

# *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*

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*The Brisbane Labour History Association*

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### **Front Cover Photo:**

*Workers constructing the Story Bridge in Brisbane in the 1930s. From a collection supplied by Dawn Clancy. See other photos from the collection published in this journal issue.*

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# The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

No. 17, September 2013

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*Labour History* (ISSN: 0023 6942) is an internationally recognised journal published twice a year, in November and May, by the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History of which the Brisbane Labour History Association is the Brisbane branch. Contents, abstracts and prices of back issues are available at the web site [www.asslh.org.au](http://www.asslh.org.au). The journal is available in both printed form and via the non-profit publisher JSTOR. The association with JSTOR offers individual subscribers a range of advantages, including online access to the full run of *Labour History* from 1962 on.

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### **The latest issue of *Labour History* (May 2013)**

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- Ellen Mulcahy: Labour Woman Activist of a Century Ago
- Those Knights of the Pen and Pencil: Women Journalists and the Work of Cultural Leadership
- Women's Leadership in War and Reconstruction
- Zelda D'Aprano and the Politics of Gender in the Australian Labour Movement

Given the headline topic, this issue is guaranteed to have an impact well beyond the immediate field of Australian labour history.

In addition, Issue 104 includes articles and research reports on a variety of topics, including an historical study of occupational health and safety regulation and a study of Professor Joe Isaac's contribution to Australian industrial relations scholarship and policy development.

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# Editorial

Howard Guille, Ross Gwyther and Bob Russell

This issue of the journal continues to publish papers that were presented at last year's BLHA symposium, the theme of which explored living under conservative governments – the implications for trade unions, working people and the labour movement. The first paper in this issue, by Howard Guille provides an excellent overview of 1980's era Queensland, focusing on the labour legislation that was introduced by the Bjelke-Petersen governments and the effects that it had on wages and labour income. Far from being an atavistic relic from an earlier period, Guille shows how the labour legislation of this period actually prefigured aspects of the Coalition's later *Work Choices* laws.

Strikes may be made illegal and workers may be subjected to punitive fines and legal harassment, but as Barbara Webster documents, in her study of the Gladstone power station workers during the 1985 dispute, this may only drive resistance into new covert and imaginative directions. Webster's paper unearths the rich history of underground, community and symbolic resistance that accompanied the Gladstone powerhouse operatives support for and solidarity with sacked

utility workers. While Guille's paper makes reference to the importance of the SEQEB dispute and Webster's contribution examines a particular aspect of it, Ted Riethmuller provides a personal account of what it was like to be an electrical apprentice coming of age working in a Queensland power station. As in his previous contributions, Ted brings social analysis, politics and art together in a powerful short story.

We also continue our new series of contemporary interviews with union leaders on topics of current interest. In this issue, Ross Gwyther and Howard Guille interview Beth Mohle, Secretary of the Queensland Nurses Union. This union is bucking trends in membership attrition and declining sectorial density. As such it provides an instructive case study into how unions can prosper in tough political times.

# BLHA

## President's Column

Greg Mallory

### **President's Report, September 2013**

The BLHA held the annual Alex Macdonald Lecture on May Day which discussed the issue of May Day/Labour Day in Queensland. With the Newman government abolishing the traditional Labour Day holiday, it was a timely lecture to consider the history of this holiday in Queensland. The lecture was presented by Dr Glen Davies and was titled 'Family, Freedom and a Fair Go'. The lecture provided a lively discussion from the audience. The lecture also provided the opportunity for the Association to present George Britten with his Life Membership. George was awarded Life Membership at the AGM but was unable to attend and therefore was given the opportunity to say a few words before the lecture. George spoke eloquently about his life in the labour movement with his involvement with the Plumbers Union and the Communist Party.

Ross Gwyther, Executive Member, has been conducting interviews with elderly labour movement people in Brisbane

and Townsville who were active in the Communist Party from the 1940s to the 1980s. The Search Foundation has sponsored this project with the Roger Coates Labour History Research Scholarship. A further 12 interviews will be conducted to complete the project. A web-site is currently being set up as part of the BLHA web-site on which the transcripts will be available.

The National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History was held in Sydney in the second week of July. A report of the conference from executive member Sigrid McCausland appears in the journal.

Our annual October Symposium will be held on Saturday 5 October at the Brisbane Workers Community Centre in Paddington. The BLHA is calling for papers for the symposium that examine particular historical issues and disputes in which unions were able to effectively campaign in hostile conditions. The symposium will begin at 9.30 and finish around 1 o'clock.

This will be followed by refreshments and lunch.

Danielle Miller, an Executive member, has been working at the University of Queensland with the project and web-site 'Queensland Speaks', which interviews leading politicians and public servants about Queensland politics. A summer course was held in 2012 with politics students and the participants were involved in researching labour history figures. One of the participants, Peter Cross, worked on a paper on Alex Macdonald and his relationship with the student protest movement of the 1960s. The paper was presented at a meeting in front of over 20 people, including Alex's daughter and grandchildren, at the discussion group, which Dan O'Neill convenes on a monthly basis. This important work should appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal.

For the past year the Executive have been discussing ways of getting the membership more involved in various activities of the Association. I am of the opinion that we need to have a number of other activities during the year particularly between May and October. If anyone has suggestions for other activities can they contact the Executive through Craig, our Secretary.

In concluding I would like to thank Danielle Miller for her work on the Executive for the past four years. Danielle has helped organise

and participated in seminars and symposiums for the Association. Danielle has accepted an academic job in Melbourne and I wish her well in her new job.

## **The Queensland Labour Movement under Conservative Governments: the 1980s**

He backed economic development at any price, censored books, plays and films, opposed unions, superannuation schemes, the 40-hour week and Aboriginal land claims.<sup>1</sup>

‘Right-of-centre’ governments ruled Queensland from 1957 to 1989 with Joh Bjelke-Petersen as Premier from August 1968 to December 1987. The government was a National (Country) Party - Liberal Party coalition up to 1983 after which the Nationals ruled on their own. In this period, the Queensland Government took repressive measures against unions and workers and initiated ‘voluntary agreements’ that undercut the award system. Significantly, the government was conservative and sought to repress and it was also liberal and sought to deregulate. The repression is better remembered but, in the longer-run, the deregulation and erosion of the institution of arbitration may have been the more significant.

Anarchopedia makes the pertinent point that ‘A conservative regime is by definition repressive’.<sup>2</sup> The Joh regime was certainly repressive and dished it out to Indigenous people, students,

unions, gays and women. Many of the actions were in the tradition of authoritarian governments in Australia and overseas; this included continuities with the way Australian Labor Party (ALP) governments in Queensland and federally had acted against striking workers in the 1940s and 50s. The undercutting of the award system drew on market liberalism and foreshadowed the ‘Jobsback’ policies of the Federal Liberal Opposition in 1993 and the workplace legislation of the John Howard Government from 1996 to 2007. The latter, of course, culminated in Work Choices legislated in 2005. One of the main spear carriers of the Nationals was, it seems, a signed-up member of the Adam Smith Institute. Moreover almost all those involved were habitués of the H.R.Nicholls Society.

There was a systematic programme of moving from arbitration to commercial and common law, individual contracts rather than awards or collective agreements and employee associations rather than unions. The HR Nicholls Society was, and remains, one of the vehicles for promulgating these views. The architects of the new Queensland regime including David Russell and Wayne Gilbert were frequent contributors; Joh Bjelke Petersen welcomed participants to the 1987 conference Light on the Hill: Industrial Relations Reform in Australia with the statement “Here in Queensland we



have ensured that the lights will stay on”.<sup>3</sup>

### **A taste of the period**

Doubtless, the 1980s are recent and lived history for many readers of Queensland Journal of Labour History. Even so, only those currently over 42 could actually have voted for or against the National Party governments of the 1980s. Since the median age of Queensland residents at the 2011 Census was 36.6 only a minority of current voters have direct knowledge of the ‘Joh-era’.

Queensland of the 1980s was, in a way, frozen in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The economy was just starting to diversify from sugar, cattle and hard rock mining and coal exports started only in the mid to late 1970s. The economy was highly regulated. Society and culture were parochial and autocratic. A strong state’s rights attitude dominated politics.

One advertisement in the National Party campaign in the 1986 state election summed it up.

Television ads showed a fatherly Premier with two of his grandchildren running into his outstretched arms through paddocks of daisies. The background voice-over told viewers that Bjelke-Petersen was a father to Queensland

and *‘had an undying love for the State and its people.’*<sup>4</sup>

In turn, the paternalists found it easy to identify the malcontents. Don Lane, former Special Branch Police Officer and Liberal MLA turned National Party Transport Minister, listed them as ‘grubby left wing students, Anarchists, professional agitators and trade union activists’.<sup>5</sup> Unions were very high on the list; they combined, at least in the mind of the Premier and his acolytes, being ideological and being trouble makers.

Bjelke-Petersen’s approach to unions is aptly summarised by Rae Wear;

Heavy handedness also characterised Bjelke-Petersen’s relations with unions. As a farmer, he saw unions as city based organisations dedicated to slowing productivity and eroding the work ethic. While still a backbencher he had opposed the forty hour week because he had worked much longer hours on the farm.<sup>6</sup>

As shown below, in the SEQEB dispute, he put laws through Parliament re-imposing the 40-hour week on the entire Electricity Industry.

### **The legislative assault on unions**

The Queensland Government introduced a range of laws against

unions during the 1980s. The full list is shown in box 1.

**Box 1 Anti-union laws of 1980s**

State of Emergency under Transport Act 1938-81  
Essential Services Act 1979  
Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act 1984,  
Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act Amendment Act 1985,  
Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act 1985,  
Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act Amendment Act 1985,  
Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act Amendment Act 1985,  
Electricity Authorities Industrial Causes Act 1985.

States of Emergency were declared under the Transport Act in the Mt Isa strike (1964), the Springbok tour (1971), Transport workers strike (1981), Shorter working week campaign (1982) and the SEQEB dispute (1985). The emergency provisions in the Transport Act were the ones as used by the ALP Hanlon Government in the 1948 Railways dispute.

The Queensland Government had introduced the Essential Services Act in 1979. This was used in 1982 against railway workers but was not used in the SEQEB dispute where the Government relied on emergency proclamations. Even so, the Essential Services Act was very harsh and exemplifies the authoritarian impulses of the Bjelke-Petersen regime.

The Act applied to public passenger and freight transport, hospitals, water, electricity, garbage and sewerage, fire and ambulance services. Declarations could be made about actual or threatened industrial action and these gave a Minister and anyone they so delegated almost unfettered power. This included power to prohibit the start or continuation of a strike, arrange strike breakers and order Crown employees to provide the service. Penalties for failing to comply with directions were \$1,000 for individuals and \$10,000 for unions. Unions could also be deregistered and made liable for losses. Moreover, union officers were required to actively advise members to comply with a ministerial direction and the normal onus of proof was reversed in any prosecution - that is people were presumed to be acting against the direction unless they proved otherwise.<sup>7</sup> As the Queensland Council of Civil Liberties said at the time, 'Not only does the Act abrogate the right of free speech, it introduces **forced speech**'. Or, as it concludes,

Whether the Essential Services Act was passed for short term electoral advantage or with sinister intent does not alter its character as a repressive and illiberal document.<sup>8</sup>

The visceral attitudes that produced the Essential Services Act were clearly evident in 1985 in the SEQEB dispute. This is summarised by the Premier's approach stated in Parliament the day

after the return to work of the power station operators.

The people of this State have copped enough. They are sick to death of the Labor Party, unionism and the militant thuggery of trade unions. The power industry must remain and operate in a constant and stable manner.<sup>9</sup>

### **Specific legislation for electricity**

The Electricity (Continuity of Supply) Act and the Electricity Authorities Industrial Causes Tribunal Act arose from the SEQEB dispute and were specific to the electricity industry. The Continuity of Supply Act converted the emergency proclamations into law including making it an offence to picket electricity workers and premises. It changed the SEQEB award to increase working hours, remove union preference and abolish industry allowances.

The Industrial Causes legislation set up a new tribunal to cover all of the electricity industry and displaced the Industrial Commission. Justice Pratt was appointed as the head and only member of the tribunal. Decisions were to take account of the economics of the electricity industry, the consumer interest and 'the role and responsibilities of management'.<sup>10</sup> The legislation forbade union preference, declared strikes and support for strikes illegal acts and provided automatic

penalties for strike action in electricity industries.<sup>11</sup> In the Government's words to

Make it clear that strikes are illegal, to abolish compulsory unionism for electricity workers, to set up a separate tribunal to hear disputes in this essential industry, and to provide for summary dismissal or suspension where employees disobey the no-strike provision.<sup>12</sup>

The Industrial Causes legislation had two less-well remarked features. One was that Justice Pratt allowed the Queensland Power Workers Association representation rights even though it was not a registered industrial union. Carberry, who acted as its solicitor, describes it as Australia's first enterprise union.<sup>13</sup> He also acknowledges that it was established with the assistance, if not at the instigation of SEQEB,

It is now a matter of public record that SEQEB granted financial and logistical assistance to 239 of its workers who engaged Mr Roly Livingstone, a prominent Brisbane industrial advocate, to represent them before the new Causes Tribunal and to seek awards of that Tribunal ....<sup>14</sup>

The second feature was to allow the use of individual contracts to vary awards. This was done in an amendment 'Contracting as to employment

conditions' to the Industrial Causes Act made in November 1985.<sup>15</sup> Both the encouragement of employee associations in lieu of bona fide unions and individual contracts were portents of the more deep seated changes that were envisaged.

