintaining the publication was going to prove difficult. So I was mightily relieved when in 1989, Charlie Fox, a well-established labour historian, returned to WA and the university to take up a position in the Department of History. His immediate and enthusiastic involvement meant that *Papers in Labour History* could survive and prosper. It also served to further embed labour history in UWA's course offerings. At Charlie's initiative, we were able to establish an undergraduate labour history course open to students from both of our academic Departments. In 1991, Lenore also set up her own labour history course at Murdoch and was also involved in teaching into our course. While this sounds rather commonplace today, thirty years ago, such inter-departmental and university cooperation was unusual. In our UWA course, we combined the history of the labour movement and the history of work, using outside lecturers, sending students out to review Fremantle's May Day celebrations, and inviting musicians in to sing work songs. The course proved to be very successful, being taught for over a decade.

The initial publication of *Papers in Labour History* was subsequently underwritten by the formation of a Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The role played in establishing the ASSLH Branch by former and current union officials, notably Harold Peden, Bill Latter, and Tony Beech, three of our early presidents, was particularly significant in ensuring its influence extended beyond the walls of academia. This was also a source of some sponsorship, with several unions contributing to facilitate meetings and workshops. The Branch also took over as publisher of *Papers* from its second number, and sponsorship from labour movement organisations met some of the costs of publication.

The establishment of a Perth Branch of the ASSLH also became a significant source of contributions to *Papers*. This came about through the Branch's organisation of events, such as the commemoration of the Eureka Stockade and seminars, including one on Dorothy Tangney's pioneering parliamentary career. Several events gave rise to publishable material, which later appeared in *Papers*. The Branch played a significant role as a bridge between research and activism, with several current union officials taking a particular interest. The WA Branch of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union, of which I was writing a history, was particularly supportive. The Trades and Labour Council, especially its then President, Clive Brown and Arts Officers, Wendy Wise and Rick McCracken, who were hugely influential in local labour history and the ASSLH, spoke at several Branch events and provided venues for them.

Overall the lesson I draw with the benefit of hindsight is that the publication of *Papers in Labour History* and the establishment of the Perth Branch of the ASSLH were only possible because of a collective effort. The fact that this brought together labour movement veterans, current union officials, university students and academic researchers was an achievement itself, but it was also a pre-requisite for success. The longevity of the Branch and its publications has been remarkable. It is a source of some self-congratulation that I was able to make an initial contribution to something, which has become so much bigger and better than seemed possible in 1987.

*Michael Hess has had a distinguished career and has held positions at the University of Western Australia, the Australian National University, and the University of Tasmania, among others.*



# The Making of an Australian Working Man: Dinny McQueen 1899-1971

My father has been dead for fifty years. He was going on for seventy-two, and had been doing, on that Friday in late October 1971, what he had done for most of his life: labouring in a tannery. As usual on Friday nights, he brought home fish-and-chips and a bottle of Fourx, to fall asleep in front of the television. My mother could not wake him.

Born illegitimate on 31 March 1899 at Anakie in the gem fields of Central Queensland, he never mentioned his mother. Had she abandoned him, or did she die in childbirth? He did not know that his given name, 'Dennis,' was spelt with two 'ns,' or that he had a middle name, 'Eagers,' until he needed a birth certificate to marry late in 1941. Was 'Eagers' a clue to his father? He was brought up by his gran who ran a shop in Clermont. When he was eleven, she sent him 700 kilometres south to Ipswich to work in another general store. On the morning of 2 February 1912, the shopkeeper left him in charge while he, carrying a length of 4x2, rode his 'barrel mare' into Brisbane to sign on as a special constable, breaking heads on 'Black Baton Friday' to put an end to the General Strike.

From work in an Eagle Street warehouse, my father found his first job in the leather trades with a backyard operation. When it closed in August 1916, he went back to his birthplace for nine months, in time to experience the deluge late in December 1916 when sixty-seven people drowned at Clermont. I can find no trace among the victims of one who might have been his gran. He returned to Brisbane with five rubies, only to have them stolen.



*Dixon with staff following the opening of his new factory in 1908.  
Photograph from the Thomas Dixon Centre website courtesy Kerry Viksne.*

Back in Brisbane, he worked for one of the largest leather firms in Australia, T.C. Dixon & Sons, who had their tannery at Hill End near the river into which spilt its effluent. Their multi-storied brick boot-factory, now an arts centre, was on the other side of Montague Road. Despite high levels of wartime unemployment, there was still a shortage of men willing and able to heave water-soaked hides out of the pits. Picture the foreman's relief when a huge Scandinavian asked for a job. No sooner had he got into the pit than he began a go-slow. The foreman screamed abuse, threatened, but would neither get into the pit himself nor halt the job. Word spread that there would be a brawl at lunch time. The newcomer was in no greater hurry to get out than he had been to throw up the hides. By the time he did, the entire workforce had gathered. My father recalled that the stranger ambled across to the foreman, 'king-hit' him, then turning to the

men said: 'I'm from the Industrial Workers of the World and it's time you mugs got organised,' and walked out the gate.

They had never seen anyone stand up to a boss like that. Within the year, most had joined the Leather Trades Union. Here indeed was 'propaganda by deed.' At the time, such deeds raged far beyond that clash between one agent of capital and a militant labourer. His king-hit landed in a world lit by the dawn of revolution. By then, my father had moved to Drake Street, Hill End, 300 metres from the tannery. The landlady had been a teenage prostitute in John Wren's brothel – Wren was a Melbourne-based capitalist who was fictionalised as 'John West' in Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* – on Highgate Hill to which clients were conveyed from North Quay by cab. She and its driver fell for each other and decided to keep working until they could save enough for a Queenslander to run as a boarding house.

On several Saturday mornings each year, my father would visit her, sometimes taking me along. I was fascinated and frightened by her appearance as she stretched out on a settee, elephantine ears pierced by tiny gold rings, and ulcerated bare feet. A greater puzzle was the stream of men who dropped by all calling her 'Mother,' as did my father. I knew that she was not my other grandmother and could not have given birth to all her visitors. The explanation let me glimpse what class consciousness can mean in daily life. Throughout the interwar years, work was always intermittent.



*Bookmakers at the dog track, Dinny at foot of photo c/o Humphrey McQueen.*

By the early 1930s, employers laid off single men first, her boarders. She ran socialism in one boarding house. Those in work paid their rent. The unemployed did not. No one was evicted. They got a bed and something approaching three meals a day. What else could they call her but 'Mother'? She became the matriarch of Drake Street. A few houses away, German cabinet-makers changed their names to Murton. Someone taught their cockatoo to shriek 'Hang the King! Up the Kaiser!' It had to be covered with a blanket for the duration but survived into the early 1950s for me to enjoy repeat performances. Although the boss-class granted my father three years 'unpaid long-service leave' in the early 1930s, he was able

to pay rent by working as a penciller with a bookie on the Flat at the dogs.

My father, the bookmaker and the bagman each went threepence in the shilling with John Wren, who owned the racetrack and the Stadium, if not the Labor government. My father saw how easy it was to 'dope' a greyhound with an ounce of chopped liver or a teacup of stout too much or too little: 'A man might be silly enough to put money on a bloody horse,' he would say, 'but he's not so bloody stupid as to put money on a dog.'