### **Use of commercial law and injunctions**

The Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act was passed in 1984 as a state version of the section 45D prohibitions on secondary boycotts that the Fraser Liberal Federal Government had put in the Trade Practices Act in 1977 and which the Federal ALP Government wanted to repeal. David Russell, of whom see below, says they were introduced at the request of building industry employers who were opposed to the spread of industry superannuation.<sup>16</sup> The secondary boycott provisions were a 'new' form of penal powers and a shift back towards 'breach of contract' that had been displaced at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century by the introduction of arbitration. Matters were in the jurisdiction of the Federal Court not the arbitration commission, injunctions could be sought before action occurred and individual workers as well unions could be penalised. Moreover, unpaid fines could be collected as civil debts - including sequestering of wages and property rather than by imprisonment.

The Queensland Act was amended in 1985, during the SEQEB dispute to cover 'primary boycotts' about demarcation and preference and industrial action without seven days notice to the employer and to the state government. These powers went well beyond the Federal Trade Practices Act. According to the then Attorney-General this 'marked the turning-point in this State in the return to sanity in industrial relations'. Drawing on the example of the Seamen's Union bans on moving uranium from Mary Kathleen he said that the Commercial Practices was especially directed at 'unions engaging in activity to further a social or political cause'; which was 'non-industrial activity outside the legitimate role of unions'.<sup>17</sup>

David Russell QC was a crucial figure in designing and using the Commercial Practices legislation. He became a member of the State Executive of the Queensland National Party in 1984 and was Party President from 1995 to 1999.<sup>18</sup> In a speech to the HR Nicholls Society, Russell has set out in detail what he terms the *Queensland Industrial Relations Reform Program of the 1980s*. David Russell was part of the National Party-Government Committee to review 'industrial law' set up after the power dispute. This also included a former President of the Queensland Confederation of Industry and other barristers who had assisted the Government.

He argues that injunctions made under the Industrial Commercial Practices Act and served on individual power station operators in February 1985 were crucial in ending industrial action in the SEQEB dispute.<sup>19</sup> He repeats this in an interview with “Queensland Speaks” in 2011 where he also comments on his daily strategy discussions with the Premier and Ministers during the dispute and describes the effort in getting the injunctions served in one day.<sup>20</sup> Gilbert makes a similar point, Writs were served on about 200 power station operators in an attempt to get them back to work by preventing them hindering the supply of electricity under the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act 1984.<sup>21</sup>

### **Voluntary employment agreements**

The Commercial Practices Act sought to control unions and sat well within the conservative perspective. Voluntary employment agreements (VEAs) were much more of a neo-liberal labour market deregulation.

On their introduction in 1987, the then Minister Vince Lester called them ‘a pioneering initiative allowing a new direction for employment arrangements in Queensland and in fact, Australia’.<sup>22</sup> In existing enterprises, VEAs were to be made directly between employers and employees and would apply to all employees if there was a 60 per cent majority in a ballot.<sup>23</sup> In new enterprises (green field sites)

VEAs could be unilateral employer documents with work offered on a take a VEA or no work basis. In the first iteration, VEAs had to be approved by the Industrial Commission; this was changed in 1989 so that the only role of the Commission was to void them, after the event, if shown to be harsh and unconscionable or against the public interest. This change was made after the VEA advocates claimed the Industrial Commission was slowing down the introduction of VEAs.

All award matters could be varied other than public holidays on Christmas Day, Good Friday and Anzac Day. There needed to be a single wage rate at or above the award minimum but there was no requirement for overtime or penalty rates. Basic recreation, sick and long service leave provisions were required but these could be cashed out. Andrew Brown, the then Chairman of the Employment and Industrial Relations Committee of the National Party of Queensland, ended his presentation about VEAs to the H.R.Nicholls Society with the prediction that ‘It cannot be long before the rest of Australia adopts Queensland’s lead in following the rest of the world’.<sup>24</sup>

The most ‘public’ VEAs were at Powers’ Brewery, Mini-movers and Metway Bank. There has been no official release about the total number made but Graeme Haycroft, who describes himself as *‘the biggest*

industry provider of AWAs', says 70 were lodged and 40 registered.<sup>25</sup>

### Some outcomes

The aim of the 1980s assault was to roll back unions and union power. If this occurred, the outcome should be observable in wages and other economic data. Table 1 shows that across the 1980s, wages in Queensland fell relatively to the rest of Australia. The growth in average weekly male earnings in Queensland at (19.4 per cent) was around ten percentage points lower than the increases in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.

83 to 2011-12.<sup>27</sup> While the average Queensland ordinary time wage was below the Australian average for the entire period, the steepest and largest fall in the proportion occurred in 1985/86 to 1986/87 in the aftermath of the SEQEB dispute. Moreover, ordinary time earnings in Queensland only reached the pre-SEQEB proportion of the Australian level in 2008/09.

Figure 2 shows the wage share of gross state product and compares Queensland with the rest of Australia.<sup>28</sup> The wage share in Queensland was below the rest of Australian in all years from 1982 to 2010. Even so, changes

Table 1 Male Average weekly earnings <sup>26</sup>			
\$/week	Queensland	Western Australia	Australia
Mar 1981	260.70	273.50	270.60
Feb 1990	504.90	556.00	546.30
State wages as a proportion of Australian AWE			
Mar 1981	96.3	101.1	
Feb 1990	92.4	101.8	

Male average weekly earnings in Queensland were 96.3 per cent of the Australian average in 1981; in 1990 they were almost four percentage points lower. In Western Australia, in comparison there was a small increase in the proportion.

Figure 1 compares average ordinary time earnings between Queensland and the whole of Australia from 1982-

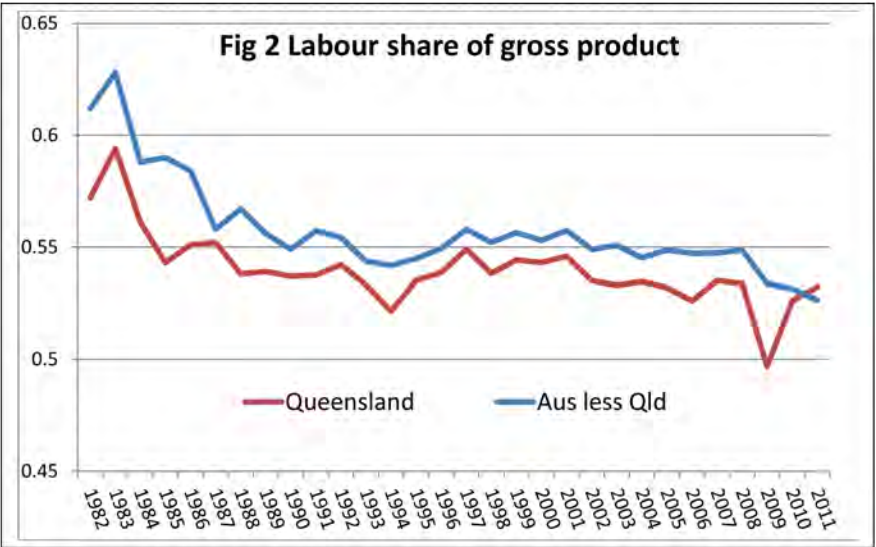
in the wage share in Queensland and the rest of Australia follow very similar trajectories across the period; this is shown by the graph lines moving up and down together.

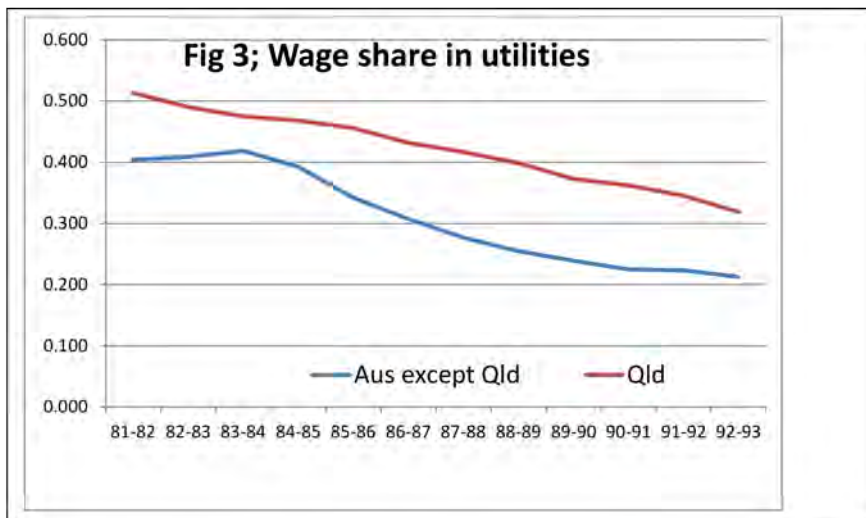
Sharp divergences occur in 1985-6, and 2008-9 and a lesser one in 1993-4. The dips in 1994 and 2009 came from above average increases in state income - especially marked in 2009



with windfall increases from high coal prices. The divergence in 1985-86 was from slower growth in labour incomes which seems to be a consequence of the aftermath of SEQEB.

The changes in wage share of net income in the utilities reinforces the evidence that the 1980s Queensland regime had a measurable effect. Figure 3 shows the wage share in utilities (of which electricity is the





largest) for Queensland and the rest of Australia.<sup>29</sup>

The wage share in all utilities fell around 20 percentage points over the 1980s. This is about a quarter more than the fall in the overall wage share (see figure 2). The wage share in Queensland utilities was increasing towards the Australian one up to 1983/4 but then fell at a much sharper rate. The wage share in Queensland fell 19 per cent from 1983/4 to 85/6; that in the rest of Australia fell 6 per cent. This would seem to be a consequence of the industrial regime.

### Lessons from the 1980s

In 1991, David Russell advised how to implement radical labour reform through ‘strong & comprehensive action’. In particular he advised the

Coalition to have ‘a comprehensive Commonwealth/State strategy for deregulation to implement on gaining power’ and ‘a simple procedural code protecting the rights of persons and corporations to carry on business with recourse to the ordinary courts’. More generally he says ‘Tinkering at the edges of the system rather than thoroughgoing reform will encourage those who oppose its abolition to resist change’.<sup>30</sup>

Much of the change made in Queensland in the 1980s is still around and even intensified. Queensland VEAs morphed into AWAs under Work Choices and, their pedigree remains under Fair Work in ‘Individual Flexibility Agreements’. The use of contract and commercial law and injunctions has intensified with the Abi Group at the Queensland Children’s



Hospital a recent example. This is highlighted, approvingly, by Allan Fels former Chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Council,

Even more significantly, a couple of years later (2000) the ACCC took the MUA to court and had an injunction and fines applied. As far as I know this is the first time the MUA had been fined ever. How the world has changed. This would have been unthinkable twenty years ago.<sup>31</sup>

There is now a legislative and procedural maze about strike action and the enterprise bargaining regime gives employers potential for non-union agreements and ‘choice’ of union every new round.

The right-wing agenda of the 1980s is not complete. There are continuing demands to remove ‘collective bargaining’ exemption from the Trade Practices/ Competition Act (ie no protection or immunity against suit for conspiracy). This was brought back to prominence by Gary Banks, Chair of the Productivity Commission, who said in 2012 that ‘Anti-competitive arrangements in the labour arena can be difficult to justify on public interest grounds.’<sup>32</sup>

The prospect of injunctive action against unions for failing to abide by their rules is an active prospect. This was one of the routes taken against the

UK Miners in the 1980s. In Australia, industrial action is not protected if it is ‘*not authorised according to the union’s rules*’. A small example of this is the readiness of lawyers to mount long actions against the issuing of industrial action ballots.

In 2013, the Queensland LNP Government has legislated on union donations and to provide so-called ‘accountability’ from unions. This has pedigree from the 1980s with David Russell claiming in 1986 that unions had ‘*substantial advantages to those enjoyed by ordinary citizens*’.<sup>33</sup> The Queensland conservatives of the period did not ‘fix’ this to their satisfaction. They also failed to abolish the arbitration system and to give ‘employee associations’ preference over independent unions. However, the Newman and Bleijie regime seem determined to make up for this. Just like VEAs were a try out for AWAs and Work Choices so their ‘union transparency’ measures look like being a try out for an Abbott regime to attack unions nationally.