His arithmetical skills intimidated me. How could someone who had left school before teenage keep track of dozens of threepenny bets so that the bookmaker knew by the minute what odds it was safe to offer. My father was no 'mute, inglorious Newton' but his abilities show that workers are not as genetically stupid as alleged by Gary Marks and Pru Goward. Had he been born forty years later, he might have been an accountant, or taught STEM at TAFE.

Reading little beyond the *Courier Mail* and the *Telegraph*, and owning no books, he was not a worker-intellectual, yet he was curious. He watched the Sunday afternoon telecasts of Shakespeare. On getting up from Hamlet, he said, 'So, that's what it's about.' His generation valued leaders who put into words what they felt. From a rally on North Quay, he recalled, decades later, the State Attorney-General, J.A. Fehilly, dismiss England as a land of 'cant, hypocrisy and humbug.'

Yet he was not stuck in the past. At the time of the 1957 split, the nearest State Labor member was Bert Turner who had held Kelvin Grove for twenty-five years. All Turner could say in response to the split was how terrible the Moore government had been during the opening years of the depression. My parents would have none of that. They needed no one to remind them of how dreadful life had been in the early 1930s, and after, but they were not blind to the ways Australia was being transformed. In 1961, they welcomed leaders like Clem Jones as Brisbane's Lord Mayor, and the university lecturer Max Poulter for the Senate, (who died of cancer before being sworn in).

Because my mother was a tribal Catholic – 'Vote Labor: Bank Commonwealth' – my father had to attend six sessions with a priest who explained that children of mixed marriages had to be brought up Catholic. He came away relieved that Father Humphries had not tried to convert him or make him confess his sins. So, he had me christened Humphrey, a given name he would also have known from Bogart. He was not an atheist, but rather an a-theist. The question of an afterlife never entered his thinking. Yet he had his clutch of superstitions: 'Never pick up a tray bit [threepence] on a racecourse.' 'Don't move house on a Friday.' As it happened, we shifted on Thursday 13th.

On marrying, my parents rented a Queenslander in Kenwyn Road, Red Hill, so he could work at Fulcher Brothers, whose tannery is now the site of the Brisbane Broncos. They took in my aunt, her two children and my mother's mother. A flow of servicemen – some GIs – were welcome to spend a night or two on the verandah. To protect us, my father excavated an air-raid shelter in the backyard. A pumpkin vine concealed the entrance. Whenever a siren sounded, instead of joining the other workers in their trench, he sprinted across Gilbert Park to be with us.

By August 1945, they were hoping to buy a 24-perch block, some twelve kilometres from the GPO in Payne Road, The Gap, for £22.10.00. Its owner insisted on selling his adjoining allotments for £45.00, which they agreed to pay in instalments. During 1949, they secured a twenty-year mortgage with the Permanent Building Society to have a five-square weatherboard-and-fibro house built for £1,000 just before Menzies got in to abolish price controls. My father's best friend, Bob Hovey, got a slightly smaller place a year later for almost twice as much. My father knew himself well enough never to contemplate building his own place, unlike our neighbours, Dave Napier and Bert Hill. (On the topic of post-war owner-builders, see McQueen, Humprey, 'Bert Hill - The Castle', published at: [https://www.surplusvalue.org.au/McQueen/aus\\_hist/aus\\_hist\\_bert\\_hill.htm](https://www.surplusvalue.org.au/McQueen/aus_hist/aus_hist_bert_hill.htm)) Instead, he set about concreting and painting, repainting, and repainting. For a few years, my bedroom colour scheme featured mushroom and duck-egg blue. One summer, he decided to paint the outside in the Labor Party colours of alternating red and white stripes. He gave that political statement away after paints speckled the boards below.

He kept chooks, never gardened, apart from a few tomato plants, the regulation maximum of five banana trees, and a choko vine around the outhouse. For the first few months, he had to bury our night soil until Hunter Brothers extended their service into the Gap. We recycled the *Women's Weekly* by nailing half-sheets to the dunny wall. The newsagent delivered to barely



120 houses on a Sunday. There was no Council bus service. A private one ran to suit the owner-driver's needs. More reliable were motorists who stopped for anyone walking to or from the tram. My father never owned a car or learned to drive. Before taking the train to visit us in Canberra early in 1971, he had never been further south than fishing trips to the Tweed. As we watched Sputnik pass, he shook his head: 'I never thought a man would live to see a spaceship.'

Waterworks Road was the only sealed road in The Gap, but not curbed and channelled. By the end of each cyclonic summer, the condition of Payne Rd was such that, not only did we call it Pain Road, but the street sign at the top of its first hill warned drivers that they were henceforth on Paynes Rd. Clem fixed that, and sewered Greater Brisbane. A two-stroke Victa mower served as a plough to level the yard. My father would lift it almost shoulder high to trim bushes. The tannery had to employ an engine driver to turn the power on in the morning and off in the afternoon. To fill in his seven hours and fifty minutes, the driver did odd jobs for the other men, including keeping my father supplied with blades.

Since the ice-man did not deliver, our first durable good was a Silent Knight fridge. An electric range replaced the wood stove, and later still, a hot-water service took over from a chip-heater in the bathroom. Even though my parents paid off only one appliance at a time, they were careful not to take on too much debt for each one. When a Chesterfield suite turned up priced at £15, and not £12.5.00, they had a long discussion on the front steps as to whether they could let the delivery men bring in it inside. That such considerations were normal was clear from the patience of those workers.

If frugal comfort was expanding, everyday life remained a good way short of affluence. Late in 1959, however, as I was about to start work, they could afford to pay off the first television set in the street – a Stromberg-Carlson. A year later, we stood agog watching the screen as the West Indies tied a cricket test match for the first time at the 'Gabba. Given my father's upbringing, where did he acquire what today are marketed as parenting skills? Each occasion of my waywardness was met with 'There'll be new rules and regulations in this household.' There never were, perhaps because he was convinced that 'Experience is the substitute for the good advice, we never take.' Every night before bed, he kissed me on the forehead. At the time, I took his unconditional love for granted but have since seen it as remarkable. Was it the lesson he took from being orphaned?

When I left school to start work in the Commonwealth Public Service, he felt that he had set me up for life since I would never be unemployed. But he didn't grumble when I resigned to attend university full-time from 1962. Other than the chemists at work, he had met no one who had been to a university until he got to know some from the St Lucia Branch of the Labor Party, in the same Federal electorate of Ryan. In July 1962, an issue of the *Freethinker* made front-page leads in the *Sunday Mail* and *Truth*, and me notorious. (For the atmospherics see Merle Thornton, *Bringing the Fight: A firebrand feminist's life of defiance and determination* (Sydney: Harper-Collins, 2020), 130-56.)

Despite the embarrassment that scandal must have caused him at work, there was never a glint of disapproval. 'Home,' wrote Robert Frost, 'is the place where, when you have to go there / They have to take you in.' Home was more than that for my parents for, as Frost adds, home is: 'Something you somehow haven't to deserve.' When a friend of his remarked that I had grown an inch taller than his six-foot-one-inch, he replied: 'I'd be even taller if someone had fed me as well as I've fed him.' That he was a 'good provider' was taken for granted. That he put food on the table was not the half of it. Four nights a week, he cooked 'tea' – meat and

three veg – and did the grocery shopping. He bought himself a pressure-cooker to coordinate the timing of the veges and to prepare tripe for himself.

If his cooking evening meals seems unusual for a man of the house it was no more so than that my mother had gone back to work in the late 1940s. (Her working life merits its own retelling.) She did the weekend baking and roasting. First thing on Saturday, he helped with the weekly wash, lifting the sheets out of the electric copper, putting them through the ringer, and hanging them around the Hills Hoist. To do so, was being fair.

Up each morning by 5.30, he shaved, fed the chooks, got his own breakfast of Weet-Bix, prepared his lunch, including a wedge of the boiled fruit cake that my mother made every Sunday, and was out the door by 6.30 am to start work before 7.30. He did not own a watch. Had he absorbed the time discipline of work?



*Dinny McQueen (2nd from right) in the Criterion bar with friends and the bar attendant. c/o Humphrey McQueen.*

After he had been in the Leather and Allied Trades Union for fifty years, the Queensland secretary got him to write up his experiences for its journal. He mentions none of the political matters I report here. Instead, he writes about the friends he had made, expressing ‘the greatest respect’ for fellow labourers: ‘Bill and Jack have passed over the great divide, but Roy, like myself, is still plugging away.’ (That other long-stayer was the father of Roy Harvey, Lord Mayor in the early 1980s.) Here is also his satisfaction, approaching pride, on the quality of the leathers he had worked up in tanning kid, calf and kangaroo, even unborn calves

(sleek) with their fur-like hairs intact. While assisting the chemists, he kept pages of recipes – if not formulae. Chemistry had another dimension. Handling hides treated with chromium sulphate ate into his hands. My mother machine-stitched calico inserts for his rubber gloves, and he smeared his hands with Zam-Buk ointment. The ulcers did not disappear until he switched to other tasks. Such injuries were accepted as a condition of work.

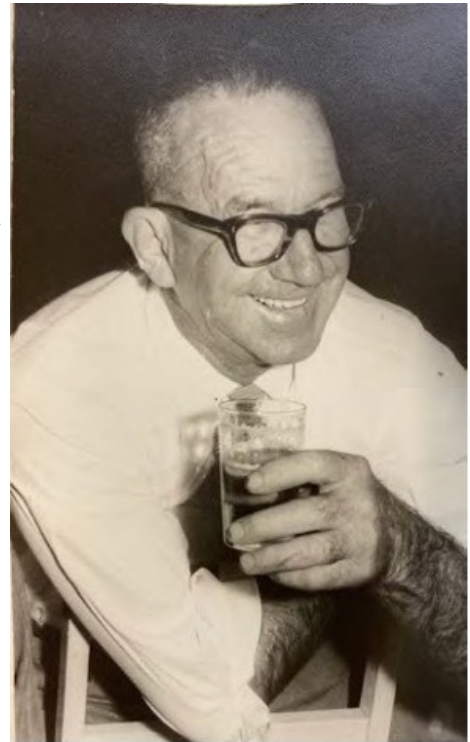
His stand-by cures were Goanna Salve for bruises, Friar’s Balsam for congestion, Condyl’s Crystals and acriflavine for cuts and abrasions. I never saw him take an Aspro, which was as close to Big Pharma as any of us came in those days. A GP who called to treat his bronchial flu turned to my mother: ‘If he doesn’t stop smoking, he won’t see the boy grow up.’ Stop he did. Twenty years later when I asked him how he had quit he replied: ‘I stopped.’ Apart from rubber gloves and galoshes, he never bought work clothes, never wore underpants, short-sleeves or short pants, always sported a hat, often as not on the back of his head. Saturday was different. Dressed up for the races, he allowed himself a set sum of spending money. If he had a good win, he’d arrive home in a cab with a couple of bottles of oysters to spice with Worcestershire sauce on buttered bread.

Men who had worked together over the decades in various tanneries dropped by the Saloon Bar of the old Criterion on Saturday forenoons for a couple of ales as one more strand in sustaining friendships as the woof and warp of being working-class. Four of them took shares each week in the Golden Casket, settling up when they next met my father, the cashier. No sooner had my parents paid off their mortgage than they won £200.

With the legal age of entry to hotels then twenty-one, he did not take me with him until I turned eighteen. I was struck by their respect for the barmaid. They stopped swearing when she came within what they judged to be earshot. A safe working environment was her right. My mother had been a barmaid at the Regatta when they met. Blokes entrusted barmaids with their pay packets on Friday nights, to collect when they sobered up. They did not have to be told that they should not mistreat women, or neglect their children, which was a kind of scabbing. My father never asked the one neighbour who did not measure up to join the Labor Party. When a funeral passed, men faced the hearse, bowed their bared heads as one more common decency.

At home, my father confined swearing to the sanguinary adjective as in 'The greatest bloody mystery of all bloody times what happened to that bloody hammer,' or whatever else it was the office for my mother to hand him usually something that was under his nose. If they did not bicker, that was not because she could not stick up for herself as she demonstrated at work and at Labor Party meetings. If she wanted to go to work when she was sick, he'd say, 'Stella, when we think we can't be done without, stick your hand in a bucket of water, pull it out, and see what a bloody great hole we've left behind.'

My parents had been recruited to the Labor Party in the early Fifties by a Grouper. The branch fell apart after the 1954 Split, to be started up again after the split in Queensland in 1957. A branch needed seven members and its monthly meetings in the Scout Hall five for a quorum. The day I turned fifteen, they enrolled me in the Great Australian Labor Party. The three McQueens became the core of a tiny branch in one of the safest Tory seats in the country, Mt Coot-tha for the State and City Council, and Ryan for the Feds.



Dinny McQueen Photograph c/o Humphrey McQueen.

Before Christmas that year, he asked a Communist friend to find a copy of Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, which turned up as the two-volume Seven Seas edition from East Germany. He handed it to me saying: 'You'd better see what we've got you into.' All but one of our Branch members were blue-collar workers, including a plasterer, a PMG linesman, a pantry-maid, and two carpenters. Their vocabulary would now convict them of racism and sexism. Yet, in 1959, I found unanimous support in my Branch, and at the State and Federal Electorate Committees, for a motion to amend the Party's Fighting Platform to rewrite the *Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act* (1897) in line with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. Returned servicemen backed Evatt's support for independence movements across the Empire/Commonwealth by recounting how they had seen natives being flogged to work harder. That was more than enough to convince the others.

The 1961 Federal poll was Australia's first television election. The ABC did its public duty by allowing the candidates screen-time. This included a scatter of communists. Their candidate for Brisbane, W.E. Bowden, was even less comfortable in front of the cameras than Menzies. Bowden took the safe course of reading out the Party's fighting platform – Nationalise the Banks; Nationalise the Oil companies; Nationalise BHP. After each proposal, my father interjected: 'The bloody Labor Party should be saying that.' Had he been in France or Italy, he,

and most of his workmates and those in our ALP Branch would have voted Communist, and joined that Party. Here, voting Labor was their only option.