## Notes

- 1 Obituary: Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Daily Telegraph, 26 Apr 2005 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1488655/Sir-Joh-Bjelke-Petersen.html>
- 2 <http://eng.anarchopedia.org/conservatism>
- 3 Joh Bjelke-Petersen, ‘Opening Address’, in *Light on the Hill: Industrial Relations Reform in Australia*, Proceedings of the

- H.R. Nicholls Society, Mooloolaba, June 1987
- 4 Australian Financial Review, 14 October 1986 (emphasis added). This is also referenced by The Ayes Have It. The original commercial is on You Tube in the collection of TVGuy
  - 5 Don Lane, Trial and Error, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1993
  - 6 Rae Wear, 'Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: straddling a barbed wire fence', Queensland Historical Atlas, <http://www.qhatlas.com.au/content/johannes-bjelke-petersen-straddling-barbed-wire-fence>
  - 7 Queensland Essential Services Act 8979, No. 45, 1979, available at [http://ozcase.library.qut.edu.au/qhlc/documents/qsr\\_essential\\_services\\_act\\_1979\\_1may85.pdf](http://ozcase.library.qut.edu.au/qhlc/documents/qsr_essential_services_act_1979_1may85.pdf)
  - 8 Peter Applegarth, 'The Essential Services Act – A Civil Liberties Perspective', Speech given in 1979, available at [http://www.qccl.org.au/documents/Speech\\_PA\\_Oct79\\_Essential%20Services%20Act.pdf](http://www.qccl.org.au/documents/Speech_PA_Oct79_Essential%20Services%20Act.pdf) (emphasis original)
  - 9 Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Queensland Parliamentary Debates, 26 February, 1985, 3260
  - 10 Eric Pratt QC was District Court Judge and Head of the Police Complaints Tribunal. According to Peter Hansen citing Des Sturgess, Director of Public Prosecutions, Pratt was also proposed as the Head of what became the Fitzgerald Royal Commission. See Peter Hansen, 'Injustice that sparked inquiry', at <http://www.tony-koch.com/index.php?page=detail&id=587>. Evan Whitton makes the same point in Evan Whitton, The Hillbilly Dictator, ch 31 at <http://netk.net.au/Whitton/Hillbilly35.asp>
  - 11 Paul McCarthy, 'Power Without Glory: The Queensland Electricity Dispute', Journal of Industrial Relations, 27, 1985, 364-82
  - 12 Queensland Parliamentary Debates (Hansard) 1985:vol. 298, p. 4213.
  - 13 For an insider view see Chris Carberry, The Queensland Power Workers' Association: The Story of an Enterprise Union, Proceedings of HR Nicholls Society, 1987 at <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol3/vol3-11.php>
  - 14 *ibid.* Livingstones' own history says that Livingstones was established in 1982 by renowned industrial relations specialist Roly Livingstone with much of the firm's work in those days concentrated on watershed issues including the SEQEB dispute, Powers VEA, the national pilots' dispute and seven day trading on the Gold Coast. <http://www.livingstones.com.au/page/our-story/livingstones-history>. Livingstone worked for Mt Isa Mines during the 1964 dispute and subsequently for Utah Development Corporation.
  - 15 A copy of the pro-forma contract of service used by SEQEB, including a clause 'Not to participate in a strike' is appended to Wayne Gilbert, The Queensland Power Dispute, in Arbitration In Contempt Proceedings of the H.R. Nicholls Society, Melbourne, February 1986 at <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol1/vol1-contents.php>
  - 16 David Russell, 'The Political History of The Queensland Industrial Relations Reform Program of the 1980s and its Repeal' in No Vacancies, Proceedings of the H.R. Nicholls Society, Parkville, Victoria, April 1991 at <http://archive.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol10/vol10-contents.php>.
  - 17 Paul Clauson, The Queensland Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act, Proceedings of the Conference of the HR Nicholls Society 1987 at <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol3/vol3-3.php>
  - 18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Russell\\_\(barrister\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Russell_(barrister))
  - 19 David Russell, 'The Political History of The Queensland Industrial Relations Reform op cit

- 20 Further, he says that the use of the commercial law allowed Petersen and Ahern to prevail over Gibbs (Resources Minister) and Lester (Industrial Relations Minister) who wanted to settle with the unions via the Industrial Commission. David Russell Interview, Queensland Speaks, 2011, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/david-russell>
- 21 Wayne Gilbert, The Queensland Power Dispute, in Arbitration In Contempt, Proceedings of the H.R. Nicholls Society, Melbourne, February 1986, <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol1/vol1-contents.php>
- 22 Queensland Parliamentary Debates (Hansard) 8 April 1987 p1560
- 23 Andrew Brown, Voluntary Agreements Between Employers and Employees in Queensland, in Light on the Hill: Industrial Relations Reform in Australia, Proceedings of the H.R. Nicholls Society, Mooloolaba, June 1987 <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol3/vol3-4.php> The ballot majority was increased to 65 per cent in 1989 at the same time that the Act was amended to remove the need for approval by the Industrial Commission before a VEA came into force.
- 24 Brown *ibid*
- 25 See Haycroft Workplace Solutions [http://haycroft.com.au/sites/default/files/Haycroft\\_A4-Fact-Sheet.pdf](http://haycroft.com.au/sites/default/files/Haycroft_A4-Fact-Sheet.pdf)
- 26 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Average Weekly Earnings, Australia Catalogue Number 6302.0
- 27 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Average Weekly Earnings, cat. no. 6302.0, various years
- 28 Australian National Accounts: State Accounts, 2010-11 cat no 5220.0
- 29 *ibid*
- 30 Russell 1991 H R Nicholls, *op cit*
- 31 Allan Fels, Speech at the Employment & Industrial Relations lunch seminar, 25 May 2005, Arnold Bloch Leibler Transcript, available at <http://www.abl.com.au/ablattach/abltranscript250505.pdf>
- 32 Gary Banks, Competition Policy's regulatory innovations: quo vadis? Speech to Economists Conference Business Symposium, Melbourne, July 2012 and the ACCC Annual Regulatory Conference, Brisbane, July 2012 p9 at <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/climate-change-adaptation/public-hearings>
- 33 David Russell, Trade Unions: Privilege and Power in Trade Union Reform, Proceedings of the H.R. Nicholls Society, Melbourne, December 1986 at <http://www.hrnicholls.com.au/archives/vol2/vol2-contents.php>

# **“Welcome to Nazi Queensland”: Gladstone Power Station Plant Control Room Operators’ Role in, and Response to, the 1985 SEQEB Dispute**

**Barbara Webster**

The 1985 South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) Dispute was “an historic defeat” for the Queensland union movement from which it has never recovered.<sup>1</sup> The event was the culmination of more than a decade of war against the reviled National’s premier, the anti-union, anti-civil liberties Joh Bjelke-Petersen [Fig. 1]. Comparatively little has been written about the SEQEB Dispute, and very little since the 1990s. Moreover, what literature there is focuses on the 940 SEQEB linesmen sacked for striking against the proposed use of contract labour.<sup>2</sup> Overlooked, except for a line or two in passing in Simon Blackwood’s early work,<sup>3</sup> are the power station workers whose role was critical in the strike. They were the plant control room operators: workers whose fingers were on the button sending out electricity across the state or plunging it into darkness if they so chose [Fig. 2]. Today – if you’ll excuse the pun – I want to shine some light on

the operators, and particularly those in Gladstone.

Gladstone Power Station [Fig. 3] was Queensland’s first “super power station”,<sup>4</sup> producing approximately half the state’s total electricity output at the time of the SEQEB Dispute. Its special rapid-increase boilers were essential for supporting dragline start-ups on the Central Queensland coalfields without blacking out the rest of the state. I want to examine GPS operators’ role and experiences in the dispute and explain how, following legislation to prohibit strikes, they adopted covert, subversive and more individualised strategies to fight the government and Queensland Electricity Commission.<sup>5</sup>

As Simon Blackwood has argued about the SEQEB Dispute, there is no evidence of a deliberate government plan to crush unions for “getting done over” in the 1979–81 35-hour week campaign. Rather, the government took advantage of political circumstances in conjunction with lessons learned from earlier defeats by unions.<sup>6</sup> However, many old unionists still believe it was deliberate; the situation certainly appeared to be an escalating war between the electricity industry unions (leading the charge for the Queensland union movement) and the government. The background to GPS operators’ role in that needs some brief coverage here.

The first clash was the GPS car park dispute. In August 1978, after two



Fig. 1: Hon. Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Queensland Premier (1968–1987)  
(<http://nebuchadnezzarwoollyd.blogspot.com.au/2007/11/not-average-joh-story-of-johannes.html>)



Fig. 2: Gladstone Power Station plant control room  
(*QEGB Newsline*, March 1982)



Fig. 3: Gladstone Power Station, early 1990s  
(GPS collection)

# Blackout backlash —new law proposal



● Mr Bjelke-Petersen

● Mr Knox

BRISBANE. — The Queensland Government will consider legislating to make strikes illegal in essential services, such as electricity supply and generation.

Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, said yesterday he favoured the legislation following the State power blackout.

"Queenslanders have paid a terrible price today," he said.

Mr Bjelke-Petersen, Deputy Premier, Mr Knox, and State Energy Minister, Mr Carrn, all came out in favour of the legislation yesterday.

State Government departments were reportedly inundated yesterday by telephone calls for Government action.

Mr Bjelke-Petersen revealed that legislation already was being drafted to insert grievance handling procedures into all the State's industrial laws.

strikes in essential services to be illegal, even if the union members were paid more.

Mr Carrn said a union which did strike would be deregistered.

State Deputy Premier, Mr Knox said: "The capricious and irresponsible strike by electricity workers over such a trivial matter as car parking facilities, has almost brought the State to its knees."

"But there's no way the Government is going to give in to these men."

"They have to be shown they can't hold the people of Queensland to ransom because they are upset about their car parking arrangements."

"In the past, there has been talk of legislating to make it illegal for strikes to be held in certain industries."

"What these electricity workers have done is to lend a great deal of strength to that argument."

Fig. 4: The effect of the GPS operators' car park strike.

(Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, 5 August 1978)

## 60 key operators to stay out

# Gladstone forces more blackouts

BRISBANE. — Blackouts will continue throughout Queensland today.

Fig. 5: GPS operators' role in the 1979-81 35 hour week campaign

(Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, 24 October 1979)

years of fruitless stop-works and negotiations, operators demanding covered parking facilities for protection against corrosive fallout staged a lightning two-day strike that resulted in widespread blackouts and “almost brought the state to its knees”.<sup>7</sup> As newspaper headlines attest [Fig. 4], it was that event, and not the state-wide 1979–81 35-hour week campaign as usually claimed, that caused the government to start drafting essential services legislation which it subsequently introduced in the 35-hour campaign and in which GPS operators took a leading role [Fig. 5].

In 1980, operators also successfully took strike action over superannuation and forced many other concessions from the electricity authority because of their positional power – the ability to cause disruption and loss beyond the industry to the whole economy. With that, and the 35-hour victory by 1981, the Commissioner urged the government to “stop the rot and take a stand” against electricity workers (Gladstone and elsewhere)<sup>8</sup> but Liberal Coalition partners who favoured negotiations prevented Bjelke-Petersen from doing so. In 1983, the Nationals secured office in their own right and soon after introduced the *Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act 1984* prohibiting secondary boycotts or sympathy strikes. By 1985, because of their successes and the importance of Gladstone to electricity supply, GPS operators saw themselves as

the vanguard of the battle with the government. As a senior engineer recalls, “Some operators said to me in the SEQEB Dispute, ‘We’re going to bring down the government! We’ll get Joh!’ They hated him.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly the media considered this was an escalating industrial war [Fig. 6].

Returning to Gladstone operators’ role in that dispute, incensed by the Brisbane sackings and without waiting for instructions from the Combined Operators’ Union<sup>10</sup> executive or state union officials, GPS men halved output by closing down three of the six units. The government immediately ordered electricity rationing as employers stood down workers across the state. Then followed an Order-in-Council that operators comply with engineers’ directions to restore and maintain supply or face dismissal. All Gladstone operators except one trainee refused to obey and had their names recorded. They also defied a State Industrial Commission order to restore supply on pain of a \$1,000 fine. Rather than employ essential services legislation, the government resorted to the new commercial practices legislation and, using a divide-and-conquer tactic, issued civil writs for \$50,000 to half the non-compliant men. Fearing financial ruin and amid confusion within union circles, operators complied with directions, and returned to full load. Without operators’ backing, the SEQEB Dispute was a lost cause. As the news headlines announced,

# State facing an Industrial war

PAGE 6

THE GLADSTONE OBSERVER

## Major strike just part of power battle

Fig. 6: Newspaper headlines during the SEQEB dispute

(Gladstone Observer, 16 and 26 February 1985)



## Supreme Court notices served on operators

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 1985 No. 2502 — 27c\*

**'Govt has unions just where it wants them' — Joh**

Fig. 7: The fatal blow for GPS operators in the SEQEB dispute



“Joh had them just where he wanted” [Fig. 7].

While the writs brought a sudden cessation to direct action, operators resorted to other forms of protest. They made rude faces and obscene gestures at police photographers at the gate and plastered graffiti on beams and walls. “JOH SUX” and “RESIST TO EXIST” was emblazoned everywhere. On the station roof and directly under the flight path into Gladstone was a large “Welcome to Nazi Queensland” sign. Every time the painters were ordered to remove the wording, operators picked the locks on the roof doors and redid them. The painters, themselves sympathetic to the cause, loved all the overtime! Unfortunately there remains no photographic evidence of this signage. Graffiti about the one scab also appeared. Police officers entered the station to investigate an offensive poster about him but every man on duty touched it before police could dust it for fingerprints. Lifts appeared to shrink in size with layer-upon-layer of protest signs. Operators placed a “permit to work” or danger/closed sign on a lift that had been cleaned and repainted for visiting politicians. Using that lift or removing the tag without the right paperwork was a “sackable” offence so the delegation had to use another lift full of criticism and obscenities. If police entered the control room itself, operators had plans to sabotage the plant by draining nitrogen from non-operational generators. On hearing a

rumour that police entry was imminent, one man began the process. After two hours, with the gas half depleted and no sign of police, the action was aborted.

Following the SEQEB Dispute, the government amended the 1984 legislation to outlaw strikes in the electricity industry; to put electricity workers under a new tribunal for awards and disputes; to remove the union preference clause from all state industrial awards; and to give wider powers to police. Those measures effectively won the war against electrical and other unions for the premier and greatly curtailed their power.