But parliament was not the be-all and end-all of life as a worker. Praise in *The Australian* from Henry Mayer for my 1968 articles about convicts and racism made my father be sure to read those fortnightly columns. From them, he sent off for anarchist pamphlets. Around the tannery, he pasted up 'Fast Workers Die Young,' an echo from the Wobbly era. The O'Shea strike, following the global earthquake in 1968, rekindled the spirit of 50 years before. Par for the course in an era of what, in effect, was still compulsory unionism, members lagged in paying their dues. Tired of chasing them up, he called a stop-work because of non-unionists on site. The officials were as flummoxed as the owners, as were the blokes, who promptly coughed up.

His most regular maxim was that 'The worker has no friend but himself.' Nothing was further from his mind than selfishness or egoism. Rather, this voiced his conviction that no one was going to do for us what we don't do for ourselves. Branch members never gave a thought to personal gain. They had their hands in their pockets, scratching a few quid together to put leaflets into letter boxes, erect How-to-Vote signs and pay for cards to hand out on polling day. At that time the Labor Party's lapel badge proclaimed 'The Unity of Labour is the Hope of the World. No more depressions. No more wars.' Today, Canberra's Labor Clubs sport the motto: 'It's all about YOU.' My parents would have found that slogan incomprehensible. For them, it was all about all of us. Had I been able to explain the motto to them, their reaction would have been: 'If that's how you see the world, why aren't you with the Liberal Party at the Golf Club?'

Marx refers to the wage-slave as 'like someone who has brought his own hide to market, and now has nothing else to expect but a tanning.' That is not how my father would have summed up his working life. Yes, he knew that workers had no friends but themselves. But it was those friendships that made work less punishing and, more importantly, enriched other aspects of their being. My father's life was not a life in politics. Rather, it lets us glimpse the impress that, in those days, everyday doings bore on class consciousness. Long before 'verballing' became current as the term for being stitched up, he had taught me to 'Never trust a copper.'

These pages say too little about the most significant source of that moral economy, his hour-by-hour cooperation with others to turn hides into boot and shoe leather, thereby building trust between them. Work gave their lives meaning through friendships, the capacity to support a family, to enjoy a few beers and a bet, and to feel that a job well done brought a wider benefit: 'There's no such thing as cheap shoes. They won't last and they ruin your feet.'

Through a neighbour, we got to know orchardists at Wyberba, a siding south of Stanthorpe. My parents took the train there for their annual leave where he helped out at a different rhythm in a cooler climate. Three weeks after he retired at sixty-five, he got his job back. His body was still as strong as a horse – his nickname. Shocking as his death was for my mother, his being bed-ridden, or even house-bound, would have been intolerable for him. The only object I have of his are nail clippers. They were never sharp but designed to cut by pressure, so that they can be used equally by either hand. They must be older than he was when he died. They still work.

*Humphrey McQueen is a prominent independent scholar and public intellectual. Beginning with his groundbreaking book, A New Britannia in 1970, he has published prolifically. This article was originally published in The Queensland Journal of Labour History, No. 34 Autumn/Winter 2022.*



# Allies in the Struggle: the fight for abortion rights and labour history

In 2022 thousands in Australia joined the international explosion of outrage when the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Chanting ‘we won’t go back’ it was a clear reference to Australia’s history of illegal backyard abortion. It too was only overturned after decades of campaigning. Prior to the 1970s, abortion was a criminal offence in each state and territory in Australia, attracting a maximum penalty of life in prison. However, one in three women would need to access abortion regardless of the law.

According to Stefania Siedlecky, a pioneering doctor, teacher and feminist, ‘women who had means could attend a skilled abortionist. Otherwise, they went to someone less skilled or tried to abort themselves.’ Abortion ‘remained the highest single cause of maternal death in Australia until the 1970s.’ By the end of that decade Australian women had largely won the right to choose legal safe abortion or continue a safe pregnancy. The right to equality in society and at work was also achieved, although the reality did not match the promise. Even though today’s situation is different, it is worth revisiting our history.

## *Taking on the abortion ‘Racket’*

In the 1960s in Melbourne and Sydney, politicians, religious leaders and state bureaucrats turned a blind eye to a long-lasting criminal ‘Racket’ of corrupt police and price-gouging doctors. The establishment was less concerned with unborn children and more concerned with keeping women bound to patriarchal family structures. The same authorities subjected Indigenous women to forced sterilisations.

Civil libertarian lawyers were working on getting anti-homosexuality, and anti-abortion laws changed. When both the Liberal National Coalition (LNC) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) refused to change the law, Abortion Law Reform Associations and ‘pro-choice’ doctors like Bertram Wainer, fought tirelessly, taking risks to bring abortion out of the back streets. Reformers found allies among the left of the ALP, but its right wing was dominated by anti-abortion Catholic MPs who could stymie proposed legislative change with a ‘conscience vote’.

In 1969 the Menhennitt Ruling succeeded in Victoria’s Supreme Court, legalising some abortions to preserve the mother’s health and well-being. A similar Levine Ruling followed in 1971 in Sydney. Even though, as early as 1970, a Gallup poll showed governments were out of touch, doctors and women were not confident the new rulings would protect them. The poll showed that 57 per cent of the population agreed that abortion should be legal either ‘in all circumstances’ or ‘in cases of exceptional hardship, either physical, mental or social.’

## *Winning our rights*

From 1970-1975 feminist and socialist women, radicalised in the anti-Vietnam war movement, built the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), often linking up with other social movements – fighting for gay liberation and against racism – including the union

movement. WLM actions put abortion on the public political agenda. Abortion access became 'normalised', providing confidence in the court rulings.

Socialist unionist Zelda D'Aprano, a leading equal pay campaigner, said that despite 'all the scandal and exposure of the abortion [graft and corruption] trials, women were silent'. That silence would soon end as the WLM gained traction. The first WLM demonstration in Melbourne, 'Contraceptives, not Chrysanthemums!' demanded free contraception and abortion on request. WLM demands challenged state priorities and family structures – for equal pay and self-determination over their own bodies – with self-activity and often audacious direct action.

In Sydney, the militant SLUT Brigade (Sisters in Liberation Union of Terrorists) painted humiliating signs on the houses of Labor MPs who had voted against reform. Other feminists emphasised education. At a Sydney Town Hall debate in March 1972, involving feminist leader Germaine Greer, an estimated audience of 5,000 people overflowed into the street. Women's Abortion Action Campaign (WAAC) held regular street demonstrations, and mutual support groups assisted women in finding new abortion clinics set up by pro-choice advocates. After 1972, the newly-elected Whitlam government-funded women's health centres and introduced Medibank health insurance subsidies for abortion.

## Askin repeats: No demand abortion


The Premier, Sir Robert Askin, reaffirmed yesterday his Government's firm opposition to abortion on demand.

He said: "My Government firmly supports the view of Bishop Stewart in regard to abortion."

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst (Bendigo), the Most Rev B. D. Stewart, attacked the Labor Party at the weekend over abortion.

He said abortion was an issue in the election despite a massive effort to convince the electorate it was not.