Nevertheless, GPS operators carried on their resistance against both QEC and government. Many were hostile to senior engineers, some for the rest of their working lives. Everyone ostracised the one scab; some victimized him quite viciously until he left the station six months later. Several of the demoralised strike leaders also resigned after the SEQEB defeat. But the SEQEB experience radicalised some of the younger men who had not previously been activists. A group took to political protest, for example, confronting Minister for Energy Vince Lester with signs and taunts at Country Cabinet in Gladstone in 1986 [Fig. 8]. They began letter writing to the local paper on issues such as the right to strike, on the injustice of redundancies and corruptness within QEC. Most

• THE MINISTER for Employment and Industrial Affairs, Vince Lester and a small band of placard carrying protesters trade shots outside the Gladstone City Council chambers before the start of the country Cabinet meeting in Gladstone yesterday.



# Union protesters greet Ministers

**A SMALL but militant group of trade unionists gave Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen and his Cabinet Ministers their 'official' welcome to Gladstone yesterday, just before the start of the Country Cabinet meeting.**

"Are you the members of the Labor Party?" was Sir Joh's greeting to the 15 strong protest group gathered outside the Civic Centre, who wasted no time in replying "No, we're just anti-National."

Fig. 8: GPS operators heckling Vince Lester arriving for Country Cabinet in Gladstone, 1986.

(*Gladstone Observer*, 14 May 1986)

letters had identities withheld or were bogus names for fear of retribution.

Striking may have been proscribed but operators could still threaten to do so. In 1988, for instance, when QEC attempted to change the superannuation rules to operators' disadvantage, the Combined Operators' Union, led by a Gladstone representative, threatened to turn the lights out on World Expo 88 and took out large advertisements in metropolitan papers [Fig. 9]. Luckily, Minister for Energy Martin Tenni didn't call their bluff and agreed to leave the rules as they were because blackouts would embarrass the government on the world stage. As history attests, by then Joh had been forced to resign by his party but operators maintained their animosity towards a National government all the same.

More creative, though, were the covert and subversive resistance strategies adopted by some Gladstone operators. One tactic was exploiting the station's bad pollution record by releasing confidential data to the press: whistle blowing. In 1987, public outcry over fallout escalated when it was revealed that the station was allowed to exceed Environmental Protection Agency standards. The Minister at the time, Brian Austin, claimed this never happened but refused to release the figures [Fig. 10]. Operators knew the station was rarely BELOW emission standards so one of them secretly removed emission graphs from the

control room wall and passed them to the *Gladstone Observer*. That made hot public news and the ABC's 7.30 *Report* picked up the story for national broadcast. The government quickly agreed to an investigation of pollution levels [Fig. 11]. Management never fully investigated the incident, nor were the culprits ever identified, although one of them was sure the operations engineer knew who they were.

A second example of whistle blowing was a supposed massive oil leak – six tankers' worth that seemingly disappeared without trace. Operators believed it was a faulty measurement; management suspected theft and hushed it up pending lengthy investigations. Five months later, just after the World Expo clash and to coincide with a round of forced redundancies, operators staged their own leak to discredit QEC and the government – again to the *Gladstone Observer*. Operators knew the public would never believe a faulty measurement and would interpret it as a deliberate cover-up of even more pollution.

Another strategy was subverting the collaborative decision-making process when introduced in about 1988. Operators keenly volunteered for Value Engineering (VE) study committees and tried to stack them to shape outcomes to theirs, or other workers', benefit. One regularly offered to participate:

# Power workers may disrupt Expo '88

Inside your Observer today

(GO, 27 April 1988)

ADVERTISEMENT

## POWER THREAT

### WHO'S BLACKMAILING WHO?

Just over two weeks ago the Q.E.C. through a senior Industrial Relations Officer gave us their position on proposed changes they had for our Superannuation Scheme.

1. "This is the proposal, it is NOT negotiable.
2. "If it is rejected or attempts are made to have the matter referred to the Electricity Causes Tribunal the Q.E.C. would move to have all members of the present scheme transferred to the Public Service Scheme."

The State Government's conciliatory approach consisted of changing legislation covering parts of our scheme to allow the following

"The Governor in Council by Order in Council may —

- a) amend the Articles;

or

- b) rescind the Articles and substitute new Articles therefor."

Perhaps the Premier and the Q.E.C. management would inform us what avenue of action was left open for employees to pursue? The non-negotiating attitude of the Q.E.C. and the government legislating away the security and safeguards of the Articles of our scheme do not suggest we have any alternative at all.

If their proposal is so beneficial why not allow the members to decide?

If their proposal is so beneficial why is membership in the Q.E.C. scheme compulsory?

If their proposal is so beneficial why not allow employees to opt for private Superannuation in lieu of the Q.E.C. scheme?

What the Liaison Committee is asking for is for all nine thousand members to have their say in the proposed changes, which concerns the future financial security of members and their families. This is surely far from an extreme request.

Authorised by  
The Combined Operators  
Liaison Committee  
through the Secretary,  
Lloyd Casey

(Courier Mail, 30 April 1988)

Fig. 9 Operators' threats to disrupt World Expo in 1988



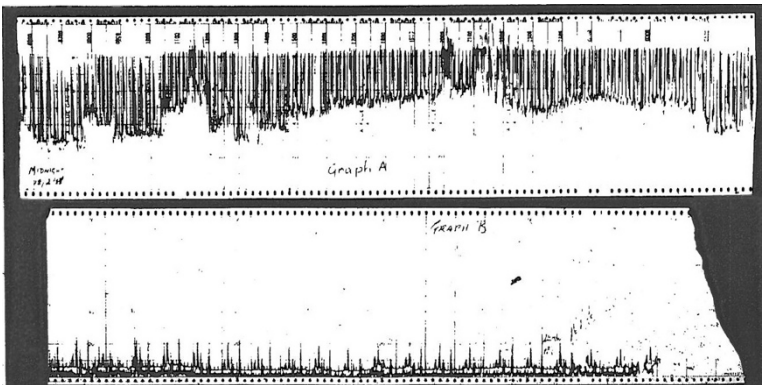
# MINISTER WITHHOLDS POLLUTION FIGURES

By William Keenan  
Minister for Mines and Energy, Mr Brian Austin, has declined to release pollution level figures for the Gladstone Power Station.

**'Public wouldn't  
understand them'**

Fig. 10: Whistleblowing on GPS air pollution  
(Roy Jones; *GO*, 3 March 1987)

## Smoke graphs show excess emissions



### **POLLUTION PROBE**

The Queensland Electricity Commission was late yesterday investigating an *Observer* report that at least one Gladstone Power Station boiler has been emitting more than twice as much pollution as allowed.

Fig. 11: Adverse publicity on pollution forced government action  
(*GO*, 5, 7 March 1987)

They wanted to guide us to a preferred outcome. I took on the secretary's job on some of them because if you've got control of what's written you've got control of the outcome. I asked for [confidential information on the control room] and they gave me access to it...I couldn't believe it! With all that knowledge, we could make sure it never went to that outcome.<sup>11</sup>

In one case, operators ensured management would not change the roster system operators wanted to maintain because they had "proved" through a VE study it would be more costly to work.

Finally, in 1989, the government announced the sale of the station to a Comalco consortium to supply the expanded Boyne Smelters nearby. Angry operators bugged the manager's office with a remotely controlled radio to eavesdrop on discussions. Not that they heard anything to their advantage but their action further illustrates the lengths to which they were prepared to go. A few months later, a state election brought the Goss Labor government to power after 32 years of conservative rule, thus ending "Nazi Queensland". Among other beneficial changes, the new government restored union preference under a 1990 Continuity of Supply agreement, however the writs remained valid for several years.

In conclusion, what does this story add to Queensland industrial history? It restores power station operators, and specifically those at Gladstone, to their rightful place in the history of the SEQEB Dispute; but more importantly it demonstrates a key point made by industrial relations theorist Richard Hyman that government suppression of strikes by legislation does not remove industrial conflict but merely diverts it to other forms, notably driving it underground to covert, subversive forms of resistance.<sup>12</sup> In Queensland, where workers hated the anti-union and anti-civil liberties Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the Nationals as much as they did, no amount of legislation was going to silence them.

## Notes

- 1 Simon Blackwood, "Doomsday for the Queensland Labour Movement: The SEQEB Dispute and Union Strategy," *Politics* 24, no. 1 (May 1989): 68.
- 2 For example, Blackwood, "Doomsday"; Howard Guille, "Industrial Relations in Queensland," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 27, no. 3 (1985); Rod McQueen, "Bringing them to their Knees": Industrial Law in Queensland," *Social Alternatives* 5, no. 3 (1986); Mark Sherry, "Agency and Discourse in Labour History: A Case Study of the SEQEB Dispute", MA Dissertation, University of Queensland, 1995; Simon Blackwood and Doug Hunt, "Strikes: Limits to Industrial Action?" in *Work and Strife in Paradise: A History of Labour Relations in Queensland, 1859–2009*, ed. Brad Bowden, Simon Blackwood, Cath

- Rafferty and Cameron Allen (Annandale: Federation Press, 2009).
- 3 Blackwood, "Doomsday," 70.
  - 4 Malcolm Thomis, *A History of the Electricity Supply Industry in Queensland, vol. 2, 1938-1988* (Brisbane: QEC, 1988), 98.
  - 5 Queensland Electricity Generating Board (QEGB) until the 1985 post-SEQEB restructure.
  - 6 Blackwood, "Doomsday," 69; Interview with operator, 29 January 2009.
  - 7 *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, 5 August 1978.
  - 8 *Brisbane Telegraph*, 29 October 1980.
  - 9 Interview with operations engineer, 28 January 2009.
  - 10 An umbrella body covering Queensland operators in various primary unions.
  - 11 Interview with operator, 29 January 2009.
  - 12 Richard Hyman, *Strikes* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1972), 55.



The portrait of Michael Faraday on Ted Riethmuller's wall - see next page

*This month we publish another in a series of short stories written by long time BLHA member and activist Ted Riethmuller about his working life.*

## **Old Darky and the Portrait of Michael Faraday (1942)**

The old power station, although decommissioned and derelict was still largely intact. It was like a corpse, not yet decayed, with its appearance and defining characteristics still there to be wondered at. And wonder at it I did. I found ample opportunity to loiter about the quiet deserted plant that once would have buzzed with life and energy; but no more the high pitched hum of the generator, the throbbing thump thump of the suction gas engine, the white noise of the water flowing down the cooling towers. Now no lights shone and the very daylight was inhibited and tentative, leaving no shadows. The only life was the dust mites gambolling in the weak sunrays that struggled through the dirty skylights in the roof. The generating sets were crouched down in line on the turbine hall and the large switchboards that both controlled the output of the generators and the distribution of the electricity generated were still standing, largely untouched, along the northern wall of the building. They were shrines of marble and slate dedicated to Prometheus. Taller than the height of men that once danced

attendance on them they were mounted with elegant assemblages of brass, copper and glass: knife switches, circuit breakers and rheostats; the wonderfully intricate electro-mechanical voltage regulators: meters of all varieties, ammeters, voltmeters and wattmeters. Once kept bright and shiny they were now developing a patina of age and like the commutator of the generator were dull and dusty. All forlorn. It was the past. It had drawn me to it but I had found the present more attractive, and the future even more so. The unfolding world to come held more possibilities back then and I knew I was part of it. Not so now.

Down the Eastern end of the building there was a metal workshop where a motor mechanic worked to keep our vehicles on the road. Old Tim worked there also. He had worked for the old Bundaberg Electric Supply Company as an electrician. His age was such that he learned his knowledge of power generation on the job, in days long gone before registration of electricians became mandatory. In deference to the younger qualified electricians who were jealous of their title, he did not claim membership of their fraternity but was content to limit the use his skills to welding and general metal work. In my mind's eye I see him, one foot on his toolbox, rolling one of the cigarettes he never seemed to be without. He never said much but I do remember him referring to power generation in the country Queensland



of his youth. I now know he would have welcomed the questions I never asked. His was of the same generation as Old Darcy, another veteran. Old Darcy was as short and stout as Old Tim was tall and lanky.

I never asked how Darcy got his name. I was still at an age when, as far as grown men were concerned, I took so much at face value. I remember him as a tubby little man with a mass of white hair and a thick white moustache. I picture him with a bucket and mop, always wearing baggy navy overalls. He did odd labouring jobs around the depot. The look on his face was always fierce and determined. He demanded to be treated with respect and everyone, even the apprentices, was happy to accord him that because he was so diligent and willing to do what was asked of him. He was a grumpy old man without humour. Some of my fellow apprentices enjoyed teasing him and in return he treated them like the ignorant fools I guess we all were in many ways. He did have a soft spot for the older apprentices though, particularly John Pisani, who sometimes teased him but always took notice of him. John Pisani, just after he came out of his time, was electrocuted on a job down at the gas works.

Vic Theil also had worked in the power station for the company and had a lot of stories of those days. Now I bitterly regret not having listened more closely. Now I would have so many questions

to ask; but he is long dead. Old Tim and Darcy have been dead even longer. What a treasure of memories of power generation in early Queensland they took with them to the grave. One afternoon, in the supervisor's office, a few of us were hanging around waiting for knock-off time and, like school kids manipulating their teacher, got Vic telling us about Darcy's fierce loyalty and dedication to the efficient running of the power station. One of Old Darcy's jobs was to keep the floor in the turbine hall clean and polished. The tiles that once covered the floor were still in place but had long lost the lustre that Darcy had applied to them.

"One day," Vic told us, "some of the board members came for an inspection of the plant. They looked around and acted impressed and tried to ask intelligent questions as they do."

We formed a picture in our minds of these blokes in suits standing about feeling all out of place. "So what happened?"

"Well, one of them took out his pipe, packed it with tobacco, and lit it." Vic, as he told us this, had taken out his own pipe and was patting his pockets to find his matches. "And he just dropped the match on the floor, as you do." By now Vic had lit his own pipe and was waving the match around to extinguish it. "Anyway," he went on to say, (puff puff) "Old Darcy who was lurking nearby, raced over, picked up

the match and waved it in the face of the company director and said, 'Do you throw your burnt matches on the floor when you're at home? – Well don't do it here!' So the director, poor bugger, took the match and put it in his pocket." Vic carefully placed his own match in the ashtray on his desk. "And that's the sort of bloke Old Darcy was, and still is." Vic said.

There were other stories, now long forgotten, that kept me company when I explored the deserted power station. On the other side of the wall where the big switchboards stood there was a room used as an electrical workshop. In that room, hanging on the wall, there was a small pencil drawing of the head and shoulders of a grey haired Victorian gentleman. The pose suggested a modest thoughtful man. At the bottom of the picture were the words, Michael Faraday 1791 - 1867. I knew something of him. At school I had learned about Faraday's Laws of Electro-magnetic induction. These stated: When a conductor is cut by changing lines of magnetic force an EMF is induced, the value of which depends on the rate of change. Application of these laws allowed the transformation of mechanical energy into electrical energy and the other way around thus leading to the invention of generators and motors. These machines, together with transformers, operated in keeping with his laws of electro-magnetic induction and were a large part of the concerns of my trade.

At thirteen Michael Faraday started work running messages for a bookbinder. There were ten kids in his family and his dad was only a blacksmith so they were poor. A year later he got a seven-year apprenticeship with the same bookbinder. He read the books he bound and attended public lectures in science. He had a hunger to learn. This was the Victorian age and self-improvement and the improvement of society was part of the spirit of that time. His efforts meant he eventually became an assistant to Sir Humphrey Davy – one of Victorian England's men of science. They were Culture Heroes. Faraday's career prospered and in time he too joined the Parthenon. He preached the religion of science to the public. But he was a Christian all his life and belonged to a sect called the Sandemanians that was an offshoot of Presbyterianism. He believed that the world is beautiful and knowable because God is benevolent and that science was a divine gift. He rejected the theory of design; he believed natural forces were in unity with God. His understanding of the Law of Conservation of Energy led him to believe that if an electric current produces magnetism, magnetism could produce electric current. He tested his hunch in his workshop and so discovered another of God's laws. The skills and knowledge of equipment and materials he had gained as an apprentice helped him become an exemplary laboratory technician and experimenter. His observations of the

results of research conducted in the real world of the laboratory led him to an understanding of the laws of God's world. He said, "The ultimate aim of the human mind, in all its efforts, is to become acquainted with the Truth."

In due course he became a member of the Royal Society and many other honours were accorded him. But they meant little. They wanted to give him a knighthood but because he felt that Christ would have said no, he too refused that honour. The Sandemanians were not impressed by worldly pomp and vainglory. In any case, the name Michael Faraday does not need such aggrandizement. Before his death he decided against being buried in Westminster Abbey. He did not seek riches either. He gave most of his earnings to charity. He did not have insurance; he had faith that God would provide. He was high-minded yet self-effacing and sought to do good and resisted evil. When the government wanted him to develop poison gas to be used against Britain's enemy in the Crimean war he refused.

During his life, those who knew him admired his integrity, generosity and honesty, while the public revered him as a great scientist. Perhaps there was a sense that he and others like him were ushering in a new world full of possibilities. The application of the power of electricity soon became a keystone of modern life and Faraday was seen as a founding father of

the electrical industry. That's why someone in the Bundaberg Electric Supply Company, long before I started work, saw fit to have his image, like an icon, hung on the wall to look down on the room we used as a workshop.

This room had a bench and a small test panel and not much else. Most of our work took us away from the depot and the room was used mostly by those apprentices who were allocated to the inspectors. In the morning while the inspectors were writing up their reports in their office we were in the workshop repairing appliances that the public left for repair. These appliances were usually irons and toasters and jugs that needed new elements. Home appliances, back then, were not as reliable as they are now. They were not as common either. Many homes had only an iron, a jug and a wireless. If the families in those homes experienced an aching sense of loss and a feeling that their lives were painfully circumscribed as a result, they managed to keep their distress politely hidden. In any case I believe we all were aware that living standards were improving. Had I not paid a deposit on a shiny new bicycle – a Malvern Star Semi-Racer – from my first pay packet? And after that a Sunbeam Electric Frypan for my mother? In those days the future, in material terms at least, was rosy with promise. Not that my young workmates spoke about such topics, they talked about their successes with drinking beer and with girls while I listened half

credulously, half enviously. I never mentioned the sense of romance the old power station had for me or the significance of the portrait of Michael Faraday. I suspected they would not understand.

Today, I have that very same picture looking down on me as I type.

## **Good Times, Hard Times? Making Australian Labour History, Remaking Australian Society**

**13<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Labour  
History, Sydney 11-13 July 2013**

The conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) is held every two years. The venue this year was Unions NSW, in Sussex Street, Sydney in a space which incorporates the refurbished 1895 Sydney Trades Hall building. The keynote speaker was Maurice Glasman, a British academic in political theory who is also a leader of the 'Blue Labour' movement which seeks to renew the British Labour Party through community activism. There were lively presentations from academics, students and independent researchers on the sub-themes of

activism, resisting the state, labour culture, biography, protest and global labour. The papers covered topics such as the 1932 textile workers strike in Victoria and Tasmania, the 1946 federal election campaign, the cold war and Australian scientists, organising in shipyards in Australia, Japan and the US, radical culture in Newcastle and protest against conscription in World War 1. There were several papers that addressed more recent campaigns such as the struggle of aircraft maintenance engineers to improve their status and the resistance of Telecom workers in the 1980s to management-imposed organisational change. A panel of media practitioners and academics discussed how labour and radical history can be popularised. Labour historians need to be thinking about how they want to spread their message and to make and maintain contacts with film, TV and radio producers. The results can be encouraging – recently the ABC documentary *Whitlam beat Master Chef!* The conference closed with a panel session on union and community organising which demonstrated that although online organising is an important tool, people coming together in local communities to defend their rights and conditions is still the most effective expression of the strength of the labour movement.

Sigrid McCausland  
ASSLH Federal Executive Member  
Brisbane

# **Interview with Beth Mohle, State Secretary of the Queensland Nurses Union**

*Conducted August 2013 by Howard Guille and Ross Gwyther*

*How long have you been with the Nurses Union?*

22 years. I'm a registered Nurse from Royal Brisbane, - that's where I did my general training and worked in a Medical Ward. I began as a delegate when I was a first year student nurse



and was active in the RBH Branch. I started as an Organiser in '92 and held various roles, Project Officer and Research Officer, and then the first Assistant Secretary in 2007. I became Secretary 1 April three years ago (2010). So I've seen a lot of things, a lot of Governments come and go.

*In the 1990s and 2000s, the Nurses were one of the fastest growing unions; what has happened since?*

We still are. By financial membership, we are the largest union in Queensland, with a total number of over 50,000, but about 48,000 total financial memberships; we're the second-largest union in Australia, after the SDA.

We were growing about 9-10% in recent years. It's come off a little bit in the last 12 months because of job cuts, but we're still growing at around 4%. But we work really hard to maintain our relevance to members. It doesn't just happen. We've kept our craft focus, so we only cover people who are doing Nursing and Midwifery work. That's all we're interested in covering.

We pursue industrial and professional objects of our members: It really does help that we've got that professional side of things, so not only do we advance pay and conditions, but we also represent our members in Coronial Inquiries and the like. The industrial and professional are inextricably linked. Something like workloads, even though it's an industrial matter,



you have to be able to deliver high quality patient centre care that doesn't put your licence to practice at risk.

There's a requirement now under National Registration to demonstrate holding professional indemnity insurance. We've got a professional indemnity insurance component in our fees and think anyone who is going to be reliant upon their employer to cover them is just nuts. They need to have insurance in their own name, not in their employer's name.

Queensland Health couldn't even manage to pay our members a couple of years back, let alone cover them for anything going wrong at work. Also, members just understand that if it's

the doctor's word against the nurse, guess who the employer is going to be backing.

We do a lot about improving professional practice, the standing of Nursing and Midwifery and the like. A big component of the things we've been working on in recent times is continuing professional development (CPD) for members, because now under National Registration, they've got CPD requirements that they have to meet.

*Why has the Nurses Union been growing when generally unions have been declining?*

I think because we work really hard to maintain our relevance with our members, and we have responded to the fundamental changes in the nature of work. We're always questioning the way we do things. Particularly in the current hostile environment, there's no such thing as a default position any more - this is the way we've always done things. We've got to have our minds open and we've got to be looking at different ways of doing things.

We're never complacent about our growth. It doesn't just happen. We work hard at it and we're continually monitoring to make sure that we're still doing the right thing.

We try to reflect on how our members operate and what approach best suits them. It's also about the way we resource how the Union communicates with its members. But it also gets down to what members want to see the Union doing. We survey members

a lot. We survey every new member that joins the Union and ask them why they joined the Union. Anybody who resigns or is retiring, we do that as well. Then every three years we have a very big survey of members that asks them about a whole range of issues. It's called, "*Your Work, your Time of your Life Survey*".

It's different with different demographics, too, so what a young nurse might want from the union is very different from someone my age. Though the themes are pretty common in terms of why people are joining.

The other really important thing is that we've got a democratic Branch structure. That's our biggest strength, I think. We had over 100 Branches from around Queensland at the recent QNU Annual Conference. Our rank and file members get to determine the policy of the Union, through Conference, and via the Branch structure. They're our





lifeblood, and how we keep a really firm link with our members.

We take the view that we'll take members no matter what way we can get them. If they join for professional indemnity insurance that's fine, but we'll convert them into activists once we've got them in.

*Casualisation has led to a decline in union membership; has it occurred in nursing?*

There's always a cohort of casual nurses, people who will want to work agency nursing, and that's largely because it suits their family responsibilities.

Interestingly, we have seen a difference with the cuts from this

current Government. Since September last year we've lost over 1,100 full time equivalent nursing positions from Queensland Health, and they're replacing them with temporary or casual positions. They're trying to create a more contingent workforce.

We strongly supported the ACTU campaign about insecure work, but didn't think that it would apply to us. Yet now there's a Government agenda of driving down wages, conditions and job security. Our members in the private sector know that, too. They know the public sector sets the pace so that anything that affects public sector members will be visiting them very soon. Many private sector employees have adopted the attitude of this new LNP Government. We've seen a significant shift in the atmospherics -



the LNP government has legislated to reinstate managerial prerogative. Other employers are going, ‘*You beauty!*’

*Privatisations are another thing that’s cut membership growth for unions predominantly in the public sector; how’s that affecting you?*

We’ve got over 90% density in the Public Sector. In Private, it’s sitting at around 60%, but we are growing more strongly in Private and Aged Care.

We’re putting union resources into growing those areas. In the regions, staff cover all sectors but in Brisbane and the South-East we’ve developed three teams, Public Sector, Private Sector and Aged Care so that we can direct resources to those areas where we need to build up. It’s paid off and we

had a record number of new Branches from private hospitals and aged care at Conference this year and significant growth in numbers and activists in those sectors.

*Can you expand on the comment about converting members into activists?*

As long as I’ve worked here, we’ve always invested heavily in training. We have to do even more in the current environment and we’ve taken a staff member off-line to review how we undertake our support, development and mentoring of activists. We’re also doing specific training for our members on developing political skills and on becoming much more politically astute and knowledgeable.





What we fundamentally want to do is re-vision. It sounds a bit grand, but it's not meant to be that grand, but we do want to re-vision the way the politics is done from our perspective. We want to get our members much more politically active, not in a party political sense, but in the very broad sense of advancing our nursing and midwifery and union values.

We have to ask the question *What does an union activist look like in the 21st Century?* It doesn't look like even what it looked like a couple of years ago.

We don't necessarily know what the answer is and it depends on the age cohort. We're looking at the way that we can communicate with our members, the way that we support them; the whole thing. We don't ever

put a toe in the water unless we're going to do things properly. The project is about six months under way.

We've had some focus groups just recently with members to hear from our activists, to find out what more they need from us. Our younger members do want different things to our older members in the way they engage with the union. We're looking at Facebook, Twitter and social media but looking carefully because it is incredibly resource intensive to do properly.

*What are some of the political skills you're wanting?*

I think there's an assumption that everybody understands how the political process works. We also make an assumption that activists know



how the whole system works. Yet that's a very big leap. I think, we have to go back to say, 'Okay, this is how the whole process works' - even the way that legislation is passed through Parliament. We need to take this step back for both members and officials I think.

Those of us who have been around for a long time have seen Governments come and go and have lived through hard times. People forget what we've struggled against, and that we've had to struggle before, so we have to remind them. Only a small number of our people were working here or in trade unions under Work Choices, let alone under the Borbidge Government.

We want to build campaign capacity in local communities, not only in our workplaces, but in our communities. That's what I mean about re-visioning

politics. It is a broad sense of politics and we're linking with the Queensland Council of Unions and other unions to form a community alliance in Queensland.