Sir Robert said: "In a recent vote in the NSW Parliament the Government members were unanimous in opposing proposals from anywhere to introduce abortion on



**Sir Robert Askin**

parliamentary candidates should be asked their views on abortion.

He was commenting on Bishop Stewart's statement. Archbishop Knox said that laws passed in Federal territories could influ-

## Women's status: no inquiry into abortion

Mr Hawke, said last night that the conservative parties had used tactics of "smear and fear" against the ALP, particularly on the issues of the "permissive society."

He told a Labor Party rally at Ryde Civic Centre that the ALP had no policy on abortion because it was so much a matter for the conscience of the individual.

"If a private member's bill is introduced in Parliament, ALP parliamentarians will be free to vote with those sections of the Liberal Party pressing for abortion reform or to vote against the bill, according to their own consciences," he said.

Mr Lionel Bowen, the Labor MP for Kingsford Smith, said yesterday that the reported statement of

An edited transcript of a press conference given by the Prime Minister, Mr McMahon, in Perth yesterday, follows.

Q: What sort of issues could a Royal Commission on women investigate. For instance, would it investigate the question of abortion law reform?

A. The Australian National Council of Women has persistently asked me if I would have an investigation, a Royal Commission into the status of women. I have looked

A. I have stated our position clearly and emphatically on several occasions. I believe the present law relating to abortion is adequate and I have no intention whatsoever of amending the law.

Q. If the ACT law position arose in Federal Parliament would you agree to Liberal members of Parliament having a free vote on issues such as abortion?

A. There is no such thing as a free vote in the Federal Parliament. On one side they are always mobilised and must vote

in it other than to know the facts. And I've had no recommendations put to me at the moment. I doubt whether Mr Whitlam would be involved.

Q. Can you tell us if you have a plan to counter unemployment if the situation worsens?

A. I'm glad you asked this question, because I think if ever there was an absurd statement, it was that made by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics that there could be this big unemployment rate of up to 180,000, 190,000. On the technical information given to me it would be

Sydney Morning Herald, 21 November 1972, 8.

### *Resisting the Backlash*

There is nothing automatic about winning rights nor holding on to them. Intent on turning back the clock, the cashed-up anti-abortion Right to Life (RTL) group harassed clinics and promoted anti-abortion politicians who attacked health and welfare spending, especially Medibank. After the Whitlam government was sacked in 1975, Malcolm Fraser's conservative Coalition government cut public health and welfare spending. On 21 March 1979, conservative MP Stephen Lusher moved a motion to end Medibank rebates for abortion. Pro-choice rallies were supported nationwide. The motion failed 62 votes to 52.

Within a year, the RTL campaigned for Queensland's first abortion clinic to be closed and the Bjelke-Petersen government drew up a new bill that banned abortion unless a woman's

life was immediately threatened and banned women from travelling interstate to obtain an abortion. Some right-wing Labor politicians supported the bill. The RTL mobilised with a 'Celebrate Life' march, broadcasting the heartbeat of a foetus over commercial radio.

Pro-choice rallies won the support of Queensland's Trades and Labour Council (TLC), which issued a statement that 'the question of pregnancy termination should be the decision of the woman and her doctor.' At least ten unions supported similar policies: including BWIU (building trades), FMWSU (metalworkers), Seafarers, Wharfies, TWU (transport) and POA (professional officers). The government retreated.

In May 1980, a *Women's Weekly* survey reported that 94 per cent of Australian women believed abortion should be available in certain circumstances, while 62 per cent thought it should be available on demand. In the context of the general 1970s social struggle, the combined social power of the WLM and the union movement mattered.

#### *Unions, women workers and abortion*

Today we expect union leaders to support abortion rights. However, until the mid-1970s, few discussed abortion openly; union policy reflected a broader divide between the left and right. Activism and the growing number of women in the unions, built pressure within the labour movement to take a pro-abortion stance. In the mid-1970s, about 50 per cent of Australia's workforce were union members. Between 1970 and 1975, female union membership grew by 50 per cent while male membership increased by only 12 per cent. By 1980, 31.9 per cent of trade unionists were women.

As early as 1971, the communist-led NSW Builders Labourers' Federation supported pro-choice demonstrations. Other unions wavered. In 1980, the ACOA (Commonwealth Public Servants) adopted a pro-choice policy before scrapping it in a later plebiscite. In 1982, conservatives within the nurses' union ran a campaign urging refusal to assist with abortions as conscientious objectors.

In 1979, the ACTU supported family planning services. At its 1981 congress, they passed a motion expressing support for free, safe and legal abortion by 528 votes to 392. The unions' vast social and political power, exemplified by the general strike to save Medibank in 1976, was a major factor. WAAC argued that the denial of women's right to reproductive control was central to the oppression of women, as it denied them equal access to education and the workforce.

#### *The struggle continues*

By 1980 women reached a new threshold in the fight for emancipation. Although there is much-unfinished business. Today, even though most states have decriminalised abortion, access is a postcode lottery. And despite the growing heterogeneity of Australia's family structures, family remains contradictory. In 2022, on average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner; for Indigenous women it's 12 times that. And there's still a significant gender pay gap, which is now 'stuck at 22.8%'. The Covid pandemic revealed the gendered and racialised nature of low-paid essential service jobs. Women are now half the workforce and the trade union movement. History shows that solidarity actions by workers of all genders matter and, if that continues, we won't have to 'go back'.

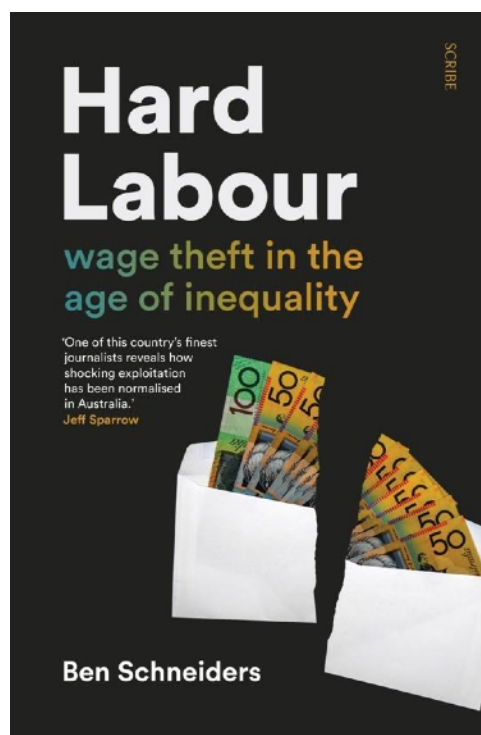
*Judy McVey is a long-term women's liberationist and socialist, and PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, Political Economy Department. This paper is based on a talk given at the 2022 Labour History Conference, Bendigo.*

JAMES C. MURPHY

# Australia's Inequality Machine

*A Review of Ben Schneiders, Hard Labour: Wage Theft in the Age of Inequality (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2022). pp. 256. \$32.99. Paper.*

It is difficult to read Ben Schneiders' almanack of workplace injustice without encountering feelings of anger and guilt. Anger at the desperate plight of migrant workers exploited with brutality on Australian farms, in convenience stores, in high-end kitchens, meatworks, and drycleaners; anger that our society might handsomely reward, rather than imprison, the managers and financiers (or, in some cases, corrupt union officials), that force near-starvation wages and up to 20-hour shifts on their employees; guilt for so regularly being a consumer of goods and services tainted by such exploitation. I read much of this book in cafes and pubs, and I would find I could not quite meet the eyes of the staff while there, knowing my coffee and eggs, my pint and korma, had a price either so low that they could not possibly get a working wage out of it, or so unequally shared with the owners of the business that the effect was just the same for the poor sap serving me. I considered boycotting these enterprises; to pack up and read at home instead, but Schneiders' depiction of modern-day slavery on farms less than a hundred kilometres away from my fridge and then the massive wage theft leaving shelf-stackers impoverished by the nation's biggest supermarkets, left me to conclude my home-made salad sandwich was just as sullied by exploitation as anything. Wage theft, as an Australian consumer, is now inescapable.