*How can we get people thinking about broader union values?*

Our Strategic Plan endorsed last year underpins everything that we do and is linked back to our union and our nursing and midwifery values. These are writ large in each of the five domains, industrial, professional, social, political and democratic, in which we operate.

We have to combine the bigger picture of being part of our community and creating a fairer society, with the bread-and-butter component, industrial stuff. There's also the professional side which is very powerful in terms of



defending very high quality universal health care.

Our members have a really important leadership role to play as advocates and communicating the importance of maintaining high quality health care services. They're so well placed to do it. Nurses are the highest, the top-of-the-pops, for the last 19 years in the Roy Morgan Poll of the most respected profession. Indeed, it's interesting to reflect upon the fact that they were only included in that poll 19 years ago.

The big thing for us is drawing the dots so our members can connect what's in their industrial interests and rights at work with the quality of their work and what that means for the community and a fairer society. We passed resolutions at our recent Conference in defence of universal health care. This is supported by our private sector members who understand the importance of nurses' and midwives' role in making sure that everyone has access to care that's based on need and not on capacity to pay.

*How do all these work in bargaining?*

An example of looking at better ways of doing things was we've engaged in interest based problem solving approach to EB negotiations in the

public sector since 2005 and some private sector employers as well. It was not without its challenges but we figured it was time to try a new approach. Basically, our members like to solve problems. Their approach is a cooperative one, and health care is an industry that's predicated on relationships, so such an approach to bargaining lends itself well to the way that our members like to work.

Anyone that thinks that it's a soft option has got another thing coming; it's really hard work, going down that approach. Of course, trying to find shared interests with the current Government is proving to be rather difficult.

Even though we've had problems with enterprise bargaining because we think that it really does disadvantage women workers, we bargain really hard, so we get the best we can out of a system we believe is flawed because that's the only way we can get pay increases.

Even so, in areas like Health you've got very limited bargaining power. The inherent nature of work for nurses and midwives is a diminished bargaining capacity. It's easier for a worker on a production line or in the public service

or anywhere else, to walk off the job, to stop work. It's really hard for a nurse to walk away from a kid on a ventilator. The fundamental nature of the work is that you're doing really intimate body work, that's why we always leave skeleton staff when we take action.

*Can you explain more about enterprise bargaining disadvantaging women?*

We got national rates of pay in the late '80s-early '90s. Nurses and midwives fought very hard on that professional rates case to get consistency, so that a nurse was paid the same amount whether they worked within Aged Care, private hospitals or the public sector. Then along came EB; and with it differentials between sectors and differentials between States. It's just huge. There's up to \$300 a week difference for a Registered Nurse working in Aged Care compared to public hospitals. Yet they're not doing anything different in terms of the work.

We don't think enterprise bargaining suits a sector like health care. The market fails in health; so does applying a market-based industrial relations framework.

*What about some impacts of the Queensland Government cuts?*

Under the previous Labor Government, we saw a significant growth in the number of Nurses and Midwives, post the Bundaberg Hospital inquiry in 2005. It took a disaster to get it but we had a significant investment in the

system and in increase in funding. All of the gains in Queensland Health post Bundaberg are now at risk. We are monitoring the impact of job and service cuts and on our data we've lost 1,100 full-time nursing positions or about 2,500 jobs in total from Queensland Health. They're dismantling career structures and putting at risk clinical governance and that's a big difference between Labor and this Government.

There's going to be huge implications on more vulnerable populations particularly with the loss of primary care services. Already we're hearing anecdotally that people with chronic diseases are going back into hospital more frequently, so it's, penny-wise-pounds-foolish. This Government is brutally cost-shifting anything they think the Feds should be funding, off their books. So anything that's primary care, community health and aged care, they're getting out of it, and they don't care about the consequences.

We've been particularly concerned about the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the cuts in Indigenous Health Workers. It's been outrageous and we've made statements about that, even though most of them aren't covered by us, but by other Unions. It's going to have huge implications on '*Closing the Gap*', similarly the closing of the TB Service and the Sexual Health Services cut-back.

The community hasn't really cottoned on to what's happened. For example in Metro South, they've just done away with the whole program of School Health Nurses who visit public and private primary schools to do screening for hearing, eyesight, scoliosis and conditions like that.

Queensland Health are re-defining that all they really want to do is act in the hospital space. Primary preventative community health care, any of those services that keep people well, surveillance services like TB, sexual health, all expendable because they're not a hospital.

*Going back a little, what was different under Labor Governments?*

You weren't fighting for your life, for your very existence. It was certainly a very benign environment, and in a lot of cases, supportive. You had the opportunity to have dialogue and to have your voice heard and one would hope respected. In brief, a much more respectful environment. Importantly, from around 2005, Queensland nurses and midwives went from amongst the lowest paid in the country to amongst the highest paid when we adopted an interest-based approach to bargaining. These gains are now at risk with the Queensland LNP's agenda to drive down costs through cuts to wages and conditions.

We were able to negotiate really good rights that work in terms of a

facilitative, cooperative industrial relations framework, which is good for productivity. I don't understand how anybody could say that what we've negotiated with the previous Government isn't good for productivity, and that's the point we keep on making to the current Health Minister. It's particularly dangerous in an area like health, undermining those sorts of approaches, but they'll learn that the hard way.

We literally have to fight for our existence right now. Not putting too fine a point on it, this Government wants to destroy the union movement. We might complain about Labor Governments, we might have our differences with them, and it's not as if our interests are always going to align. We're going to have our blues but it was a respectful relationship, one where the contribution of workers was respected and, as I said, we were listened to. The legitimacy of our role accepted.

We were affiliated with the ALP for a number of years in this period. One of the tensions of affiliation was that you're dealing with a Government that's the employer of a large number of your members, and that there's going to be a divergence of interests. We made the decision not to continue with affiliation early in 2010. For the record this was before the payroll disaster, despite what this Government might maintain. We decided that we were just going to do politics differently and in a broader way.

What I want out of politics is something that will inspire me again, not something that I have to apologise for, or say that this is the lesser of two evils. I think it gets back to wanting to have shared values and to see these mirrored in the progressive side of politics.

*And the payroll debacle?*

It was the biggest disaster we've ever been involved in. For a small organisation like ours, it is astounding that we were able to continue functioning under that amount of pressure. The number of calls we were getting from members was unbelievable some just weren't getting paid, some were getting overpaid and some were getting underpaid. It went on for months, and the system is still not paying them properly.

This current Government saying the QNU did nothing about the payroll is just offensive to the core. We're not going to bite, because any examination of the evidence shows we did everything we could, including protests outside Parliament, including protests at workplaces. But what's the good of protesting, when protesting, or even taking industrial action, is not going to get people paid because it's a system's disaster.

The payroll disaster totally diverted our attention from our strategic agenda. In the April when it happened, we were having a Summit on the Nursing and Midwifery workforce in

Queensland that we'd planned with the Chief Nurse's Office; we had all the universities and all of the players there to do something about workforce planning. Yet we had to divert all our resources into making sure our members got paid.

There was no appropriate governance; it was a fundamental failure of project planning. No-one was responsible for making sure that it was all going to plan, and the buck stopped with no-one. They didn't have parallel testing. They didn't roll it out over time. We were promised by Queensland Health that there was a contingency plan, and there wasn't.

The only important line in the recent Chesterman report that cost over \$3m is one that says that, *try as Government might, they can't out-source risk*, and that is a very salient lesson for what they're now trying to do with privatisation in Health.

*Now you're facing privatisations, outsourcing, cutting of positions, attacks on the Union*

Not only have we lost 1,100 jobs since September last year but there's demotions going on everywhere. In Metro North they wrote to 3,000 experienced Grades 5 and 6, (that's the base grade registered Nurse and Clinical Nurse) to take redundancies so that they could be replaced by part-time, temporary new graduates. The only reason is that there's a nine

dollar per hour pay difference between the bottom and the top of Grade 5. So they'll save millions of dollars each year, and have a more contingent workforce.

This is occurring with the Hospital and Health Service Boards established from 1 July last year. These are 17 little fiefdoms. Four of the new Chief Executives come from the UK National Health Service and they're bringing a lot of their buddies out as well. The significance of coming from the NHS is that they have been making the whole Health system as generic as possible including a substitution agenda for nurses. The consequences are clear in the *Disasters in Mid-Staffordshire Enquiry*<sup>1</sup> where there were appalling standards of care and many deaths

We see a lot of lessons there for what's happening here. We are seeing substitution here, replacing registered nurses with enrolled nurses, with assistants in nursing. The executives seem to think they just need to have a pair of hands. It's a total under-valuing of the professional status of Nursing and Midwifery.

*Are they also rolling back some of the advances that were made for women?*

Absolutely; there's a lot of gender analysis in all of this. As I said, Nursing and Midwifery have only been in the Roy Morgan Poll of professions for the last 19 years and that coincides with so many of the advances we've made.

Health is a system that's riddled with power imbalances— it's mainly organised medical labour who have the power through their union (the AMA), the Colleges and the like. In the last 20 years, power has been more equally distributed within the health system with nursing and midwifery, allied health and other groups getting more power. Now the tables have been turned around, and they're trying to get some of that power back. For example, in Metro South I believe that all of the Directors who have been appointed to the different divisions are medicos. There's not one nurse.

So that's what we're fighting. It really is a rearguard action and we're not over-stating this, and it is really quite worrying that we have to re-prosecute these arguments that should have been won two decades ago. We still hear '*Don't use the word 'Nurse' and 'professional' in the same sentence.*'

*How do you fight it?*

It is all about trying to empower our members, empowering our members to understand politics, and ensuring development and supporting of activists. Our members are pretty scared right now, but it's turning to anger. Another thing is that some of our activists' positions are being made redundant. Now, whether that's coincidental or not, we can't necessarily prove otherwise at this stage.



*The Government is going for the Union as well?*

Yes, though I think it is part of the general attack on unions. They've probably realised that because nurses have such a high standing in the community that is the union that they have to dent and destroy. That's why they're using the language of the 'Union bosses' in their very personal attacks on us in Parliament.

They've absolutely silenced the community sector because they've tied funding. If you get more than 50% of your funding from the Government, you can't advocate. So who's there left to advocate? Only the Unions are left to advocate, and so they have to come after us.

*What's your biggest challenge?*

We've been successful in terms of our industrial campaigning and campaigning around things like workload management. We now have to go to a higher level about our and other unions' roles in society. We have a key role in health care, but we've got to work with other organisations that are like-minded. That's very hard within health - the doctors' union, the AMA, don't want to share power with us.

But it is hard within the union movement. Lots of people do not know how to take nurses and the nurses' union. There's a good argument that the Nurses Union is at the cutting edge

of modern unionism. Yet, we don't fit into a box easily.

We work with our hands and with people and it's intimate body work and all that sort of thing; and yet we're not quite public servants. It is hard to fit us in a traditional union framework because we're a craft union, but we're predominantly "girls" seen as being a bit soft.

I think that we've copped a fair brunt of the current assault from the Queensland Government. The movement now might be seeing us through different eyes. We haven't taken a step backwards in terms of standing up for what we believe in and what's in our members' interests. Ron Monaghan calls us Public Enemy No. 1, from the Government's perspective. We'll wear that. It's a badge of honour.

## Notes

- 1 According to Linda Shields, Professor of Nursing, at James Cook University

*Mid-Staffordshire Trust (the equivalent of our health services districts) cut 10 million pounds from their budget by cutting staff and "restructuring", without any risk analysis beforehand. As a result, over 400 people died unnecessarily, through mistakes and poor care by insufficient staff, or unqualified care workers who replaced the (more expensive) qualified nurses. <http://www.crikey.com.au/2013/03/05/qlds-health-blueprint-a-clarion-call-for-privatising-services/>*

## Story Bridge Photos

The accompanying set of photos were taken in Brisbane during construction of the Story Bridge between 1935 and 1939. The bridge links Fortitude Valley to Kangaroo Point, and was built as part of a 1925 Hawken plan for more bridges across the river, adding to the original Victoria Bridge with the William Jolly Bridge and then the Story Bridge. Components for the bridge were fabricated in a purpose built factory at Rocklea. Four men died during its construction.

Dawn Clancy provided these photos to the *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, and she says “these photos originally belonged to my cousin Dorothy, whose father Jack worked

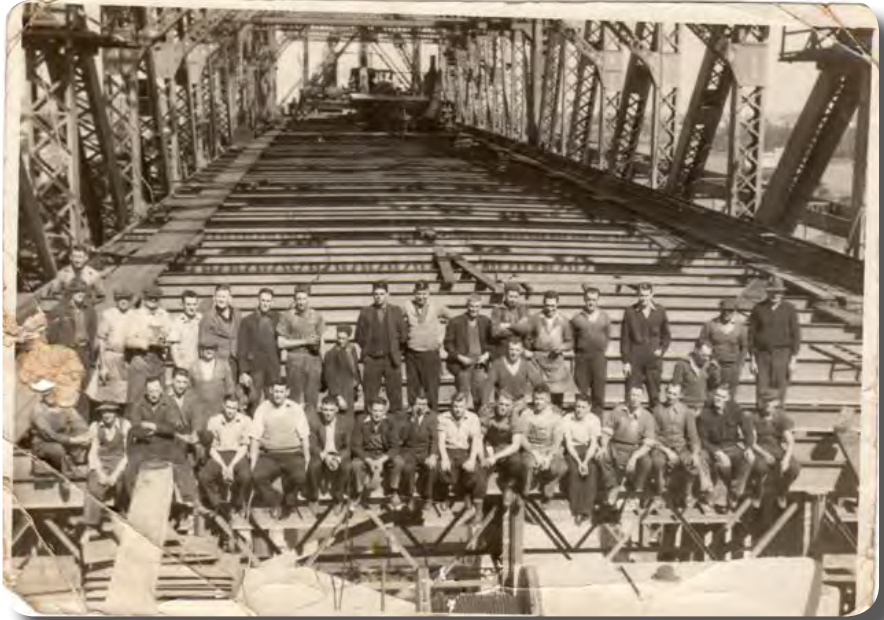
alongside my father on building the bridge. When Dorothy died I was cleaning up her house for her mother and found the photos. My aunt said I was welcome to take the photos as she was going into a nursing home and she knew they meant something to me. I had put them away for many years and when I was doing a cleanup myself I came across them again. As a member of the Kangaroo Point State School Past Students Association, I took them to one of our regular get-togethers and from there they were circulated throughout the group.”