That is one of the key claims that Schneider — the *Age* investigative journalist who broke some of the biggest wage theft scandals of the last few years: Coles, McDonalds, Neil Perry's Rockpool, George Calombaris' Press Club, etc. — succeeds in hammering home in this book: that wage theft in the Australian economy is not occasional or isolated, but widespread, normalised, systemic. In fact, he is so convincing on the ubiquity of wage theft that he finds himself having to explain why paying the legal minimum wage in, say, cafes would not decimate the hospitality industry and cause mass unemployment (p. 66). Yes, consumers might have to pay a tiny fraction more, but Schneiders shows that in many cases, the money stolen from workers does not actually go into bringing down the price of smashed avocado and instead tends to go towards fatter profits for already-wealthy proprietors and investors. Schneiders follows the money, sometimes through labyrinthine international shell corporations and tax havens (pp. 70-71), to show the incredible fortunes being made by private equity firms and shareholders from the illegal mass exploitation of labour in Australia.

Indeed, at times the contrast between the exhausted, penniless, effectively indentured migrant chefs, the exquisite \$300 meals they prepare all day and night, and the garish multi-



million-dollar Portsea mansion of the restaurant's owner is so gratuitous and extreme that it feels almost pornographic. I could not help but recall Peter Greenway's baroque anti-Thatcherite film, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* – the grotesque gangster-cum-restaurateur villain, Albert Spica, replaced instead by normally-loved Australian TV chefs; chewing with their mouths open and cackling with criminal insanity as they wrench money from the till and shout for more champagne and caviar to the table. Schneiders' portrait of Australia's new gilded age sometimes comes close to this.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with a little dramatic juxtaposition if it is there to depict. However, what was missing was a greater appreciation for the human depth of the victims of wage theft. We meet dozens of individuals in Schneiders' book, but they remain thumbnail sketches: a name, a country of origin, an overview of their horrible work conditions, and sometimes an explanation of what they did to fight back – in the courts, on the picket line, via a union or leaks to the press. It is difficult to connect emotionally with any of these people – they come and go with too much speed. There is no Jurgis Rudkus – Upton Sinclair's human guide through the harrowing brutality of Chicago's meatpacking industry at the turn of the twentieth century in *The Jungle*. Via Jurgis, Sinclair helps us feel the exhaustion and physical pain of labour; the fear of deprivation and the humiliations of accepting exploitation; the gut-wrenching betrayals of the authorities, the regulators, the indifferent union, and heartless politicians. We see more intricately the grand trap that the economic system snares its victims in; we feel its human toll more acutely, the way it breaks people and the things it drives them to. Schneiders depicts many potential Jurgis's, and he clearly feels for his subjects, but he does not share enough of their lives and does not place us in their shoes for long enough to let us see their world and really connect with them.

More frustratingly, we also cannot connect with any of Schneiders' documentary sources. There are no endnotes in this book – despite numerous references made to this book, that report, 'one expert', 'the data', and so on. I can understand why endnotes are perhaps not the norm for Schneiders, as a journalist usually unencumbered by such things, but Scribe simply should not have let this book go to print without forcing some kind of referencing system on him. There is also no index. The result is a shame: the lack of referencing undermines both the utility of the book as a gateway to other sources and the rigour of the work in that we can check up on none of his analysis.

But these two faults are far from terminal. The work retains immense value: it depicts, in an engaging and accessible format, Australia's 'inequality machine' in action – down at the level of the individual fruit-picker or burger-flipper being ripped off by hundreds of dollars a week; up at the level of large, well-known, enterprises pilfering wages to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars a year, sometimes in close collaboration with unions nominally there to protect workers; and then way up, at the level of the macroeconomy, showing how the neoliberal turn of the 1980s fatally weakened the labour movement and kickstarted the redistribution of profits to capital on a massive and ever-increasing scale. It will stand as a valuable and important document chronicling the gross inequality of Australia's gilded 'twenties.

It also looks at the other side of the workplace relations equation – the labour movement. The scale of that survey, for such a taut volume, is sweeping: Schneiders charts the formation and growth of trade unions in Australia; their important role in policing employer excesses – like wage theft; their incredible – Schneiders suggests excessive – power in the 1970s, and their routing by the forces of capital through the 1980s and '90s. He draws a straight line from the neoliberal turn of the Hawke-Keating and Howard years to the grotesque inequality

and injustice of the present, with the demise of union power as the handmaiden. A portion of that demise Schnieders puts down to the malfeasance of unions themselves. The book devotes special attention (chapters six and seven) to the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association and their cosy, at-times illegal deals with large employers like Coles and McDonalds, giving their ascent to poor wages and conditions for hundreds of thousands of low-paid workers in exchange for hordes of members, to wield as influence within the Labor Party. These schemes – defended still by the Shoppies as untoward – are in Schnieders' hands the very height of betrayal. Is it any wonder, given this kind of behaviour, that the bulk of the precariously employed – in hospitality, on farms, etc – are not union members; that just 5% of under-24-year-olds are unionised; that the entire movement risks dying out in the coming decades (p. 128)?

But Schnieders also shows us green shoots for the labour movement. He depicts new bouts of organising, including by the UWU on farms, RAFFWU in retail and take-away chains; the (short-lived) Hospo Voice in cafes and bars; new waves of action occurring outside the debilitating strictures of the Fair Work system, including civil court actions; new pressures for policy responses, including the criminalisation of wage theft. For Schnieders, then, Australia's gilded twenties is not necessarily the graveyard of trade unionism – it could yet be a rallying point from which the movement rebuilds, reorganises, and start the long, perhaps two-generation battle to restore some of the power labour has lost over the past thirty years.

*James C. Murphy is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Melbourne. His most recent publication is The Making and Unmaking of East-West Link, published by Melbourne University Press in 2022. An earlier version of this review was published in Recorder, newsletter of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, No. 305, Summer 2022.*

## *Labour History*, No. 123

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STUART MACINTYRE

# Radiant Illusion? A lost review by Stuart Macintyre

*[Doug Munro: In December 2016, when I was involved with a United States journal, I commissioned Stuart to write a review of Radiant Illusion? Middle-class recruits to Communism in the 1930s, which had been published the previous year. The review was duly written but the unfathomable One Scholar system of electronic submission defeated Stuart's best efforts to send off his review. We asked the journal editor to do this, which did not happen. In mid-2017 I parted company with the journal over a matter of non-consultation and Stuart seemingly couldn't be bothered in chasing up the fate of his review. It languished in our respective hard drives, which was a shame because it's an insightful review by a major scholar of communism of an important little book on the subject. So here it finally is, happily resurrected and given the wider circulation that it warrants.]*

*Review: Nicholas Deakin (ed.), Radiant Illusion? Middle-class Recruits to Communism in the 1930s (Edenbridge, UK: Eden Valley Editions, 2015). pp. 178, \$19.42. Paper.*

The essays in this collection are based on seminars at Gresham College in London in 2013 and 2014, where the children of British communists of the 1930s reflected on the politics of their fathers and mothers. The event was initiated by the principal of the college, Roderick Floud, a distinguished economic historian whose parents had joined the Communist Party while students at Oxford. Bernard Floud, his father, worked for the Ministry of Information after wartime service and later became a television company executive before election to the British parliament in 1964. It was when Harold Wilson proposed to make him a Minister in the Labour government that he was interrogated by MI5 and denied a security clearance on the grounds of 'a lack of frankness about his past Communist associations'. Depressed by the recent death of his wife, he committed suicide.



Roderick Floud was drawn to his father's defence when his interrogator, Peter Wright, published alarmist memoirs, *Spycatcher*, alleging that Bernard Floud worked for the KGB – and Christopher Andrew relied on the MI5 file for an inaccurate account of the case in the original edition of his authorised history of the agency. Despite Andrews' subsequent correction, Roderick Floud is still denied access to the file. In discussion with a senior civil servant who had known and admired his father, he began reflection on the impulses that had drawn young men and women such as his parents to communism and the way that with

the hindsight of the Cold War they were portrayed as utterly deluded. Hence this collection, which uses a filial perspective to reflect on an earlier generation's choice.

Several academic contributors were recruited to frame the biographical accounts, and there was a panel discussion in which Denis Healey (one of the last surviving communists of the 1930s) joined with two twentieth-century British historians, Peter Hennessy and Juliet Gardiner. Nicholas Deakin's lengthy introduction canvasses the context in which the middle-class recruits of the 1930s turned left. They grew up in the shadow of the Great War in an atmosphere of recrimination and mourning. Then they experienced the social consequences of the Depression, not directly but through an awareness of the waste it laid to industrial communities (so that the passage of the hunger marchers through Oxford and Cambridge on their way to London made a lasting impact) and they became active in anti-fascist activity (especially in defence of Republican Spain).



*Denis Healey speaking at the Labour party conference in 1945. The Guardian.*

These are familiar features of the inter-war ambience and Deakin reminds us that they drew only a small minority of this generation to communism. He searches for an explanation for that decision and sees it as a particular form of rebellion that could often be traced to family, school and university. For some it took the form of a crossing over comparable to religious conversion, for others it was a matter of reasoned reflection. Some were drawn to the Communist Party as the wave of the future and others were attracted to communists (often through romantic links) as determined and resolute activists.

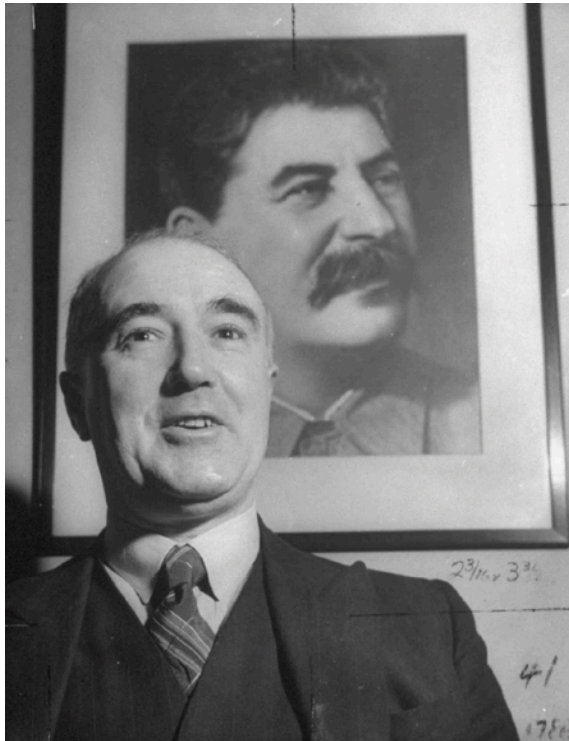
These variations are illustrated by the family histories. James Klugmann, Margot Heinemann, Mary McIntosh and Richard Clark attended prestigious and progressive private schools, and were able to travel while young. Yet Len Jones and his sister Eva grew up in an impoverished Jewish home in Liverpool; he proceeded to Cambridge through scholarships, whereas her education came later after she married the fanatical Eric Cohen. Eric, who worked as an accountant, carted along party literature to their wedding where he informed Eva: 'I dedicate my life to the Communist Party but whatever's left you're welcome to' (p. 130).

Eric Cohen illustrates the point made by Kevin Morgan in another introductory essay on middle-class recruitment. The leading British scholar of British communism, Morgan contrasts the insistent proletarian Communist Party of the 1920s with the transformation effected by the Popular Front of the 1930s. Although the platform of the 1937 party congress was dominated by established working-class leaders such as Harry Pollitt, nearly half the 500 delegates were aged under 30; and while 186 worked in industry, 152 were in professional and clerical occupations. They were more likely to come from the meritocratic grammar schools than exclusive public schools; the Left Book Club was more formative of their politics than the hothouse atmosphere of Oxbridge. Morgan suggests that this critical mass of middle-class communists eased the strictures that had inhibited earlier ones. They embraced the duties and rituals of membership, addressed each other as 'comrade', but no longer felt



the need to drop their embarrassingly bourgeois given name for a shortened proletarian one or flatten their diphthongs to disguise their background.

Some of these middle-class recruits became lifelong loyalists. That is true of Klugmann, Heinemann, Jones and the Cohens. As the Communist Party of Great Britain moved gradually after the war to a more gradualist and independent stance, Len Jones abandoned it to live in the German Democratic Republic and followed the Soviet line unbendingly to the end of his life. A son remarked that 'he was not a Communist; he was really a Stalinist' (p. 120).



Harry Pollitt in front of a portrait of Stalin, c. 1945. *Time Life*.

Uncritical admiration of the Soviet Union was a common characteristic of all these recruits, though Floud contends that this was by no means unusual at the time. It was only with the advent of the Cold War that they would be seen as 'naïve, deluded or even treacherous' (p. 11). Two of the individuals considered here provided intelligence to the Soviet Union during the war. James Klugmann, a lifelong party functionary, helped to recruit Donald Maclean and the other Cambridge spies, and as a member of the wartime Special Operations Executive, he promoted British support of Tito in Yugoslavia. Geoff Andrews, his biographer, has documented this involvement in espionage but the other case is less well known. It is James MacGibbon, who, as an officer in the Intelligence Corps provided information on German dispositions that enabled the Red Army to win the Battle of Kursk in 1943. As his son Hamish argues here, this was scarcely an act that endangered British security.