We feel sure that BLHA members will find these original images of workers in Brisbane fascinating.



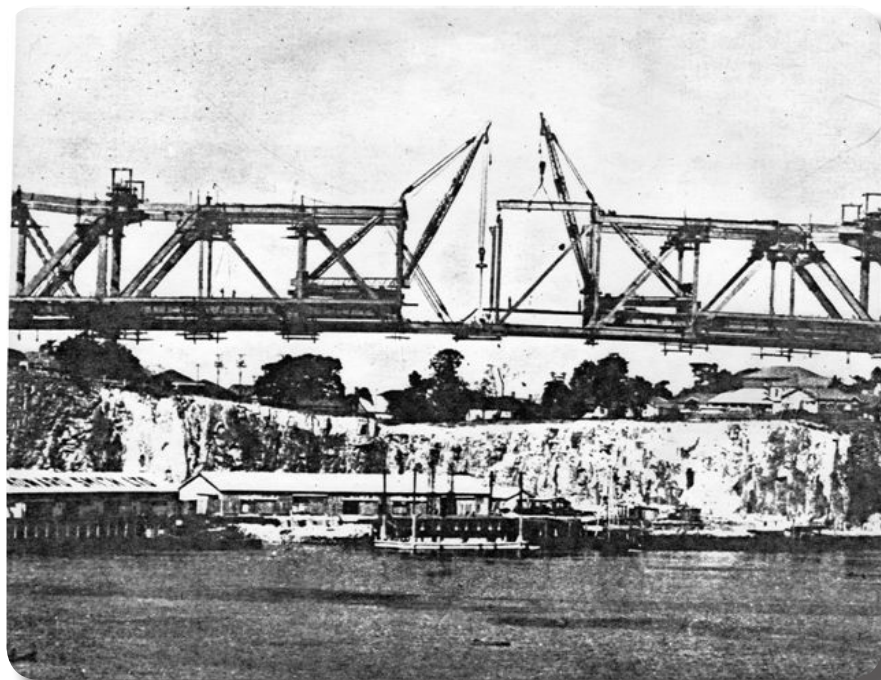




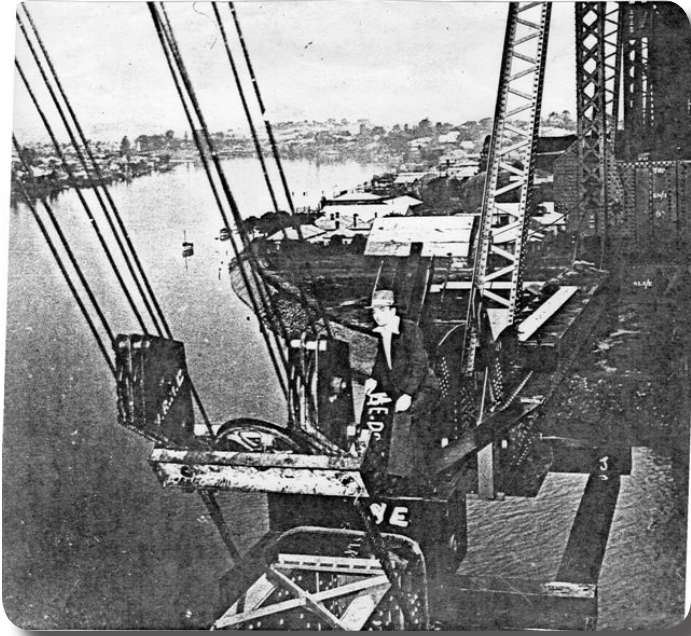


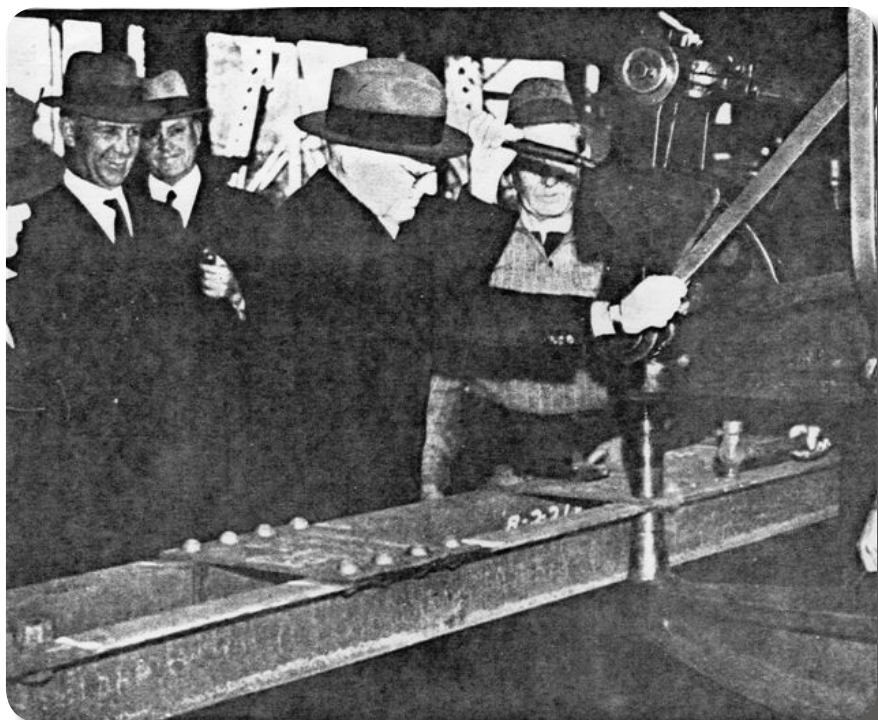












# In Memoriam

## Gary Howcroft

Progressive politics and the trade union movement lost one of its most colourful and charismatic characters with the passing of Gary Howcroft on 23 February 2013, at the age of 64.

Gary was born in Brisbane on 20 May 1948, the eldest of Elsie and Wilfred Howcroft's three children. When Gary was 10, his father was diagnosed with MS and thereby incapacitated for work. At age 15, Gary commenced his working life as a butcher's apprentice in Fortitude Valley, usually having to walk to work from his home at Wynnum due to an early start and the unavailability of public transport. Gary progressed quickly in his job and moved on to manage the butcher shop.

Gary joined the Wynnum branch of the ALP in about 1968 and not long afterwards, through contacts made in the Valley, joined the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union (the Painters and Dockers).

As each branch of the union had a limited membership in order to preserve

employment, Gary joined the union in Newcastle and worked there for some time. Due to his former occupation, Gary was christened "*the butcher boy*" by his new comrades.

Gary returned to Brisbane in 1975 to work in the shipbuilding and ship repair industry and in January 1976 met his future wife Lana, who was duly dubbed "*the butcher bird*". Gary and Lana's children Amanda and Meesha were born in 1977 and 1981 respectively.



I wrote in an earlier edition of this journal about the Queensland branch

of the Painters and Dockers in the late 1970s and its legendary secretary Ray Winning – “*the Pig*”. On Gary’s return to Brisbane, his abiding intellect and keen interest in trade union politics naturally led Winning to take the young man under his wing. Gary was duly dubbed “*the Pig’s Trotter*”. Gary Howcroft was of course his own man and earned the respect and affection of the Brisbane dockies who were, it must be said, a harsh school of critics. I met Gary in 1977 when I joined the Painters and Dockers and was immediately taken by his energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the union.

Gary, along with Ray, embraced the progressive politics of the time. They joined and resigned from the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) several times. At other times, Gary was a member of the ALP. He met, collaborated with, and was influenced by other left wing trade unionists such as Hugh Hamilton, Pat Clancy, Neil Cain and Terry Gordon, the federal secretary of the Painter and Dockers. The union became an integral member of a strong maritime group within the Queensland Trades and Labour Council, along with the Seamens Union of Australia (SUA) and the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF).

The Painters and Dockers strongly supported a socialist and progressive political agenda, embracing causes such as the campaign against uranium mining. When that campaign led to the

banning of street marches by the Bjelke-Petersen National Party government in 1977, Gary and Ray led a strong contingent of Painters and Dockers to join the right to march demonstrations, including the largest march in which some 400 people, including large numbers of maritime workers, were arrested and jammed sardine-like into the old South Brisbane Watchhouse.

In the late 1970s, Gary organised a group of dockies to provide security for a delegation of Vietnamese communist trade unionists visiting Australia at the invitation of the CPA. Their presence was greeted with significant hostility in most of the major capital cities by expatriate Vietnamese who had supported the South Vietnamese puppet government recently vanquished in the Vietnam War. Many will remember a rather ugly confrontation outside the old Wharfies Club at Petrie Bight where the delegation was due to speak and where the dockies, led by Gary, had to form a firm security cordon around the visiting delegation.

In the late 1970s, Gary was elected president of the union and, when branch finances allowed, was appointed to the paid position of Vigilant Officer.

At that time, painter and docker labour in the ship repair yards in Brisbane, including Cairncross Dock, was subject to the “*bull*” system where each yard maintained a semi-permanent gang of core workers which was supplemented

by labour allocated from the pickup shed, in accordance with a roster, when there was a vessel to be worked on. In 1980, Gary was instrumental in the successful campaign to convince a majority of the union's branch members to vote to disband the bull system and overhaul the roster. The new system, dubbed "*Back to the Shed*", meant that the union members voluntarily terminated any existing employment on Wednesday night and re-rostered for work on Thursday morning. Members returning to the roster would be placed on the roster in accordance with the hours worked during the previous week with the least number of hours being highest placed and so on. Gary and Ray had achieved, as far as possible, a system whereby the work was equalised amongst the membership. I have said before that the implementation of this system is the single greatest act of industrial democracy that I have seen and I do not resile from that description.

Unfortunately, work in the ship repair industry was scarce in the early 1980s and Gary, with a young family to support, had to seek work elsewhere. With the assistance of Hugh Hamilton, secretary of the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), Gary obtained a job working on the construction of the Tarong Power Station near Kingaroy. Gary soon became chairman of the Site Committee leading a combined workforce of some 2000 union members. Gary won

universal respect as a negotiator and problem solver and the Tarong site set the standards for wages and conditions in the construction industry. During this time at the Tarong site between 1982 and 1985, Gary further distinguished himself by leading the first May Day march in Kingaroy.

Returning to Brisbane after his Tarong stint, Gary was appointed in December 1985 as an organiser with the BWIU, following a very short qualifying period in his newly chosen trade as a gyprock fixer. Gary immediately showed his abilities as an organiser, building strong delegate networks throughout Brisbane, and demonstrated his already well developed skills as a speaker "*on the stump*" at job meetings.

Gary became an industrial officer of the BWIU in the early 1990s and, following the amalgamation of the BWIU with other kindred unions, Gary was appointed as assistant secretary of the Construction, Forest, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Construction Division, on 29 July 1993. In the words of Wally Trohear, then CFMEU secretary, "*Gary's politics were a great asset which greatly strengthened the union. We focussed on policy development with much involvement of officials, delegates and the rank and file. Once policy was set it was then not optional. He worked hard to campaign around our policies. It was a good period for the union with membership increasing to just under 17,000 and*

*many gains made for Queensland building workers. Gary played a strong role in all of this.”*



Gary remained in the position of assistant secretary until he left the CFMEU in September 2002. In recognition of his inestimable contribution to the stability and progress of the organisation and his role in the improvement of wages and conditions for construction workers throughout Queensland, Gary was awarded life membership of the union.

Following his retirement from the CFMEU, Gary worked in a liaison capacity for construction companies Multiplex and Devine, on the employer's payroll but quietly and efficiently ensuring that workers interests were not submerged.

Gary and Lana had separated in 1988 and in late 1999, Gary entered into a last great enduring personal relationship with Dominique Nunan, herself a veteran of the trade union movement. Gary remained close to his daughters

Amanda and Meesha and settled comfortably into the role of grandfather to their children. Dominique, Amanda and Meesha continued to provide Gary with abundant love, strength and support in his difficult final days.

Gary Howcroft was many things. Aside from being an outstanding trade unionist, he was a larrikin with a quick wit and an uncanny ability to sum up situations with quick snappy descriptive phrases, many of which stuck and were borrowed by others as emblems. He loved a drink, a smoke and a punt. Gary was a fine ballroom dancer, a student of Henry Lawson's poetry and a vociferous South Sydney supporter. He was a loyal friend who never stopped providing financial and other support to any mate who was doing it tough, particularly his former dockie comrades. Only days before his passing, Gary was organising an industrial fan for an ageing comrade who was struggling with the heat.