Deakin suggests of these middle-class recruits that in joining the party they 'relinquished at least some of their critical faculties' for a radiant illusion (p. 63). Some held fast to it and others were disillusioned. That break came at various times, but it was not so much an abandonment of the ideals that made them communists as a reaction to the betrayals of that cause. Hence Hamish MacGibbon left after Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's tyranny in 1956, but he and his wife remained Labour and CND activists. As Kevin Morgan explains, many middle-class communists expressed bitterness towards Stalinism, some to the Communist Party itself, but it is rare to find a similar hostility for the experience of party membership. And the same is true of these essays.

*Stuart Macintyre was one of Australia's preeminent historians. His last major publication, The Party: The Communist Party of Australia from heyday to reckoning, was published in 2022 by Allen & Unwin. This review was first published in Recorder, No. 305, Summer 2022. Frank Bongiorno's launch speech was published in Radical Currents, Labour Histories, No. 1, 2022.*

ROWAN CAHILL

# *Our Members Be Unlimited*

*Review: Sam Wallman, Our Members Be Unlimited: a comic about workers and their unions (Melbourne: Scribe, 2022). pp. +256. paper \$39.99.*

Such was the demand for Sam Wallman's *Our Members Be Unlimited* that when it was officially released at the end of May 2022, the publisher had to order another print run. Maybe this was due to the decent pre-publicity campaign mounted by the author and the publisher; maybe the publisher had underestimated the initial print run. What is more likely is that the book met a real need.

Cartoonist and activist Sam Wallman is Melbourne-based and describes himself as a 'comics-journalist'. His work has been widely published in outlets as diverse as *Overland*, *The Age*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, SBS, the ABC, and used in campaigns led by Naomi Klein, Owen Jones, and Bernie Sanders. His focus is the nature of work and workers in the modern neoliberal economy, and social movements and collective actions in the pursuit of social justice.



Wallman has travelled in Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States on assignments. In interviews he has cited Matt Groening, Mary Leunig, and Diego Rivera as amongst influences upon his work. His posters and large cartoon work hark back to the visually striking and message-crowded trade union banners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Experience as a trade union delegate and organiser, and employment in the modern work environment as a picker in the Amazon warehouse wilderness, deepen his understandings and perceptions.

*Our Members Be Unlimited* is a full colour comic, with 256 pages, ten chapters and an appendix. Eschewing the traditional panel layout and format of comics, Wallman plays with the genre. Each page delivers a surprise, variously treating the viewer-reader to double-page spreads, full-page spreads, half-page panels, traditional comic panels, traditional balloon texts, swirled texts, listed texts, no text. For Wallman, text is important. Over time, as the visual feast of Unlimited attests, he has developed and individualised ways of delivering it in comic form.

Taking its title from an idea pondered upon by E. P Thompson, and subtitled 'a comic about workers and their unions', Unlimited gets straight on the job, sketching the ways that the decencies and social justice pleasantries we enjoy today have much to do with collective organisation and struggles in the past, and yet, how in our daily lives their origins have been lost. Central to Wallman and this comic is the premise that resistance to exploitation goes way back, is as old as time, and in tandem with this, that people collectively coming together in opposition and struggle to confront and seek redress, also have been human constants.

The rest of the comic explores this in the context of workers and trade unions. Rather than depict this as a narrow national story, Wallman portrays it in a global way. He peppers his case with examples of collective organisation and resistance in the pursuit of workplace and social justice across time and place. No doubt, too, the book envisages a global market; publisher Scribe has a London office.

Drawing on his own experiences as a worker and as a union activist, Wallman spends considerable time examining the nature of work in the modern neoliberal workplace. Much of this work is casualised, deadening, fragmented by shifts, subject to gruelling production demands, and conducive to worker-feelings of atomisation and powerlessness. Wallman provides examples of how this workscape has been contested in modern workplaces, and asserts the relevancy and need for collectivisation and organisation to address the exploitation of workers and attendant injustices involved.

Wallman's comic is obviously aimed at those who know little if anything about trade unionism, and contemporary workers, particularly the young. He is upfront in acknowledging that the trade union movement is not without its historical mistakes, ongoing faults and tensions, so the comic has relevancy for those harbouring jaded attitudes towards trade unions. As an educator, I reckon the comic is also well suited to discussion groups, book clubs, and use in educational outfits and settings. It would be a huge asset in the training of trade union organisers and delegates.

As Wallman makes clear throughout the book, the working person is up against a huge social, political, economic behemoth in Capitalism. Many of us in our lonely hours have felt the battle rage within as pessimism versus optimism and hope. In his final and deceptively simple chapter, Wallman confronts this spiritual/existential political crisis. He depicts a worker who has figured out that trade unionism is the way forward, walking through some twenty pages of a workplace.

This cartooned workplace path is bland and grey, soulless, concrete, predetermined, an end of history so to speak. But each double page spread of a step taken by Wallman's worker is depicted as being increasingly confident. Eventually, as the booted feet hit the floor, the concrete begins to crack, and as the cracking becomes more significant a green plant emerges, grows, and begins to bloom. The grey path disappears as the book ends. Wallman's way of saying small beginnings are hopeful beginnings, that the future is not written but there for everyone to variously write and make, and that the key to it all is collectivity, organisation, resistance, struggle. And that trade unionism is not an irrelevancy in the modern world.

For some 50 years or so there has been a tsunami of cultural messaging promoting and encouraging the atomisation and individualisation of people in the workplace, undermining and thwarting collectivity in the pursuit of wages and conditions, indeed of social justice betterment generally. In Australia this cultural process has been reinforced by pernicious political-legal interventions in the name of 'workplace reform'. *Our Members Be Unlimited* confronts and challenges this hegemony. Creatively, intellectually, politically, emotionally, Wallman has produced a remarkable work. *Our Members Be Unlimited* is a robust and distinguished contribution to the long Australian tradition of interactions between artists and the labour movement going back to its birth years in the nineteenth century.

*Rowan Cahill is a radical historian and journalist. His most recent major publication, The Barber Who Read History, was co-authored with Terry Irving and published by Bull-Ant Press in 2021.*



# ASSLH CONFERENCE PHOTOS

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History's 17th biennial conference was held in Bendigo in April this year. We include here a few of Judy Hughes' photographs of the event.



*At the start of the Smoking Ceremony*



*Tim Sullivan and Diane Kirkby*



*The Opening Plenary Discussion*



*Enjoying Morning Tea*



*Panel Discussion*



*Thanking the Conference Organisers*



# ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History is a non-profit organisation, founded in 1961 to study 'the working class situation ... and social history in the fullest sense'. The Society aims to encourage teaching and research in labour history, and the preservation of the records of working people and the labour movement. It desires to make history a vital part of popular consciousness and a matter for reflection and debate.

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<https://www.labourhistory.org.au/branches/perth-branch/>

SOUTH AUSTRALIA: Adrian Graves

<https://www.labourhistory.org.au/south-australia-branch/>

SYDNEY: Danny Blackman

<https://www.labourhistory.org.au/branches/sydney/>

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In 2022, the ASSLH hosted a seminar series to celebrate its 60th anniversary. Find out about this series and the other activities of our branches at <https://www.labourhistory.org.au/events/>