Gary was farewelled at a packed funeral on 1 March 2013, followed by a lengthy wake at traditional union watering hole the Terminus Hotel. I do not expect to see his like again. Vale comrade.

**Bob Reed**

## Keith Fordice

*A tribute from his long-time associate, Noel Condon.*



Born in Cairns on the 18th of November in 1920, Keith Drummond Fordyce passed away at age 92 on the 2nd of December, 2012. With his early childhood spent in Cairns, Keith's family relocated to Brisbane in 1930 and lived in the suburb of Newstead, close to Breakfast Creek. Keith had the opportunity to attend and complete his education at the Commercial High School, the forerunner to Brisbane State High School.

By 1938, at age 17, Keith joined the then Queensland Government Railways and commenced service at Mayne Junction depot as an Engine Cleaner in August of that year. Upon joining the railways, Keith became a member

of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen, (AFULE); something that would influence his thinking for the rest of his life.

In the early war years, Keith passed his examination to qualify as a Fireman and acted as a Fireman during this period. Keith worked trains from Mayne Depot to the lines radiating from Brisbane. There were regular trips to both Gympie and Toowoomba on both passenger and goods carrying trains.

As the demands of a world war spread over a number fronts, many young men heeded the call-up to military service and Keith was enlisted into the Australian Army on the 1 December, 1941. Keith's service number recorded in the World War II Nominal Roll was 0100830.

After his initial training, Keith was posted to the Royal Australian Artillery's, 211 Anti-Tank Regiment with the rank of Gunner. The unit was deployed to the Townsville area where it conducted training and awaited transportation to New Guinea.

Military service for Keith was to be short lived as the nature of the war in the Pacific began to take a very worrying turn. Australia and Queensland in particular had come into the operational reach of the Japanese and Queensland became pivotal in supplying the Pacific war effort.

The demand for rail transport increased dramatically with 63 additional trains required each week. With many young firemen enlisted in the military, the task of operating the additional trains was near impossible with critical shortages of train crew. The Australian Government passed legislation in the Parliament, The Essential Services and Manpower Act. The legislation controlled the labour market and registered all workers. The effect of this legislation was to ensure that men engaged in critical industries that required specific skills were reserved or prohibited from military service. The other significant impact was the release of men already enlisted in the military but not yet deployed overseas. In Keith's case, he along with many other railway employees from around Australia were listed for immediate discharge from the Army. They were then returned to their home depots for employment in their classification. Returning from Townsville by train, Keith found himself in a coach with 35 other firemen returning to southern depots of the Queensland Government Railways. Keith's discharge took effect on 16th of June, 1942, barely SIX months after enlisting.

Returning to Mayne and life as an Acting Fireman, Keith worked many wartime trains, delivering essential troops and supplies to aid the Pacific War effort. In 1943, he worked an unusual hospital train on the New Farm Branch with a new American

built locomotive termed the AC Class. This was the only recorded working of this type of locomotive hauling a hospital train along the branch. The wounded American troops were then transferred to a waiting hospital ship for repatriation to the United States.

By 1944, the opportunity to be classed as a fireman arose and Keith was transferred to Alpha in the Central Division. Firing trains over the Bogantungan Range to the East towards Emerald and to the West towards Jericho, Barcaldine and Longreach, Keith honed his skills as an engineman. He also ventured along the long rambling branch line that stretched from Jericho through Blackall to Yarka, one of the most isolated townships of the Central West.

Whilst in Alpha, Keith returned to Brisbane briefly to marry Dulcie Stegemann in Brisbane on the 2nd June, 1945 at the All Saints Church Wickham Terrace; Dulcie had been a hairdresser and living in Auchenflower area and working in the Finneys Building, later David Jones in Adelaide Street in Brisbane. He returned to Alpha to complete his period of initial classification before returning to Brisbane at the end of 1945.

By 1946, having returned to Brisbane, Keith and Dulcie were busy planning and building a life together. They purchased a block of land at Quany Street at Alderley and commenced



building a home. The first of their two children, Lanny was born 21st of December of 1946, a month or two after the home was completed.

Looking for progression within the railways, Keith qualified as a Driver in 1951. He was appointed to a Driver's position in Emerald. Returning to the Central Division and running trains over some of the same territory that he worked as a Fireman during the war years, Keith spent the next four years in the depot before transferring back to Mayne in 1955.

Over the years, Keith's active role in the AFULE led him to fulfil various positions within the union. In the centenary year of Queensland Railways, 1965, Keith was voted into the role of President of the AFULE.

During his years of union membership, Keith also had an interest in the world of politics and took membership in the Australian Labor Party. With 1966 being a state election year, Keith sought the candidacy for the state seat of Windsor. At the time, the seat was held by Percy Smith, a Liberal Party member of parliament who had won the seat after the tumultuous events of the great split in the ALP in 1955 and the disastrous ALP results in the subsequent 1957 election. This was a time of political wilderness for the ALP and Keith suffered a defeat at the polls.

Keith was afforded the honour of driving the first official train over the missing link in the Brisbane rail network, a city river crossing in the form of the Merivale Bridge in 1976.

After witnessing the effects of a vastly inadequate rail network during the war, Keith worked through the great modernisation of Queensland Government Railways seeing the development of modern steam locomotive designs, the introduction of diesel electric locomotives, steel passenger cars and wagons, the building of the new coal lines and finally the adoption of the modern image of QR. There were many challenges throughout the period of modernisation and Keith's participation in the AFULE and ultimately his presidency influenced much of the determination of modern work practices.

Before his retirement Keith and Dulcie travelled extensively to many off the beaten tracks overseas while enjoying the enriching experiences on offer. On one trip, they traversed the then Soviet Union before embarking on an unusual truck journey through Afghanistan, Pakistan and onwards to India.

By 1983 retirement beckoned and Keith no longer needed a "tucker box" and he set about charting a new course for his life. This new course included bushwalking and climbing some of the mountain peaks of South

East Queensland around Warwick and Stanthorpe.

In recognition of his lifetime of devotion, Keith was accorded two honours for his industrial and political service throughout his life. He received life membership to his union, the AFULE as well as life membership to the Australian Labor Party for his longstanding membership in the party. Keith also engaged in two other pursuits, membership of the Gaythorne RSL Club and working for the Enoggera Historical Society.

Keith enjoyed the recreational pursuits on offer with Gaythorne RSL and was particularly interested in playing snooker at the club's facilities. He also fostered another passion in the form of travel. The club had a small bus that could be used for the benefit of the members. Keith organised and managed numerous trips ranging from day trips to week long expeditions. Acting tour manager and using his ability to plan and organise, Keith would map out all of the details of the proposed tour. After the RSL decided to dispose of the bus, Keith resorted to hiring buses to continue to provide tour outings.

The range of the tours encompassed destinations from the far north of Australia to southern regions. One trip to the north went as far as Cooktown. He made regular trips to Rockhampton and Yeppoon with tour groups travelling

either one way with Keith in the bus or via other forms of transport including the newly introduced Tilt Train before rotating for the return journey. On one of his more southerly journeys, Keith managed a tour to Melbourne for the first Tuesday in November to witness the running of the Melbourne Cup. With a railway theme in mind, Keith facilitated a tour to Wallangarra during the 2001 Centenary of Federation to celebrate the refurbishment of the station complex and to recognise the link as the only means of rail travel between Queensland and other states at the time of Federation. Armidale and Ballina were also regular round trip operations of Keith's bus tour program.

By 2003 and in tandem with his RSL tours, Keith saw the opportunity to offer tours through the Enoggera Historical Society. Keith envisaged a means of enlightening people about their local history. Keith planned out tours with a heritage theme and conducted tours for a number of years. Apart from the enjoyment for tour goers, the historical society benefitted enormously from the generation of valuable income. Keith's legacy of operating tours continues today through the current generation of the society's membership.

Dulcie, Keith's wife of 57 years, sadly passed away in 2002 leaving Keith to soldier on. Keith should be remembered as a man of great passion for his fellow railwaymen, as well as a commitment to making Australia a

better country and a man who shared his joy of travel with others. Keith is survived by his sons, Lanny and Glenn and grandchildren Kathryn & Christopher.

## Contributor's Notes

**Bob Reed** currently practises as a barrister in Brisbane, principally in the areas of industrial and employment law, human rights law and criminal law. However, from 1977 to 1988 he worked as a painter and docker in the ports of Brisbane and Sydney, holding positions on the committees of management of the Queensland and New South Wales branches at various times.

In 1987 he resumed legal studies which he had abandoned some years earlier for the earthier pleasures of industrial life. He completed an LL.B. in 1990 and has a B.A. which he gathered on the run in the mid 1970s.

Bob also worked as a solicitor from 1992 - 1995 and from 1995 – 1999 as a research officer for the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union.

**Dr Barbara Webster** is recently retired from academe but maintains an adjunct position as senior lecturer in History at CQUniversity Australia, Rockhampton Campus, and continues her research into trade union history and other aspects of the working class experience with a focus on Central Queensland. Among other publications, Barbara contributed a chapter on arbitration and Rockhampton unions to the official Queensland sesqui-centenary work *Work and Strife in Paradise: A History of Labour Relations in Queensland 1859–2009* and, in 2011, she was appointed to the editorial board of *Labour History*. From 2008 to 2010, she undertook a commissioned “history from below” of Gladstone Power Station and its workforce, from which the paper in this issue derives.

**Dr Howard Guille** worked and taught in Europe and New Zealand before coming to Australia in the mid-1970s. He was the foundation appointment in industrial relations at what became Brisbane CAE. He worked at the Trades and Labour Council of Queensland from 1988 to 1992. He was involved in major projects in restructuring, award restructuring, industrial policy and in trying to combat corporatisation, privatisation and national competition policy.

Howard was the Queensland Secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union from 1994 to 2006. This became increasingly complex with enterprise bargaining and the assault of the Coalition Government on the NTEU.

He was a member of the TLC Executive from 1996 to 2006. He was the QCU representative on the Queensland Heritage Council from 2008–2012. In 2000

and in 2008 Howard assisted the Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress with research and submissions to the National Minimum Wage Boards of those years.

He retired from the paid workforce in 2008 after two years as Associate Professor in Humanities at Queensland University of Technology. He has undertaken research and written on a wide range of topics including industrial relations theory and policy, labour market policy, globalisation, industry, housing and social policy.

**Sigrid McCausland** is a member of the Federal Executive of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and of the Executive Committee of the Brisbane Labour History Association. She has mostly worked as an archivist, including some years in Canberra heading the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australia's largest business and labour archives. She has researched the anti-nuclear movement and the history of labour archives. Sigrid currently teaches records and archives management by distance education at Charles Sturt University.

**Noel Condon** is a life member of the AFULE (Australian Federated union of Locomotive Engineers), and worked for a number of years with Keith Fordyce. He is also a member of the Enoggera Historical Society.

**Ted Riethmuller** was born in Kingaroy. The year was 1939 and so he was an observer of the tumultuous events that shaped the second part of the 20th Century. He is optimistic about the future but agrees that such hope is hard to justify.

He served his time as an electrician in Bundaberg and Brisbane. During his apprenticeship he joined the ETU and became interested in politics. In the early sixties, like many other young Australians he travelled to the UK and it was there that the class nature of society could not be ignored and it hastened his move to the left. Although the radicalism of his youth has been tempered by age and experience he still embraces the ideals of universal peace, fraternity and the emancipation of the down trodden.

His interest in social history and labour history comes with a strong belief that the experiences of the common people deserve to be documented. In particular he wants to see the struggles and sacrifices of activists of the past acknowledged, honoured and their successes and failures learned from.

In his retirement, Ted is writing a collection of *Workplace Sketches* as an exercise in autobiography and a contribution to social and workplace history. He invites others to do the same.

# The Brisbane Labour History Association

The Brisbane Labour History Association was formed in 1990 to encourage and promote the study, teaching, research and publication of labour history and the preservation of labour archives. There are no limits on the study of labour history and the diverse membership reflects many different areas of concern.

The BLHA is the Brisbane branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The Association organises seminars, lectures, meetings, conferences and publications on themes of labour history. Membership is open to all individuals and organisations who subscribe to the Association's objectives.

## Editorial Policy

*The Queensland Journal of Labour History* is a journal of labour and social history with a particular emphasis on Queensland history. The history of labour, the classic social movement, is central to our concerns, as are the histories of newer social movements. This journal is committed to the view that history has a social purpose. It publishes articles which, in Ian Turner's words, engage our sympathies, affect present circumstances and suggest answers to present problems. In the words of the Association's slogan, 'The Past is Always with Us'. Material published herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Association or the Editors. The Journal's Editorial Board is the Committee of the BLHA, chaired by the President.

## Notes for Contributors

The *Journal* is published in March and September. Articles of up to 4000 words may be accepted; shorter contributions are encouraged. First person accounts of labour history are particularly welcome. Reports on exhibitions, seminars and research projects are sought, as are book reviews and photo essays. Obtain a copy of the Editorial Guidelines before submission.

Contributions should be made in hard copy to the Society's post office box and (if possible) digital format via email, to the Secretary's email address (see inside front cover). Hard copies should be typed, double-spaced, on single-sided A4 bond paper, with a margin of at least 3 cm. Please number the pages. Two (2) copies of each manuscript are required. Please ensure all contact details are given, including phone numbers and an email address.

Please advise if you have ideas for graphics (photographs, maps, drawings, cartoons, etc) that might accompany your article if accepted for publication.

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